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Syrian national flag flutters over a building controlled by forces loyal to President Bashar al-Asad in Ashrafieh, Aleppo September 17, 2013. | Reuters

THE END OF SYKES-PICOT? REFLECTIONS ON THE PROSPECTS OF THE ARAB STATE SYSTEM

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During much of the past three years, the Syrian civil war has been the most prominent item on the Middle Eastern political agenda and has dominated the political-diplomatic discourse in the region and among policy makers, analysts, and pundits interested in its affairs.¹

Preoccupation with the Syrian crisis has derived from the sense, apparent since its early phases, that it was much more than a domestic issue. It has, indeed, become a conflict by-proxy between Iran and its regional rivals and the arena of American-Russian competition. It has also had a spillover effect on several neighboring countries and has been a bellwether for the state of the Arab Spring.

As the conflict festered it also prompted a broader discussion and debate over the future of the Arab State system. The collapse of Syria, the ongoing fighting in Iraq, and the general instability in the Middle East has led some observers to question whether the very geography of the region will be changed. Robin Wright, a journalist and scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, argues that “the map of the modern Middle East, a political and economic pivot in the international order, is in tatters.” Wright also warns that competing groups and ideologies are pulling the region apart: “A different map would be a strategic game changer for just about everybody, potentially reconfiguring alliances, security challenges, trade and energy flows for much of the world, too.” Similarly, Parag Khanna, a senior fellow at the New America Foundation, argues, “Nowhere is a rethinking of “the state” more necessary than in the Middle East.” He contends that “The Arab world will not be resurrected to its old glory until its map is redrawn to resemble a collection of autonomous national oases linked by Silk Roads of commerce.” Lt. Colonel Joel Rayburn, writing from the Hoover Institution, points out that the alternative may not be new states but rather simply collapse. “If watching the fall or near-fall of half a dozen regimes in the Arab Spring has taught us anything, it should be that the Arab states that appeared serenely stable to outsiders for the past half century were more brittle than we have understood,” warning darkly, “This conflict could very well touch us all, perhaps becoming an engine of jihad that spews forth attackers bent on bombing western embassies and cities or disrupting Persian Gulf oil markets long before the fire burns out.”²

This discussion touches on a key question: Will the collapse of one or several



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¹ For two book length studies of the Syrian civil war, see: Fouad Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2012) and Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant* (London: Routledge, 2013)

² Robin Wright, “Imagining a Re-mapped Middle East,” *New York Times*, September 28, 2013; Parag Khanna, “The End of the Nation State,” *New York Times*, October 12, 2013; Joel Rayburn, “The Coming War in the Middle East,” *Defining Islam* (The Hoover Institution), February 6, 2013.

other Arab states produce a new order in the region?

The regional order has been threatened before, but today's challenge is unique. Syria is what has prompted the latest reevaluation of the Skyes-Picot borders, but many of the problems predated the Syrian civil war. Ambitious monarchs in the 1930s and 1940s challenged the order after the colonial period. The doctrine of Pan-Arab Nationalism and Gamal Abd al-Nasir's messianic leadership in the 1950s and by Saddam Hussein in 1990 again posed a threat. Now it is now challenged not by a powerful state or a sweeping ideology but by the weakness of several Arab states that seem to be on the verge of implosion or disintegration.

This paper assesses the situation in Syria, with an emphasis on what might lead to its de facto partition or lasting collapse. It then examines Syria's neighbors and their prospects for stability. The paper concludes by exploring how the United States, Israel, and Iran might affect this tenuous balance.

The prospect of Syria's partition or disintegration

The challenge to the Middle East order predates the Syrian crisis and have little to do with it as such – Iraq's virtual partition into three components, Hizballah's takeover of the Lebanese state, and the failure of the Libyan and Yemenite states. And yet, it was the Syrian crisis that prompted the discourse of a systemic change and may well serve to bring it about in a full-fledged or limited version. This Syrian role derives from several sources: Syria's central position in the core region of the Middle East, its traditional role, and the real prospect of the Syrian state collapse and partition.

Syria has been a fractured country for more than two years now. The civil war, which began as a series of fairly quiet demonstrations in March 2011, developed into a full-fledged conflict. The opposition gained control of large parts of the country but has failed to capture Damascus or topple the regime. A draw of sorts has been established. The regime, with massive help from Iran and Hizballah, has been able to consolidate its control over Syria's central part with extensions to the west and south and retaken parts of the country under opposition control. Diplomatically, the regime also gained a new lease on life by becoming an indispensable partner in the destruction of the chemical weapons arsenal and by the likely change in the ground rules of the Geneva II meeting in the regime's favor.

The change in the tide of war does not imply an imminent breakthrough or decision and, indeed, the regime's military strategy does not seek to regain control on the whole country in the near future. It rather seeks to consolidate its control over Syria's central part from Damascus to Aleppo with a westward extension toward the coast and the Alawite mountains and southward toward the city of



Deraa.

The Syrian opposition is fractious; with implications for Syria's future should Bashar al-Asad's regime fall or should a stalemate continue. In fact, it is difficult to speak about the opposition as a single, coherent entity: it has hundreds of military organizations that cooperate at best sporadically and at times fight one another. A variety of jihadi groups challenge both the state and more moderate oppositions – and yet they too fight one another. In areas under their control, they jihadi have been imposing Islamic law and replacing the state courts with Islamic courts.

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The Syrian regime still hopes to regain control over all its territory, but military setbacks could change this. In late 2012 and early 2013, when the regime's fortunes were at a particularly low ebb, they appeared to be considering limited additional withdrawals while consolidating control over Alawite areas in the mountains as well as Damascus. There has been evidence of Alawite preparations for such an eventuality. Also, the ferocious fighting in Homs and other areas close to the Alawite mountains and on the road to the Shiite parts of Lebanon suggested that it was part of a scheme designed to expand the projected Alawite enclave, give it some depth, and afford it a secure link to its Shiite and Iranian allies in Lebanon. Control of the coast would give such an enclave both seaports and airports. The weaknesses and faults inherent in such a scheme are obvious but as an emergency planning for a community fearing retribution and massacre it seemed to make sense. Asad and the core of his supporters would, naturally, prefer to restore the regime's control over the whole country, but they must realize that this is not likely in the short term. A small Alawite statelet is a less desirable option of last resort, but Asad must have resigned himself to the notion that a preservation of his regime in western and parts of central Syria may be the best option available to him at present.³

Geography and adequate weapon systems would enable the Alawites to defend themselves against the massacre that could be expected in the event of a Sunni victory. This mood rested on the assumption that the brutal suppression of the Sunni rebellion in the early 1980s and the bloodshed of the current civil war created a blood account that the Sunnis would seek to settle in the event of

³ See: Nicholas A. Heras, *the Potential for an Assad Statelet in Syria* (The Washington Institute, Policy Focus 132, December 2013). Heras focuses his analysis on the smaller version of an Alawite statelet, but he deals also with the option of a larger version of such an Alawite dominated entity.



victory.⁴

If such a scheme were to materialize it would mean in practice a partition of Syria not into two, but into three, since the Kurds in the northwestern parts of the country would be likely to establish their own autonomous area. And, indeed, the Kurds are making their own move. Such a shift, however, will involve de facto autonomy rather than a formal bid for independence. Syria's Kurds, like the Iraqi Kurds, may crave sovereignty and independence, but they know that fierce Turkish opposition precludes this. Turkey has its own minority of 15-20 percent Kurds and believes that the formation of an independent Kurdish statehood on the Iraqi or Syrian side of the border would have a radicalizing effect on their own Kurdish population. This is well understood by the Kurdish leadership in Iraq, which has found a modus vivendi with Turkey, and the same is likely to shape the conduct of the Syrian Kurds. So far, the Kurdish leadership in Syria has been deeply divided over a variety of issues including the attitude toward the regime and the rebels. There have been clashes between Kurdish groups but on the whole their leadership and activists are focused on the efforts to keep the war away from their region and to fend against efforts by jihadi groups to establish their control over some Kurdish areas. This perspective is likely to change in the event of a full partition of the Syrian state. The prospect of a Kurdish autonomous region in Syria, contiguous with the Kurdish autonomous region in Iraq, is unsettling for Turkey, which would have to contend with both regions on its borders. So is the prospect of an Alawite statelet. While two autonomous Kurdish regions on its borders could further agitate its own Kurdish population, Turkey must also think of the effect of an Alawite statelet on the Alawite population in the Hatay Province and, to a lesser extent, on the Alevi minority. By acquiring and maintaining a leading role in the Syrian crisis the Turkish government must feel that it may have some influence on the course of events.

Four of Syria's five neighbors – Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan – are involved in the country's civil war, playing a role by supporting one of the sides and being affected by its spillover effect. It is not the Lebanese state or government but Hizballah, in the service of Iran, that has been playing a significant role in the Syrian civil war sending thousands of fighters. Such support is vital, as the Syrian leadership is afraid of massive defections if it were to employ the regular units, whose rank and file is mostly Sunni Arab, in quashing the opposition.

When it comes to Iraq, it is the government of Nuri al-Maliki, essentially representing the 60 percent Shiite-Arab majority and a close ally of Iran, which supports Asad's regime in the civil war. It facilitates weapon transfers from Iran and encourages Shiite volunteers to fight alongside with the regime. An entirely different phenomenon is the role played in the ranks of the opposition by Iraqi

⁴ There is no direct link between the Alawite statelet created by the French mandatory authorities in the 1920s (it was forcibly integrated into the Syrian state in the late 1940s) but the memory of that entity and the tradition of Alawite separatism have certainly reinforced this line of thinking.



jihadijihadis.jihadi In January 2014, the most radical jihadi group operating in Syria, ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria), consisting mostly of radical Sunni jihadis from Iraq, transferred the edge of its activities to Iraq itself and captured parts of cities of Falluja and Ramadi, thus posing a severe challenge to the al-Maliki government and underscoring the interplay between the Syrian and Iraqi crises. The very name, ISIS, implies the notion that a Sunni victory in Syria would lead to the creation of an entity friendly to Iraq's Sunnis across the border. This is not a sentiment shared so far by the majority of Iraq's Sunnis who are not quite ready to secede from Iraq and is limited to the radical jihadis.

The prospect of Iraq's disintegration

Iraq's civil war burned hottest in the middle of the last decade, and the fire is not out. Indeed, the Syrian war has added fuel, with thousands dying in 2013 in sectarian violence. Partition there remains a possibility. Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has built an authoritarian system that rests mostly on the Shiite-Arab majority and has sharply antagonized the Sunni-Arab population that feels disenfranchised after centuries of hegemony. The Sunni minority concentrated in the north-western part of the country is estranged from the current Iraqi state and the government in Baghdad has a limited sway over this part of the country. This area serves as the territorial link between the Syrian civil war and the ongoing conflict in Iraq, and has been described above, serves in turn to inflame one party or the other. The Kurdish region in the north enjoys full autonomy and is

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economically flourishing. For now, neither the Kurds nor the Sunnis are ready to separate – Iraqi national identity remains real. Saddam Hussein invested a massive effort in trying a legacy and a distinct identity for Iraq that would integrate the three major communities into one polity. His success was not full, but the notion of a distinct Iraqi entity is there. Nor should the significance of oil revenue be taken lightly. For Iraq's Sunnis to secede from Iraq would be to abandon their claim for their share in its oil income. At this point they would rather fight for their position inside Iraq than secede from it.

The gloomy status quo in Iraq could persist in the coming years unless a radical domestic or external development serves to convert the potential for radical change into an actual one. In this context, the future course of the Syrian crisis and its interplay with Iraq's domestic conflict seems to be the most likely source for such a change.



Lebanon

Lebanon meets the definition of a failed state – here the issue is more collapse than partition. It houses a complex entity, Hizballah, that is at one and the same time a political party, a social movement, a powerful militia and an extension of the Iranian government. Hizballah is more powerful than the Lebanese state and does not accept its authority. It participates in the governmental coalition and exercises its influence over the Lebanese army. At this point Hizballah and its Iranian patrons prefer to keep the shell of the Lebanese state as long as they enjoy full freedom to pursue their policies and as long as the Lebanese government does not take any action that is not acceptable to them.

There is strong criticism within the Shiite community and outside it to Hizballah's participation in the fighting in Syria but in the absence of a countervailing force there is no one to harness that opposition into counter action. There is open fighting between radical Sunnis and Alawites in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli, and radical Sunni elements in Lebanon and jihadi elements active in the Syrian opposition have retaliated against Hizballah by launching terrorist acts in Lebanon. These acts have a disruptive effect but not real impact on Lebanese politics. Communities other than Lebanon's Shiites, the Sunnis in the north, the Druze and the Maronites in the mountain, keep their strongholds but this does not represent a change in the familiar pattern of Lebanese politics. In 2005, a coalition of Syria and Hizballah's rivals was strong enough to flood the streets of Beirut and bring about Syria's military withdrawal. That coalition has since disintegrated and while Hizballah encounters terrorist retaliation by radical Sunni groups it is not politically challenged by a force or a coalition that threatens its domination of the Lebanese state. It would take a collapse of Assad's regime in Syria to introduce a massive change in the equation and open the way to a normalization of Lebanese political life.

As long as Hizballah chooses to maintain the status quo, the Lebanese system is likely to continue with few changes. As in Iraq, the key to a profound change in the state of Lebanese politics is to be found in Syria. A Sunni victory over the regime would weaken Hizballah's position in Lebanon, which is precisely why Iran and Hizballah are willing to invest such massive efforts in preserving Assad's regime. Should Assad be able to stay in power, either in the current limited version or with fuller control of his country, Iran's and Hizballah's position in Lebanon would be reinforced. In any event, there is no current threat to the very existence of the Lebanese state. The struggle is over its character.

Jordan

The stability of the Hashemite Kingdom in Jordan is challenged by domestic opposition and the unsettling effect of the Syrian crisis. The current opposition to and criticism of the Royal House does not come from the traditional Palestinian sources but rather those from the East Bank, who are unhappy with the royal



family's conduct and with the country's economic plight. The main impact of the Syrian civil war on Jordan has been influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees, most of who live in miserable conditions in the northern part of the country, while the wealthier refugees buy apartments in Amman and increase the pressure on the real estate market already affected by the earlier influx of Iraqi refugees.

These trends are offset by the feeling of many Jordanians that tough as conditions may be in their country, compared to most Syrians, Iraqis and Lebanese, they are doing relatively well. Furthermore, while in earlier decades opposition movements in Jordan threatened the country's very existence, current opposition and criticism are narrowly focused on the king and aueen. The Royal House and the Jordanian elite continue to monitor the Palestinian question and Israel's relations and negotiations with the Palestinian Authority with concern. They navigate a narrow path: Jordan is concerned that a future Palestinian state, particularly one that shares a border with Jordan, would threaten the Kingdom's existence. The familiar calculus of the Jordanian Hashemite establishment is that a small Palestinian state in the West Bank would by definition be irredentist and would challenge the Jordanian Kingdom's legitimacy claiming the allegiance of at least part of its Palestinian majority. They are also concerned that Israeli-Palestinian tensions and the outbreak of a third Intifada would radicalize Palestinian opinion inside Jordan and threaten the kingdom's stability. In a different vein, they are concerned by the power of the radical right wing in Israeli politics and the occasional revival of the notion held originally by former Prime Minister ArielSharon, that "Jordan is Palestine." Jordan maintains a good working relationship with the current Israel government but is ever watchful, fearful of radical changes in the state of the Palestinian issue. In this state of affairs, the Jordanian Kingdom's space for political a diplomatic maneuvering remains limited. Jordan calls for Palestinian statehood and opposes Israeli annexation of the Jordan Valley but in practice relies on Israel to postpone the formation of a Palestinian state and to create a buffer between it and Jordan should such a state finally emerge.

Turkey

Syria's northern neighbor is a powerful state with complex interests in Syria's affairs. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government had prided itself on a rapprochement with the Syrian regime after decades of tension, but with the outbreak of protests in Syria, Erdogan was clearly disappointed by Asad's failure to follow his advice and his sympathies were clearly with the Islamist opposition to the regime. In short order, Turkey found itself hosting a large number of Syrian refugees as well as the political headquarters of the Syrian opposition. Some military supplies provided by Turkey and other foes of the regime have also gone through the Turkish-Syrian border, but like other actors in this crisis, Turkey has been very careful with the level of weapons it has been offering the rebels, fearful of the prospect of sophisticated anti-tank and anti-aircraft systems falling into



radical hands.

Most importantly, Turkey's involvement in the Syrian crisis revealed the limits of Erdogan's and Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoglu's policy and some significant weaknesses in the structure of the Turkish state. The deterioration of Turkey's rapprochement with Syria was but one aspect of the collapse of Turkey's hopes for a hegemonic role in the Arab World alongside with the deterioration of its relations with Egypt and other comparable developments. Furthermore, the conflict with Asad's regime revealed the weakness of Turkey's military posture and the significance of fault lines in Turkey's body politic. When Asad's forces shot down a Turkish jetfighter and exploded a charge in southern Turkey, Turkey refrained from retaliation. It also transpired that significant groups in Turkey are supportive of Asad's regime and opposed to Erdogan's policy. In the Turkish province of Hatay, the former Syrian Alexandretta, there is a large Alawite minority supportive of the regime in Damascus. The Alevi minority (not to be confused with Alawites), as a Shiite group, feels affinity with the Syrian Alawites and is also critical of Ankara's policies. Coupled with the domestic agitation confronted by the regime, the image of a formidable, coherent Turkish state coming to play a dominant role in the Ottoman Empire's former Arab provinces has been shattered.

Even more significant from a Turkish point of view is the Kurdish question. Dealing with its own Kurdish minority is a major problem for Ankara. Ankara has been quite successful in building good working relationship with the autonomous Kurdish region in Iraq. As has been mentioned above, the Kurds, in turn, refrain from crossing red lines and seeking sovereignty among other things because they know that this would not be acceptable to Turkey. But the prospect of a break up of the Syrian state and the emergence of yet another autonomous Kurdish area on Turkey's borders could upset this delicate balance and is monitored very closely by Turkey.

The United States, Iran and Israel

Perhaps surprisingly, Iran, Israel, and the United States share an interest in keeping Syria intact and preventing regime collapse in general. The United States has traditionally been supportive of the territorial status quo in the Middle East. Iran, a revolutionary challenger of the political status quo and a revisionist power, is in fact interested in maintaining the current state structure: Iraq and Lebanon are led by forces friendly to Teheran, and the Iranian regime is Bashar al-Asad's strongest supporter.

Israel's outlook is more complex. It has no particular interest in Iraqi affairs as long as Iraq does not return to the position of being the lynch pin of a hostile "eastern front." Israel is concerned with Hizballah's arsenal in Lebanon, but is not likely to initiate any action as long as the status quo can be maintained. With



regard to Syria, Israeli decision makers and analysts are divided into two schools: those who believe that it is better for Israel to have Asad stay in power, and those who believe that it is better for Israel to have him go, rather than face the consequences of a triumph by the Russia-Iran-Hizballah axis. In any event, this so far has been mostly an academic debate. The Israeli government knows full well that it is in its interest to stay on the sidelines and that its ability to affect the war's outcome is limited. Israel drew its own red lines by stating that it will not accept the transfer of sophisticated weapons systems into terrorist hands and it acted several times to prevent such transfers to Hizballah. But the limited influence that the Syrian civil war has so far had on Israel's national security could be transformed into a massive crisis swiftly. The IDF chief of Staff, General Gantz, has consistently warned of such potential eventuality. In November 2012, he warned that "the Syrian conflict could become ours" during a tour of Israel's north . Nearly a year later, in October 2013, he stated in a speech at Bar-Ilan University, "The pastoral landscape of the Golan could change in a momentary explosion to a battlefield of blood, fire and smoke."

Conclusion

The unraveling of the current political order in the core of the Middle East may reshape the strategic landscape. At present, the interplay between the Syrian and Iraqi crises seems to pose the greatest challenge to the current Middle Eastern map. In both states the regimes are confronting severe challenges to their legitimacy and control and the interplay between these two challenges – the Sunni majority's war against Asad's regime in Syria, the Sunni minority's refusal to accept the new order in Iraq, the contiguity of these two groups, and this arena's choice by al-Qa'ida as the focal point of its activity – turn it into the region's tinder box.

The present challenge to the stability and in some cases the state's very existence developed differently in each of these states – the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the unique sectarian problem in Syria and Bashar al-Asad's mishandling of the initial protest in March 2011, and the accumulation of political pressures on the Lebanese and Jordanian political systems. But they have all been also affected by regional trends, the effervescence which manifested itself in the Arab Spring of 2010-2011, a greater role played by religious affiliation and movements, and the resurgence of primordial loyalties, (ethnic, tribal and sectarian) At the same time, other regional forces at work have served to protect the current state system: A common perception that the precedent of one partition could set the stage for a massive havoc in the region and the absence of a regional actor, comparable to Abd al-Nasir's Egypt in the 1950s, possessed of the ability to generate such changes. This perception, however, may not be enough. Many of the forces described above are strong, and most are beyond the control of the actors involved.

