

Arab rulers must speak up against sectarianism

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By Ahmed Rashid.

There is hope that political developments in [Iran and Syria](#) will finally allow the western alliance a diplomatic way out of two terrible impasses.

However, at the same time, other countries in the region are in a state of meltdown - and one overwhelming cause is sectarianism. Muslim leaders are offering no home grown answers for the devastating effects on politics and society.

The new Iranian regime, inundated and paralysed with sanctions, may finally be ready to discuss its nuclear programme and reach a compromise with the west, which would have to be sufficiently comprehensive to satisfy Israel too.

Syria's agreement to surrender its chemical weapons to the UN may now allow a meaningful diplomatic effort to secure a ceasefire in the war between the government and the opposition and, further down the road, a tentative peace settlement. However, whether such a settlement can save the country from disintegration is doubtful.

Yet other Arab nations are dissolving before our eyes, and crises are everywhere. In Iraq, there is a car bomb a day. The almost daily bombings of both Sunni and Shia mosques, and other mass sectarian killings, are taking the country back to the darkest days of 2006 and 2007, when violence was at a similar level to what it is today.

Al-Qaeda is busy bombing its way through the Shia heartland. Shia militias and state security services are taking revenge by carrying out what many now call "religious-ethnic cleansing", whereby religious communities that have lived together for centuries are being ghettoised. Iraq may yet fall apart even as the war in Syria winds down.

Al-Qaeda is also on the offensive in Yemen, where dozens of soldiers were killed in a wave of attacks on September 20 in the southern province of [Shabwa](#), despite regular US drone attacks and American support for the Yemeni army. Al-Qaeda continues to threaten a big attack on Yemen's oil and gas terminals, which if carried out would send oil prices soaring.

[Egypt](#), the linchpin of the Arab world, is facing a new guerrilla war by Islamists loyal to former President Mohamed Morsi, as well as rampant intolerance and a sectarian war against the Christian community. Lebanon is facing a crisis, with the arrival of Syrian refugees escaping the regime of President Bashar al-Assad; and the involvement of the Shia paramilitaries of Hizbollah on the side of Mr Assad's forces. This dangerous double whammy is reigniting the fragile sectarian and ethnic balance in the country. Lebanon is a fuse waiting for a spark.

Jordan is simply overwhelmed with refugees and an economic crisis - all the result of the war in Syria - even as Amman is still trying to cope with its Iraqi refugees and fallout from the last war in the region. Jordan is the permanent victim. Turkey, once considered a role model for the Arab world on account of its democratic development, is now beset with its own widespread unrest and growing public disillusionment with its rulers. Its government has ceased to be a role model for many of its own citizens.

In the wider Muslim world, on Sunday September 22 alone, at least 78 Christians were killed and 150 wounded in a double suicide bombing carried out by Sunni extremists in [Lahore](#), Pakistan; 12 Shia were killed by Sunni extremists in a suicide bombing in Iraq, following the killing of 70 Sunnis the day before. Meanwhile the death toll at the siege of the shopping mall in [Nairobi](#), claimed by the jihadists of [al-Shabaab](#), has exceeded 70.

The US and Europe are least prepared to deal with any implosion of these states in the near future. But what everyone, including the region's Muslim rulers, are loath to touch is the growing destructive power of sectarianism. No ruler, politician, general or religious scholar in the wider region has had the courage to speak out openly against the killer disease of sectarianism that is tearing the heart out of the Islamic world.

The world centres of Islam and fatwas or religious edicts - al-Azhar in Egypt and the Great Mosques of Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem - are silent on the issue. Politicians hide their heads in the sand while allowing hate literature and sectarian militias to flourish. Blaming al-Qaeda and affiliated groups for the growth of Sunni extremism is not far off the mark but does not offer a total explanation.

The real issue is the lack of governance, institutions and values, along with state collapse and the failure of ruling elites to protect minorities, whether Shia or non-Muslim. The Arab uprising has not just overthrown dictatorship but also exposed the weaknesses of the foundations of the modern states built on the back of western colonialism.

Today's Muslim leaders need to speak up and not fear the consequences of opposing what is fast becoming a war within Islam and the Arab world. No state can experience unrelenting extremism and intolerance year after year and not eventually face an internal collapse.

The origins of Islam go back to protecting minorities, providing an example of tolerance and treating all citizens, including women, as equal. Who on earth among the ruling elites remembers that today?