



The Remaking of Syria, Iraq and the Wider Middle East

The End of the Sykes-Picot State System?

Gareth Stansfield

Foreword

Michael Clarke

While Western diplomacy continues to struggle with attempts to bring the Syrian civil war to a more, or less, peaceful conclusion, the revolutionary wheel in Egypt continues to turn.

The military intervention that removed President Morsi in early July is at once part of the Syrian crisis and simultaneously a distraction from it. It is part of the crisis because the removal of an Islamist government in Cairo plays directly to the Assad regime's arguments that political Islam is unfit to rule anywhere. But important as events in Cairo are, they also distract Western attention from the much bigger game being played out in Syria. Iran – both directly and via its ally Hizbullah – has now intervened very significantly in the conflict to bolster the Assad government. Western powers are therefore seeking to even the odds again to lessen Assad's dominance, while shepherding all parties towards a peace deal. But with each passing month the conflict becomes more complex and diplomatically intractable, and the renewed crisis in Egypt will only make it worse. Cairo has long been a bellwether of trends across the Arab world, but this time it is more likely itself to be subject to the turn of the larger strategic wheel across the Levant.

A year ago, the war in Syria might have been constrained by strong Western action, but it is increasingly clear that the world is confronting a crisis that extends far beyond Syria, threatening to deteriorate into a regional conflict. Now part civil war, part proxy war, it has also become a great-power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and between the US, Russia and China.

Meanwhile, and perhaps most importantly, the conflict has prompted the fragmentation of the twentieth-century states that have shaped the region to date: Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan – and the interests of Israel and Turkey – are all profoundly affected by what is happening in Syria today.

In the short term, and with no end to the fighting in Syria in sight more than two years after it began, the most important casualty of the war is potentially Iraq. In the medium term, it is possible that the Levant will change significantly after a century of relative territorial stability. But such change is not liable to consist of a universal collapse of old state structures. Rather, as elsewhere in the world since the Cold War, we may see a region in painful transition, with some traditional states – albeit smaller and perhaps weakened – surviving intact, and with semi-states, assertive enclaves and contested territories all vying for the attention of the big players, like Saudi Arabia and Iran, not to mention the US, China and Russia.

While the agony within Syria looks set to continue for some time to come, the Levant is on the verge of recasting itself around the epicentre of the crisis. Syria might eventually emerge from this trauma more or less intact as a state, but the same cannot be said for its neighbourhood. The winners and losers from Assad's civil war will extend far beyond Damascus, Homs and Aleppo.

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For Western powers, a significant moral dilemma relating to the future of the Middle East state system looms large. The question is simple: if the only way stability can be achieved in the Middle East (and North Africa) is through support – whether passive or active – for regimes of varying shades of authoritarianism, is it morally and practically acceptable to provide such support?

It may be that the West need not be troubled by this particular dilemma for long: forces inside the region – and in Syria and Iraq in particular – are sounding what could be the death knell of this imperial creation of less than a century's vintage. Furthermore, there seems to be growing regional and international acceptance of the possibility of erasing the once-rarefied,

externally imposed boundaries that have divided peoples as much as they have united them, with a greater emphasis on the need for state structures to be tied more authentically to the peoples they encompass.

Therefore, if it is now no longer possible to simultaneously maintain the integrity of the extant state system while advocating democratisation – which may result, among other things, in the removal of existing dictatorships – then a different, and even more worrying, set of questions needs to be posed. The problem now is how to ensure that the ongoing, escalating instability in Syria and Iraq does not deteriorate further into a region-wide war.

This is not mere speculation. Jordan's delicate political stability is vulnerable to instabilities in its wider environment, while Lebanon remains deeply fractured.¹ Israeli action is increasingly plausible, both against Hizbullah in south Lebanon, now that the latter is actively involved in Syria, and against Iranian nuclear targets, now that Iran is pursuing its strategic interests through direct intervention in Iraq and Syria.² In parallel, the Arab Gulf states are also intervening in Syria and Iraq, but by proxy.³ Meanwhile, renewed turmoil in Egypt adds fuel to the fire in Syria – encouraging regime and rebels alike – while threatening simultaneously to divert international attention from the latter. And all of this is happening within a context of wider inertia in the international community, caused by an East-West stand-off in the UN Security Council, with Russia and China finally standing up to what they perceive to be neo-imperialist, high-handed Western strategy, expressed in an *ex cathedra* manner that they no longer deem acceptable.⁴

The Symbiotic Neighbours

Is Syria on the verge of collapse? And could Iraq, in particular – as well as Lebanon, Jordan and Israel – survive this eventuality? The answer is a tentative Yes to the first question and a probable No to the second.⁵

The 'Collapsed' Syrian State

Considering the first question in greater detail, if Syria were to collapse following the defeat of the Assad regime and subsequent contestation over the spoils between disparate factions, what would the resultant 'state' look like? Here, analysts often look to events in Iraq some six years ago, when its society was ripped apart by inter-communal conflicts driven by the devastating logic of sectarianism that continues to stalk its tortured political landscape today.⁶

But is this how events would unfold in Syria? Arguably, it is not. There are significant differences between the two cases, particularly the fact that – unlike Iraq – three-quarters of Syria's population is Sunni Arab, and the fact that there is not (as yet) a Western occupying force attempting an ill-

informed state-building initiative in the country.⁷ As such, the post-civil war future of Syria will likely be based around a dominant narrative of Arabism of a Sunni hue.⁸ Without doubt, in such an environment, there would be recriminations against those closely associated with the worst excesses of the former regime. However, these would likely be limited because the regime, although headed by Alawis, has been the primary agent of all social and political mobilisation and economic advancement and thus remains as much 'Sunni' as 'Alawi'. There may also be significant problems in the north of the country, with recent skirmishes between Islamist Arab fighters and the forces of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) potentially a harbinger of future unrest among the area's predominantly Kurdish population.⁹ Furthermore, the Alawi heartland in the west of the country could witness serious human rights abuses as victorious rebels target those believed to have been part of, or to have benefited from, the previous order. But a collapse which renders borders irrelevant seems counterfactual. On the contrary, borders could become very relevant indeed, as zones of contestation and as features that need to be changed.

The Potential Impact on Iraq

This leads to the second question – whether Iraq could survive the collapse of the Ba'ath regime in Syria. Assessing Iraq as a discrete state entity, it is clear that the country is already changing as a result of its own internal dynamics, and that talk of the 'integrity of Iraq' is increasingly misguided. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), for example, pays only lip service to the notion that the sovereignty of Baghdad extends into the north of the country, even though its existence within Iraq depends financially upon the constitutional mechanisms that provide it (in law, if not in practice) with 17 per cent of the country's oil revenue.

Meanwhile, the final piece of the Kurdish puzzle of independence is now being put into place, with the engagement of an as yet undisclosed Turkish state-owned energy company (believed to be TPAO) and ExxonMobil in the KRG, and the construction of a pipeline between the Kurdistan region of Iraq and Turkey that can be connected directly to Turkish infrastructure north of the border. It is speculated that this pipeline will be completed in October, allowing the Iraqi Kurds to present a secessionist *fait accompli* that may well be supported by Turkey, the Arab states of the Gulf, and Iran, because it would now be in their interests – whether financial, security, sectarian or a combination thereof – to do so.¹⁰

Interestingly, this points to another layer of complexity within the region. The development of the KRG's economic relationship with Turkey means that it is no longer in the Iraqi Kurds' interest to engage with, and support the autonomous demands of, Syrian Kurds. This is especially so given Ankara's domestic troubles with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has long

struggled to gain an autonomous region of its own and has strong ties with Syria's Kurds. As such, the powerful Kurdish leadership within Iraq may well find itself protecting broader Kurdish interests in Syria while at the same time denying its ethnic kinsmen the same structures from which Iraqi Kurds benefit. Clearly, pan-Kurdish sentiment is not the unifying force Western analysts tend to think it is – at least not when the choice for Iraqi Kurds is between forming an oil-rich, 'UAE-lite' entity within their own patch, and being part of a fractious, hard-to-govern and relatively poor pan-Kurdish state that would be opposed by Iran as well as the rump states of Iraq, Turkey and Syria. From this perspective, it is not a difficult choice to make.

It is possible, therefore, that Iraq could find itself suffering the consequences of both the secession of the KRG and the collapse of Syria within a short space of time. If this were the case, what would be the impact of the emergence of a Sunni-dominated state in Syria on the rest of Iraq?

Of importance in this regard are the deeply held and murderous sectarian hatreds that clearly remain, given the ramping-up of violence in Iraq in recent months. Violence has spiked dramatically from the (relatively) low levels of killing at the beginning of the year: estimates suggest that some 700 people were killed in April, and that there was an increase of nearly half the following month, with approximately 1,000 people killed in May. Furthermore, the method of killing suggests the return of organised and systematic violence of the sort that used to be committed by the highly capable Iraqi nationalist insurgent outfits – such as the 1920s Brigades – and by Al-Qa'ida-affiliated groupings, including the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). These numbers do not (yet) match the terrible figures of 2006–07, when monthly death tallies would routinely top 3,000 and when all components of society were targeted during a full-scale civil war which also saw the full engagement of US forces. However, the trend is deeply worrying – perhaps even more so than the situation in 2006 – for two reasons.

The first concerns the fact that the government and other Iraqi political elites today seem to be far more closely engaged with the emergence of instability and violence. In 2006, violence occurred very much at the level of 'the street', with the political life of the Iraqi state, for what it was, continuing more or less unhindered. While Prime Minister Maliki did take some action against insurgents, he tended to focus his efforts on removing the threat posed to him by the Sadrist (Shia) movement – ordering the *Charge of the Knights* to break the insurgency in Basra in 2008, for example – while doing relatively little to target the Sunni-associated insurgency. This was left largely to the US, and it is here that the second reason the current trend is so worrying becomes very pertinent indeed.

This concerns the fact that the forces that brought the civil war of 2006–08 to an end are no longer in place in 2013. In late 2006, the Sunni insurgency was brought under control as a result of both the efforts of the US and the acknowledgement by many Sunni Arab stakeholders that it was in their economic and political interests to work with, rather than against, the US (although this willingness to co-operate did not extend to the Iraqi government). In short, Sunni insurgents became increasingly isolated. The tribal leaderships accepted the US strategy of furthering the ‘Sons of Iraq’ programme – bringing Sunni militias into the pay of the US with the promise of future incorporation into government structures – and Sunni politicians became increasingly fearful of the influence of Al-Qa’ida among their constituencies. As part of this, insurgents were divided into ‘reconcilable’ and ‘irreconcilable’, with the former embraced by General David Petraeus’s ‘Awakening’ programme, while the latter would likely find themselves on the assassination list of General Stanley McChrystal’s Joint Special Operations units.

Today, however, none of these elements – either political or military – remain in place. Far from being separated from the violence, the interests of Iraqi political elites seem to match very closely the interests of those committing the violence – whether Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and intelligence units, insurgents or militias. Consider, for example, whether it is in the interests of the leadership of Sunni parties (for example, from the spectrum of Iraqiyya – the Iraqi National Movement) to condemn and work against the current insurgent attacks on government targets or to passively support them. Arguably, it is the latter. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Maliki is caught up in accusations that the ISF – increasingly Shia in its composition – is pursuing a sectarian agenda in areas north of Baghdad, with the alleged massacre at Hawija earlier this year a clear case in point. Furthermore, there is no overarching US presence of 100,000 troops capable of ‘encouraging’ Sunni insurgents to stop their activities, killing the irreconcilables, or influencing the actions of Iraq’s elites, including the prime minister. And there is no realistic chance that this military capability will return.

The emergence in Syria, post Assad, of a Sunni-dominated regime is therefore likely to have a significant, negative effect on Iraq, not least because of the close ties of kinship and religion between the two countries, the historical legacy of shared service in their respective insurgencies, and the powerful ideological sentiments of Sunni Arab nationalism. For these reasons, Arab Iraq (with the Kurds still safely in their northern redoubt) stands to become the front line in the conflict between Sunnis and Shias.

In this scenario, it is possible to imagine a Sunni-dominated Syrian state capable of strongly influencing the Sunni-dominated provinces of Iraq west and north of Baghdad, supported by the Arab states to the south, whether

in financial, logistic or moral terms. Meanwhile, having been defeated in Syria, Iran would have little choice but to intensify its efforts to shore up the Shia-dominated Iraqi cities of Baghdad and Basra. And as such, sectarian contestation would once again be focused on the area which saw the emergence of the schism in Islam some 1,300 years previously.

The Broader Regional Implications

Syria's neighbourhood – and the countries likely to be affected by its civil war – extends beyond Iraq, however. Indeed, from the perspective of Western policy-makers, Iraq is perhaps the least-important element in considerations of the long-term regional ramifications of instability or change in Syria, since the possibility of intervening again in the affairs of Iraq after a decade of trauma is simply anathema to them.

Of far greater concern in Western capitals is the stability of Syria's Levantine neighbours – Lebanon, Jordan and, of course, Israel – not least because of their proximity to Europe. In particular, there is concern over the very real threat posed by the possibility of state failure or of the emergence of ungoverned space in Lebanon, which could easily be exploited by Iran's Revolutionary Guard and Sunni Islamist militants alike (although they would likely be as entertained by each other's presence as they would be by the presence of Israel to the south or Europe to the west). Similarly, the Kingdom of Jordan may prove unable to survive significant instability without substantial external help, while the possibility that Israel might be tempted – in an environment of geopolitical flux – to take provocative action to strengthen its borders and enhance its security is also of major concern to Western policy-makers.

Lebanon, more than any other country, is intimately tied to Syria. Indeed, with its complex ethno-confessional society, Lebanon is actually part and parcel of the conflict in Syria – a fact that has become readily apparent in recent months. The now open alliance between Hizbullah and the Assad regime has intensified sectarian tensions between Shias in the south and Sunnis in the north of Lebanon to the extent that they are palpable, with both sides increasingly viewing their futures as tied not only to the struggle for control of the country, but also to the wider sectarian contestation across the region. Beirut, of course, lies on the front line between the two communities and, with Shias from Lebanon now fighting alongside the Syrian army and the country's Sunnis flocking in significant numbers to join anti-Assad forces, the country's demise – or at least the emergence of long-term internal instability – can almost be taken as a given.

The situation in Jordan is different – there is no sectarian tension there – but any form of instability, from any direction, is always a concern for a small, nearly landlocked state with a significant foreign population (in the

form of Palestinian refugees). This is compounded by the daily arrival of ever-more Syrian refugees, with some half a million having already arrived. It is therefore unsurprising that Jordan has emerged as a vocal opponent of the Assad regime, at the forefront of early efforts by the international community to build up a military force in response to the Syrian crisis. The US has deployed Patriot missile systems to protect Amman, while Operation *Eager Lion*, undertaken for the third time in June, saw some 8,000 troops from across the Middle East and Europe participate in war games in Jordan. The UK, too, has made public commitments to ensuring Jordan's security. Following his meeting with King Abdullah in June, Foreign Secretary William Hague agreed to 'protect Jordan and Syria's other neighbours from the consequences of the crisis'.¹¹ Increasingly, Jordan seems to be considered, by planners in Western capitals, as a possible platform for intervention in Syria – in preference to Turkey, perhaps because of the complexities of operational engagement from the north and the difficulties faced by Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan at home.

Last but not least of the Levantine countries affected by the Syrian conflict is Israel. The increased aggression of the Assad regime must surely be a cause for concern for Israel – especially in light of the sporadic engagements in the Golan Heights – as must be the emergence in Syria of a capable and determined Islamist militia that is now in receipt of Western arms. However, there is a calmness emanating from Israeli politicians and analysts that suggests that Israel may see, in the volatile cloud of chaos and instability in Lebanon and Syria, a significant silver lining. Indeed, it may see the potential for a change of government in Damascus to offer opportunities for engagement with new actors, some of whom may be open to discreet discussions regarding future relationships. Such a profound shift in policy, however, could only be made as part of a broader transformation of Israel's overall regional policy, particularly in terms of the country's relations with Turkey, Jordan and the Gulf states. Furthermore, at present, any such developments – particularly with regard to the Gulf states – could only ever be tacit, and would be dependent upon Israel reviving the peace process with the Palestinians. In short, it is clear that Israel and its neighbours will have to react in novel ways to the changing systemic realities unfolding around them, and that previous red lines may no longer be so clear in the future.¹²

Threatening to distract Western attention from these countries, however, is Egypt – itself in turmoil since the removal of President Mohamed Morsi from power by the military establishment in early July. The situation in Egypt is now very different to that in Syria, with the two cases having followed different trajectories and timescales. Nevertheless, our final analysis of the impact of the conflict in Syria across the Arab world must take recent events in Egypt into account.

The irony of out-surviving Morsi was not lost on President Assad, who declared that ‘Egyptian events signified the fall of “political Islam”’.¹³ Assad went further, noting that Islamist groups were unfit to rule and attacking those seeking to draw religion into political life. For the Syrian rebels, the loss of the Islamist government in Egypt is a hit to morale, rather than a material loss. However, what should be of real concern to them is the speed with which their supporters – Saudi Arabia and Qatar – congratulated Morsi’s successor, suggesting that alliances are perhaps not as concrete as initially thought.¹⁴

Clearly, the situation in Egypt has yet to resolve itself, and it may take time to do so. But in the meantime, Egypt will remain a lodestar for both the regime and the rebels in Syria, with each taking developments there as an indicator of popular dynamics – Arab and Islamic – and of the posture of regional powers in what will remain a destabilised system.

The End of Sykes-Picot?

The instability in Syria has had an undeniable impact on its Levantine neighbours, while the interplay between events in Egypt and Syria will prove important in the months ahead. However, it is clear – in the short term at least – that the interaction between events in Syria and those in Iraq should be viewed as being of intrinsic importance, especially given the long and porous border between the two countries and their all but symbiotic – and potentially mutually empowering – relationship. As such, the interaction between them must be acknowledged and taken as a given. Syria, in 2013, owes a great deal, if that is the right phrase, to developments in Iraq between 2003 and 2008, and events in Iraq in 2013 and beyond will increasingly be conditioned by the realities that emerge from the unfolding civil war in Syria.

Furthermore, the comparison provided by the experiences of the two countries is important. Syria is not Iraq – in terms of the way in which the conflict is unfolding, the way in which Western powers will engage with the conflict, and its ramifications for the wider region – but there are strong parallels that need to be recognised and understood. In essence, Syria and Iraq cannot be separated, neither spatially nor temporally; they present a past, present and future continuum that will prove transformative in Middle Eastern political life.

Nearly a century after Sir Mark Sykes and François Georges-Picot concluded their agreement over control of the Middle East in May 1916, it is tempting to conclude that the Middle East state system is coming to an end; that the anomalous, Western-made century of regional instability is now being challenged and overthrown by those indigenous forces of ethnicity, religion and local communality that were so imperiously ignored by the realist policy-makers of a century ago. But this would be wrong.

The Sykes-Picot Middle East state system is not being erased. But it is almost certainly being modified – coming to be marked, potentially, by the emergence of a scattering of new states, with the Republic of South Kurdistan at the head of the list.

Perhaps the new model for the Middle East will indeed be the former Yugoslavia, as some analysts have suggested – not in terms of the establishment of ‘new states’, but in terms of both the development of new entities and the contestation of spheres of influence.¹⁵ Such entities might comprise those that are stable and coherent – with Israel, Jordan and maybe even South Kurdistan the potential equivalents of Slovenia and Croatia in this regard; those that are recognised but remain deeply problematic, with Lebanon and maybe Iraq the equivalents of today’s Bosnia; and those that exist in a netherworld of contested recognition, debated sovereignty and challenged state power, with possible post-Syrian entities such as an Alawite or Kurdish state or an entity spanning Syria and Iraq being akin to Kosovo.

In short, the future map of the Middle East is likely to be confused, confusing and changeable. Yet the legacies of twentieth-century states will prove difficult, if not impossible, to dispel, raising the question of who will be in control of the remnants of their structures, their narratives and their futures. These are the pressing issues that Western states should now be addressing, rather than concerning themselves with the pitfalls of intervention in situations where the opportunity to usefully intervene has long since passed.

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BRIEFING PAPER

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The Middle East 2017 3. ern Syria” and the panels on both Iran and Russia raised doubts about the willingness of either Moscow or Tehran to continue to pour resources into Syria to do so. While the Saudi panel posited that Riyadh was now more focused on Yemen than Syria, it acknowledged that Qatar and the UAE remained fixed on Syria and might opt to escalate their commitments to the Syrian opposition to help prevent the regime and the Iranians from consolidating their gains. In the grand Venn diagram of the Yemeni civil war, there did not yet appear to be any overlap among the circles. One of the speakers, an expert on civil wars, provided a haunting reminder at the end of the first day of the conference, warning that