

## Ethno-Sectarianism and Political Order in the Middle East

December 2018



BIPARTISAN POLICY CENTER

---

## STAFF

### **Blaise Misztal**

*Director of National Security*

### **Jessica Michek**

*Policy Analyst*

### **Nicholas Danforth**

*Senior Policy Analyst*

---

## CONTRIBUTORS

### **Aaron Lobel**

*Founder and President, America Abroad Media*

---

## DISCLAIMER

The findings and recommendations expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views or opinions of the Bipartisan Policy Center's founders or its board of directors.

- 
- 4** Introduction: Doubling Down on Dysfunction
  - 7** Nation Building Beyond Borders
  - 21** Balance of Power: Geopolitics Steps on the Scales
  - 30** Federalism: Centripetal or Centrifugal?
  - 36** Bosnia: A Case Study in Contradictions
  - 43** Conclusions: Synchronized Stabilization
  - 49** Endnotes

# Introduction: Doubling Down on Dysfunction

When Iraq and Syria descended into civil war, the intractability of their ethnic and sectarian divisions were said to make such conflicts inevitable. Now, as these two conflicts appear to be reaching a turning point and attention shifts to the task of reassembling political order in the heart of the Middle East, such diagnoses—and the impossibility of peace that they implied—have largely been forgotten.

Increasingly, analysts and policymakers have turned to the idea that a decisive military victory by Damascus and its Russian and Iranian backers will allow Syria to “knit itself together again.”<sup>1</sup> According to this theory, only when regime forces have decisively crushed the remaining pockets of opposition, in Idlib Province and possibly the Kurdish-held northeast as well, can Syrian President Bashar al-Assad succeed in once again stabilizing Syria on his terms. In Iraq last year, Washington also embraced the logic of stability through force when it consented to Baghdad’s military intervention following a Kurdish independence referendum. And yet this newfound faith in the ability of centralized governments to maintain order by brutalizing restive populations into submission is belied by the region’s recent history. Indeed, it was the failure of this very approach that left both Iraq and Syria susceptible to the upheaval they are experiencing today.

Thus, any consideration of Iraq’s and Syria’s future political dispositions cannot and should not take place without a broader reflection on what caused them to unravel in the first place. This must be true both logically and strategically. No attempt to replace conflict with order can succeed without resolving the drivers of the conflict in the first place. Any vision of what comes next in Iraq and Syria contains, whether explicitly or not, a judgement about what sparked their combustion. The viability of these proposals can be vetted by the accuracy of their diagnoses.

Such a comprehensive explanation for the Middle East’s instability is also a strategic requirement for U.S. policy. Stability not only continues to evade the region but also remains a significant national interest. Whatever the fate of Syria and Iraq, violence and civil conflicts continue rippling through the region, tearing apart Yemen, Libya, and southeastern Turkey. In all cases, the only benefactors of such chaos are America’s adversaries: Iran and Salafi jihadist movements like the Islamic State. If America’s enemies are driving or exploiting regional instability, or both simultaneously, it is crucial that American policymakers understand its roots in order to develop a strategy for reversing it.



*If America’s enemies are driving or exploiting regional instability, or both simultaneously, it is crucial that American policymakers understand its roots in order to develop a strategy for reversing it.*

There has been no shortage of previous attempts to ascertain the failings of Middle Eastern states. Long before the current conflicts arose, scholars and statesmen seeking to shape the region have offered diverse diagnoses for the Middle East’s political pathologies—and proposed an equally diverse array of cures. Over the course of the 20th century, religion, culture, class conflict, and economics have been put forward as broad explanations for any and all of the region’s perceived shortcomings. In turn, a succession of would-be reformers—Ottoman modernizers, European imperialists, Soviet advisors, and American development experts—have sought to transform Middle Eastern states and societies. Yet despite, or because of, these efforts, a stable and durable political order still eludes the region.

Nevertheless, to avoid the pitfalls of the last century, these same questions ought to be asked again. And asked in light of both past failures to create a sustainable order in the region and the latest paroxysms of violence. Either old diagnoses need to be discarded and new cures developed, or expectations of order in the region need to be recalibrated. Or perhaps both. Yet, in current policy debates about Iraq and Syria, neither is occurring.

This paper begins by interrogating three of the most prevalent recommendations for returning stability to Iraq and Syria: redrawing borders, balancing regional powers, and enacting federal political systems. Each approach relies on an implicit or explicit assessment of what key element makes a state system function smoothly. Then, citing the supposed absence of this element in the Middle East, each approach proposes a method for instilling it. Ultimately, each of these proposals amounts to a reductive approach—doubling down on a single explanatory variable and an inflexible



solution—that comes at the expense of a comprehensive vision for the region, one that can be both flexible and focused on building a more nuanced understanding of the Middle East’s unraveling.

## REDRAWING BORDERS

Over the past decade, a diverse array of critics have reduced the origin of Middle Eastern instability to the region’s post-World War I territorial delimitation at the hands of the British and French Empires. According to this theory, the secret terms of the Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916 set the stage for the creation of arbitrary borders, enclosing artificial states. Or, in the words of former Vice President Joe Biden, “artificial lines, creating artificial states made up of totally distinct ethnic, religious, cultural groups.” As a result, the argument goes, these inherently fissile territories could, at best, be forcefully held together by authoritarian leaders like the Assads or Saddam Hussein, but in the absence of such a heavy hand would break apart as they are today. At the most extreme, this diagnosis of the region’s turmoil has led to elaborate and implausible schemes for redrawing the region’s borders anew to create ethnically or religiously homogeneous nation-states. More modestly, though, it has built support for concrete territorial changes—Kurdish independence, the division of Iraq, the de-facto partition of Syria into autonomous regions—that represent moves toward greater demographic homogeneity. In other words, correcting bad borders by creating better ones.

As explored below, however, this approach misunderstands the history of state formation not only in the Middle East but in Europe as well. While many states around the world have benefited from a strong sense of shared national identity, this has seldom been the result of properly drawn borders. Rather, it has almost always been the result of a complex process, involving an often fraught and controversial mix of ethnic cleansing, assimilation, and political contestation. Even if policymakers were to conclude that creating coherent nation-states represented the most effective means to bring peace to the Middle East, they should only approach the task with a firm awareness of the challenges this would pose. Redrawing borders and remaking states, while sometimes the lesser evil in cases of irreconcilable conflict, is also a sure path to new conflicts as well.

## REBALANCING POWERS

Alternatively, another approach that has gained currency across the political spectrum in Washington focuses on the role of interstate rivalry in driving intrastate conflict. According to this approach, it is the Iran-Saudi rivalry, sometimes presented in sectarian terms as a Sunni-Shiite rivalry, that has fueled domestic conflicts in Syria and Iraq, ultimately leading to their collapse. For analysts who see this regional cold war as the primary source of instability, creating a modus vivendi between Iran and its Sunni rivals in the Gulf appears to be the first step toward stabilizing the region. This, in turn, requires creating a balance of power between the two rivals, checking both fears and aggressive impulses on either side of the divide so that Riyadh and Tehran will refrain from provocative moves in the region. Seen in this light, both President Barack Obama’s effort to secure Iran’s integration into the regional order in return for giving up its nuclear program and President Donald Trump’s emerging policy of confronting Iran represent rival but related approaches to securing regional stability by rebalancing Iran’s relations with America’s traditional allies.

There is no doubt that the Saudi-Iranian standoff has been a serious source of instability in the Middle East. It is impossible to understand the conflicts in Syria and Yemen, for example, without recognizing the role of this rivalry in exacerbating already extant social divisions. Without the influx of arms and ideology from Tehran and Riyadh, these conflicts would not have become as violent, protracted, or as explicitly sectarian in nature. But while stanching this regional conflict by achieving a workable balance of power is a necessary step for restoring broader stability, there is little reason to think it will be a sufficient one. First, the experience of the last two administrations shows that there is little agreement on what an appropriate balance of power would look like. While some in the Obama administration thought the United States had, for too long, tipped the balance in favor of its Sunni allies, many in Washington and the region believed that in his approach to the nuclear deal, Obama did exactly the opposite. Moreover, even if Washington came to its own conclusion on what a balance of power would look like, it is highly unlikely either side would be confident enough in it, or in each other, to avoid the temptation to meddle in regional affairs. The Syrian civil war shows the rapidity with which both Iran and its Sunni rivals moved to intervene when they felt a key aspect of the regional order was up for grabs. Conversely, however well-balanced outside powers are, as long as the internal order in key regional states remains contested, the possibility of using destabilizing means to tip the balance will likely prove irresistible.

## RECONFIGURING STATES

Finally, for many observers who recognize the challenges of both rebuilding shattered states and redrawing borders, federalism has emerged as a compromise solution, a way to split the difference by remaking state institutions in order to reflect the irreconcilable divisions within these states. According to this logic, federalism can allow people to simultaneously live together and apart, with mechanisms like territorial autonomy and guaranteed political representation creating space for coexistence. In Iraq, for example, federalism was seen as a way to manage Kurdish demands for independence while maintaining a unified Iraqi state, while more extensive federal decentralization was proposed in response to less territorially defined Sunni-Shiite divisions. Similarly, in Syria, federalism has been proposed as a way to reintegrate rebel-held regions that refuse to return to Damascus's brutal grip.

Yet for all the obvious appeal of federal solutions—alongside variants such as confederation—the history of the 20th-century Middle East reveals their limitations as well. Indeed, many of the region's attempts at creating federal states failed so quickly and ignominiously that they are barely remembered at all. If the short-lived United Arab Republic (UAR) has at least gone down as a footnote in history, the Arab Federation and the Federation of South Arabia, which did not even make the footnotes, stand out as other dramatic examples of failed federations with lessons for today. Specifically, these failures reveal that federal systems work best when they unite preexisting political entities with shared interests and ideas, not when they seek to hold together existing entities by bridging existing divisions. Ultimately, federalism works best in the presence of centripetal forces, not centrifugal ones like those tearing apart the Middle East.

## NEXT STEPS

All three of these approaches share two fundamental characteristics: They locate the source of instability in the region's ethno-sectarian cleavages, whether internal or external, and then they assume that this constellation of identities is static and immutable.

Indeed, sectarian divisions between Sunni and Shiite Muslims, which were not a defining feature of regional politics a century ago, have taken on an undeniable importance over the past two decades. Just as it would be a mistake to see multiethnic states as doomed to failure, it would be a mistake to see the Sunni-Shiite divide as an insurmountable 13-century-old geopolitical rift. Yet, recognizing that these fault lines are not eternal or inevitable does not make them unimportant. Nor does it minimize the risk that they could become even more important if misguided policies exacerbate them.

Squaring this circle, then, at both the local and regional level, requires an ongoing awareness of malleability and endurance of political identities, as well as the possibility that they can overlap. It requires creating a balance of power that acknowledges sectarian divisions where they exist while incorporating cross-cutting identities that reduce their salience.

The resulting model might be thought of as synchronized stabilization. Its goal would be to recognize and resolve existing conflicts without reifying the institutions and identities that sustain them. Applying the idea of synchronized stabilization to U.S. policy and the Middle East today calls for lowered expectations about how much stability the United States can achieve, coupled with greater attention to the most concrete and dangerous destabilizing forces.



# Nation Building Beyond Borders

In the fall of 2017, the Kurdistan Regional Government held a referendum on declaring independence from Iraq. In making his case for independence, Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani frequently criticized the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the injustice it had done to the Kurds by forcing them to be part of the Iraqi state.<sup>2,3</sup>

In his criticism of Sykes-Picot, and his suggestion that Kurdish independence could help remedy its damaging legacy, Barzani was not alone. Western policymakers have also put forward a series of proposals for redrawing Middle Eastern borders. Whether implicit or explicit, whether specific or region-wide, these proposals all build on a historically based diagnosis of what makes a state stable and why Middle Eastern states lack this stability. Specifically, they operate on the assumption that demographic homogeneity, be it ethnic, religious, or otherwise, is a prerequisite for stable states and that the Middle Eastern states, because of their supposedly arbitrary postwar borders, lack this homogeneity. According to this widely heard argument, the artificial nature and arbitrary borders of the region's states, a product, supposedly, of post-World War I European imperialists, made today's state failures inevitable. Getting lumped together into a single political entity, this argument holds, is fundamentally unbearable for diverse ethnic and religious groups and will always result in friction that, eventually, flares up. Beginning from this assumption, the natural conclusion is that these divisions can best be managed by redrawing regional borders to create more "authentic," that is, homogeneous, states. If the arbitrary borders and artificial states that define the region today could be replaced with a more suitable arrangement, the logic goes, stability would follow. Good borders, after all, make good neighbors.

Over the past decade and a half, a number of prominent policymakers from both parties have endorsed the logic of partition along ethno-religious lines based on their belief in the inherent stability of homogeneous states. In 2006, for example, then-Senator Joe Biden seemed to embrace this approach when he made a controversial suggestion to divide Iraq into separate Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish states. He doubled down on the logic behind this proposal when addressing U.S. military and diplomatic personnel in Baghdad a decade later:

*Think of all the places we are today trying to keep the peace. All the places we've sent you guys and women. They're places where, because of history, we've drawn artificial lines, creating artificial states made up of totally distinct ethnic, religious, cultural groups, and said: "Have at it. Live together."<sup>4</sup>*

On the other end of the political spectrum, White House National Security Advisor John Bolton recently made a similar case, claiming that defeating ISIS required creating a new Sunni state to take its place. "The best alternative to the Islamic State in northeastern Syria and western Iraq," he wrote, "is a new independent Sunni state."<sup>5</sup> More recently, writing in *The Wall Street Journal*, journalist Bret Stephens endorsed a similar partition plan for Syria, calling for the creation of an Alawite state along the Mediterranean coast.<sup>6</sup> Though creating an "ethnic homeland" might be "messy," he suggested, it is the "only solution" to Syria's civil war.

In the Middle Eastern context, this commitment to the ideal of the homogenous nation-state frequently makes reference to a stylized history in which the Sykes-Picot Agreement is central. Many calls for remapping the region begin with a reference to the 1916 Anglo-French proposal for dividing the region. In a piece titled "It's Time to Seriously Consider Partitioning Syria," for example, former NATO Supreme Allied Commander Admiral James Stavridis justifies this conclusion by claiming that "Syria's borders, of course, were famously drawn in the early part of the last century, as the 'sick man of Europe'—the Ottoman Empire—collapsed after World War I. Syria is not a longstanding civilization like Persia (today's Iran), Turkey, or Greece."<sup>7</sup> For critics, Sykes-Picot symbolizes the arbitrariness of the current Middle Eastern state system and the borders that define it.

According to the expanded Sykes-Picot version of history, the Ottoman Empire, a multireligious and multiethnic state spanning the region, was doomed to eventual disintegration on account of its diversity. Yet when the Ottoman state collapsed after World War I, the opportunity to solve the empire's fundamental flaw was supposedly wasted, as self-interested imperial powers drew new borders to accommodate their own needs without regard for the demographic realities on the ground. Skipping ahead a century, the Sykes-Picot narrative then posits the identity-based conflicts currently wracking the region as the belated result of the borders laid down in 1916. At best, it suggests that only heavy-handed authoritarian regimes could keep these inherently fissile states intact and that with their collapse some form of the current chaos was inevitable.

## INTRODUCTION: REVISITING THE NATION AND THE STATE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

As this section will describe in more detail, the myth of Sykes-Picot risks leading policymakers astray. In suggesting that borders failed to accommodate the Middle East's preexisting ethno-sectarian rifts, it posits the fundamental problem as one of stifled nationalism. The solution, in turn, becomes a realization of nationalist ideals, a kind of neo-Wilsonianism for the Middle East. The limitations, and consequent dangers, of this approach are manifold. Most prominently, it overstates the extent to which the formation of ethnically homogeneous nation-states is both desirable and possible. It assumes that there were always clear, readily definable national identities in the region that existed before the emergence of the modern state system and simply needed to be given states of their own in order to find their place in the world.

In reality, creating homogeneous states is always more difficult than it appears. Identities in the premodern Middle East were diverse, malleable, and overlapping, just as they were elsewhere. These identities were reflected in complicated ways by the state institutions that existed during the Ottoman period and that also helped shape those institutions. Creating modern nation-states that reflected the history of these identities and institutions would have been a complicated process, regardless of whether local residents or Europeans were in charge of it.

To understand the history of unstable politics and contested identities in the Middle East then, it is necessary to move beyond the chicken-and-egg approach to the state and the nation that so often bedevils even the best historical accounts. To imagine that clear-cut national identities predated the arrival of modern states in the region would be to misunderstand the contingent nature of national identities. At the same time, to imagine states where given a demographic blank slate on which to work their policies or to imagine an infinitely assimilable premodern populace would be to ignore the role of preexisting interests, institutions, and forms of identification. Instead, to see where a stable relationship developed between state and identity and where it did not, historians must approach this as an iterative process.

Identities and state institutions evolve together and shape one another. The following historical accounts examine a number of examples in a rough chronological and geographic order. In each case, the accounts look at the tensions that existed between state institutions and identity, how statesmen and others tried to resolve them, and whether these efforts proved successful. Not surprisingly, diverse situations led to diverse results, revealing no clear path to success or to failure. In the case of the Ottoman Empire, for example, a weak state failed to develop a common identity that could strengthen it, in turn making way for the Turkish Republic's more successful, if still checkered, experience. In the case of Israel, by contrast, a strong nationalist movement ultimately became the foundation for a strong state, which still struggles with those who do not fit the new state's identity. If these diverse cases do not lead to any tidy conclusions, they offer policymakers a more sophisticated understanding and more expansive tool kit for approaching the challenge of reconciling identity and institutions today.

In thinking about changing borders, the conclusion of Barzani's independence bid is instructive. Following the Kurds' wildly successful referendum, Baghdad moved to crush the Kurdish dream of independence, forcibly occupying the contested, oil-rich city of Kirkuk and pressuring Barzani to annul the vote. In short, if Iraq were an artificial and unsustainable imperial creation, no one told the Iraqi government in Baghdad.

## THE OTTOMAN EXPERIENCE: VISIONS OF REFORM IN A BELEAGUERED EMPIRE

In the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire lost a series of European territories to nationalist rebellions among its Christian population backed by Russian and other European Christian powers. The empire's military defeats in the late-18th century had inspired a campaign of military modernization based on the Western model. The rise of Balkan nationalism, and the successive territorial losses that came with it, led Ottoman statesmen to focus on centralizing political control within the empire as well and, more abstractly, to wrestle with questions about the empire's identity and how it could secure the loyalty of its citizens.<sup>8,9,10</sup>

The Ottoman's efforts at nation building and centralization, however, ultimately failed to hold the empire together in the face of the multiple forces tearing it apart.<sup>11</sup> In some cases, this failure reflected larger structural forces; in other cases, it reflected contingent historic factors like the outbreak of World War I. No matter what reforms Ottoman leaders took, the empire was highly unlikely to survive with the same borders and population with which it entered the 20th century. Yet the empire's complete collapse, and transformation into the modern Turkish republic, was not inevitable either. Tracing the Ottoman Empire's efforts to create new forms of identity that could cement the loyalty of their population to a preexisting state reveals, among other things, the complex religious, ethnic, and institutional terrain that would have challenged any attempt at state building in the 20th century.



## Before Nationalism

In its earlier incarnation, the Ottoman Empire, like many premodern states, had exercised political authority over its subjects through often indirect means.<sup>12,13,14</sup> Provincial governors had more autonomy, soldiers were paid and recruited without any standardized form of national conscription, and revenue was collected through an indirect system of tax farming. Across much of the empire, particularly rural, far-flung, and mountainous regions, local leaders, including tribal sheiks or the heads of large land-owning families, also exercised immediate authority over the day-to-day lives of the villagers under their control within parameters set by the local government. Even in cities, prominent families played a dominant role in local politics, with their influence both expressing but also mediating Istanbul's power. Finally, for the empire's non-Muslim communities, the millet system provided another layer of mediation between the sultan and his individual subjects. In its idealized form, the millet system gave religious minorities a degree of nonterritorial autonomy, in which community decision making, the administration of justice, and sometimes taxation were carried out by community leaders and corresponding religious courts. So long as the head of each community—the Orthodox patriarch, for example, or the empire's head rabbi—remained loyal to the sultan, they could exercise considerable control over their own communities. By extension, even if individuals did not feel any direct loyalty to the sultan or his government, their loyalty to the leaders of their community, with whom they shared a religion and, often, a language, secured their loyalty to the empire as a whole.<sup>15</sup>

Throughout the 19th century, successive Ottoman governments sought to remove these intermediate sources of authority in order to secure the direct loyalty of the empire's citizens/subjects to the central government and exercise more direct authority over them in matters of taxation, conscription, civil administration, and justice.<sup>16</sup> In the mid-19th century, the *Tanzimât*, or “reordering,” represented the first far-reaching reform effort in this direction. Beginning in 1839, the Edict of Gülhane introduced direct taxation and conscription, along with the formal equality of Muslim and non-Muslim subjects.<sup>17</sup> In 1856, a subsequent reform edict aimed to reinforce and improve the status of Christians, giving Christian judges an enhanced role in the judiciary, allowing Christians to enter civil-service posts, and ending punishments for apostasy. Yet the new political order the *Tanzimât* sought to create failed to satisfy many of the empire's Christian and Muslim subjects alike. For nationalists among the empire's Christian population, it failed to give them the degree of equality they demanded, while removing some of the privileges they had previously enjoyed. For many Muslims, meanwhile, it nonetheless represented a symbolic loss of their traditional status without providing them additional rights or the alleviation of their existing obligations to the empire.

## Abdulhamid's Islamist Nationalism

Against this backdrop, nationalist sentiment grew among Balkan Christians alongside agitation for reform among imperial administrators in Istanbul. In 1876, an effort to re-reform the empire along liberal lines—as a constitutional monarchy with a multi-confessional parliament—proved short-lived. Facing a nationalist rebellion in Bulgaria and a subsequent Russian invasion, Sultan Abdulhamid II suspended the empire's new constitution, closed its parliament, and embarked on a decades-long program of autocratic centralization increasingly built around religion. For Abdulhamid, a shared Islamic identity—perhaps something approaching a sense of Islamic nationalism—would provide the source of loyalty tying the empire's Muslim subjects directly to the central government, as embodied in his own person.<sup>18,19</sup> In pursuit of this policy, Abdulhamid placed unprecedented emphasis on his role as caliph, a title that Ottoman sultans had long claimed but seldom emphasized to the exclusion of their other roles.<sup>20</sup> He also sought to build religious identification with the state in other ways, distributing government-printed Qurans across the empire, making his weekly trip to Friday prayers a high-profile state function, and sending religious officials to promote Sunni orthodoxy among heterodox Muslim communities such as the Alawites. Perhaps the best symbol of Abdulhamid's vision for consolidating state power through religious identification was the creation of the Hejaz railway in the early 20th century. Promoting the government's effort to build a railway that would connect Istanbul to Mecca as an act of official piety, Abdulhamid funded the project in part by securing donations from individual Muslim citizens. Yet at the same time, the railroad was also an instrument to extend the state's central authority, most obviously during World War I, when it served to transport troops to Hejaz in effort, albeit an unsuccessful one, to suppress Husayn ibn Ali's Arab revolt.

Yet Abdulhamid's project faced consistent opposition, not only from Ottoman Christians, for whom it offered little, but also from Muslims who articulated their own national identities as Turks, Albanians, or Arabs, and from liberal thinkers of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds who opposed its autocratic character. The early 20th century therefore saw a particularly fervent debate over an array of ideological projects to reorganize the empire at a time when nationalism increasingly appeared to be the dominant force across the globe.

## Ottomanism and Turkish Nationalism

In competition with Abdulhamid's Islamic nationalism were rival visions of the empire based on a form of civic Ottoman identity, often called "Ottomanism," and another based on ethnic Turkish nationalism.<sup>21</sup> Ottomanism proved short-lived, but it initially inspired real enthusiasm among some late-Ottoman political thinkers. In 1908, a military coup led by the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) forced Abdulhamid to reinstate the constitution he had suspended four decades earlier.<sup>22</sup> Initially, the CUP, as a secular and modernizing political organization, had attracted the support of a number of Christian and non-Turkish members. The 1908 revolution, which led to elections and a new, politically, ethnically, and religiously diverse parliament, revived expectations among those who thought the empire could be saved by abandoning its Islamic and autocratic political character. This vision largely appealed to the political elite within many communities, those who would have been more likely to speak Turkish and interact in professional and social settings with the empire's Muslim ruling class.<sup>23</sup>

Yet the geopolitical situation in which the Ottomans found themselves in the early 20th century was not conducive to this program. The empire's weakness, combined with the ever-present promise of external support for nationalist movements, made independence appear a more attractive and plausible option to members of many Christian minorities. Moreover, at a time when Westernization and modernization were closely linked in the minds of many Ottoman reformers, the prevalence of ethnic nationalism in Western political thought led some to conclude it was necessary, if not inevitable, in the Ottoman context. Finally, the contrast between the Ottoman Empire's territorial dismemberment and the seeming success of the highly centralized, explicitly nationalistic French and German states led many Ottoman statesmen to see any recognition of diversity or decentralization as a dangerous step in the wrong direction.

As a result, the nationalist faction within the CUP quickly came to the fore; their political program, based on centralization and Turkish-ness, failed to save the empire from destruction in the Balkan Wars and then World War I, but it proved a more successful formula for rebuilding the Turkish state when subsequently applied in a more limited territory by Mustapha Kemal Ataturk. In part, the problem was that when implemented by the CUP, nationalist centralization helped foster rival nationalist movements in non-Turkish, less central parts of the empire. Hassan Kayali, for example, shows how in the Levant, the imposition of new, Turkish-speaking officials sent from the capital, as well as a standardized school curriculum designed by the central government, generated resentment among the predominantly Arabic-speaking population, which then manifested itself in a more pronounced sense of Arab nationalism.<sup>24</sup> From the perspective of the non-Turkish provinces, centralization and Turkification often appeared indistinguishable. What is more, while much of the Arab elite was fluent in Turkish, as the state expanded its reach into the everyday lives of ordinary citizens, locals who did not speak Turkish increasingly found themselves interacting with, and resenting, the state bureaucrats with whom they could not communicate.

## Alternative Trajectories

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire in World War I has often been seen as marking the inevitable fate of multinational states in the modern era. But it would be a mistake to conclude from this that any and all efforts to create multinational political entities are or were inherently doomed to failure.<sup>25</sup>

Certainly, as seen above, the rise of nationalism in Ottoman territories had a self-perpetuating logic to it. The fact that the success of nationalist movements in the Balkans made nationalism seem like a more attractive option for other Christian minorities, the fact that this then inspired a move toward nationalist centralization from the Ottoman government, and the fact that this in turn then created a nationalist backlash in outlying Arab provinces, all reveal a process whose eventual outcome appears to be more than pure coincidence. Moreover, with European nation-states displaying a degree of military power and economic success unrivaled on the world stage, the allure of this model was likely to exert an enduring influence on non-European leaders engaged in their own state-building projects.

With the outbreak of World War I, the drive toward nationally homogenous states in the region intensified. The British, seeking an opportunity to weaken the empire, promoted Arab nationalism and gave it their military support. And the Ottoman state, for its part, used the Russian invasion of Eastern Anatolia as a pretext for carrying out a genocidal campaign to destroy the empire's Armenian population. In both cases, these wartime measures had a profound impact on the political and demographic landscape out of which postwar states and identities emerged.



Yet it is still worth considering whether, in other political or geopolitical circumstances, perhaps in the absence of a world war, the empire could have survived in some multinational form. While the Arab revolt subsequently became the dominant narrative of the war in Western and Arab nationalist historiography, in fact, evidence suggests that most Arab leaders in the Levant continued to imagine a political future within the Ottoman Empire up until the war rendered this possibility moot. Similarly, Arab soldiers in the Ottoman army largely appear to have stayed loyal until the end of the war, deserting in rates no higher than their Turkish counterparts.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, the Russian Empire's postwar transformation provides the most striking case of a multinational empire surviving—as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics—in a reconstituted, explicitly multinational form. The Soviet approach to managing nationalism through superficial decentralization and the creation of nominally independent national republics succeeded in large part as a result of Joseph Stalin's brutality, but it also achieved a more meaningful degree of support from leaders and even from citizens of the non-Russian Soviet republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the subsequent experiences of Iran and even the modern Turkish state also show how multinational empires could, with varying degrees of success, endure in a more nationalized form as well.

In this context, examining the history of the post-Ottoman Middle East in the 20th century reveals an ongoing struggle over what territorial units should become states and what forms of identity could best serve to cement these new states. As with the Ottoman Empire, there were structural obstacles inherent in the state-building process and the nation-state model that many new countries in the region confronted, but there were also powerful external factors that further complicated, and even undermined, these efforts.

## THE MYTH OF SYKES-PICOT: CREATING STATES AND NATIONS IN THE POSTWAR ERA

The modern-day political borders in the Middle East were, with a few subsequent modifications, laid down by the British and French governments in the 1920 Treaty of San Remo. Critics in both the region and the West regularly refer to these as the “Sykes-Picot borders” after the secret 1916 agreement that first established the principle of an Anglo-French division of the Ottoman Empire's Middle Eastern territory.<sup>28</sup> The misnomer is at once trivial and telling. The French and British did, after all, divide the Middle East between them, but the process through which they did so—the debates and developments that transformed the Sykes-Picot map into the one recognized today—reveals the challenges inherent in creating modern states.

Examining the competing visions that existed for what eventually became both Iraq and Syria, as well as the sometimes-violent process through which they were contested, shows that any set of borders would have produced a discrepancy between identity and state institutions that would have been difficult to reconcile. This, in turn, highlights the way that, for better and worse, imperial rule prevented the process of state-building within the borders of the Middle East's new states. Imperial rule, which has subsequently been praised for protecting local minorities, prevented violent acts of deportation and forced assimilation that European states themselves benefited from. But at the same time, the violent, divisive, and undemocratic means through which the imperial powers and their local proxies governed also prevented the region's new governments from gaining legitimacy on their own terms by winning the loyalty of their citizens or forging an inclusive sense of civic identity. As a result, when most Middle Eastern states gained their independence in the wake of World War II, they sometimes decided to compensate by conducting rushed and brutal nation building on particularly unfavorable terms.

Viewed from the present-day context, this history ultimately serves as a reminder that redrawing borders alone seldom creates homogenous states if it is not accompanied by other, often more brutal methods. And to complicate matters further, if these methods are carried out in the wrong circumstances, they too can backfire.

### Competing Local Visions: Iraq and Syria

Looking back at the choices faced by the French and British at the end of World War I, as well as by local political leaders with their own competing plans for the future, it is clear that whatever configuration of states emerged in the region, the new governments would have had to exert significant political effort to forge a common identity among their citizens. Indeed, this can even be seen in the contradictory criticism leveled against the region's borders today. Among other things, no one can agree whether the region's current states are too big or too small: Iraq stands condemned for being an artificial and unworkable mix of Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds, while at the same time critics have attacked the artificial division of Greater

Syria, or indeed the entire Arab Middle East, into a series of smaller, artificially truncated states. In fact, the process by which Iraq and Syria were created saw conflicts over the future of both countries that bely present-day critiques.

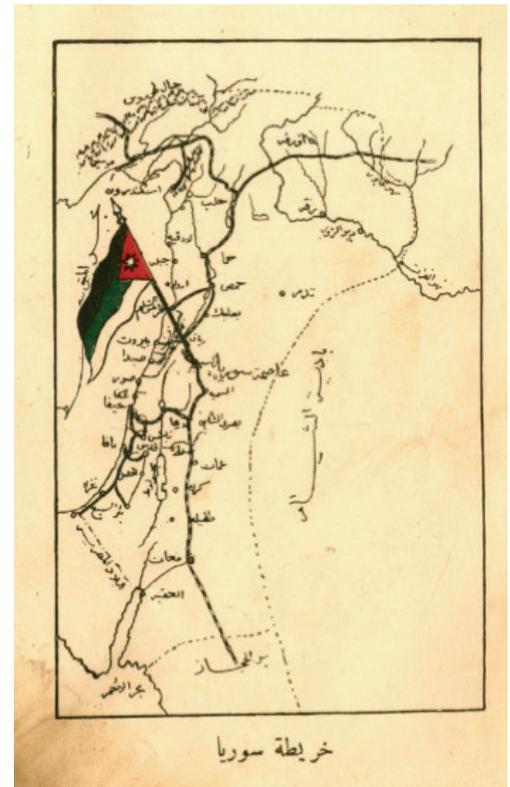
In the early 1920s, following the Treaty of San Remo, one of the most pressing territorial questions in the Middle East was whether the Ottoman province of Mosul would be joined to the newly formed Turkish Republic or to Britain's newly formed Iraqi mandate. While the positions of Britain and Turkey were straightforward, the positions taken by Kurds in Mosul and by Arab/Iraqi nationalists add another dimension to an understanding of modern-day Iraq. As discussed by Middle East historian Sarah Pursley, the British diplomatic campaign to incorporate Mosul into Iraq was enormously popular among the local political elite in Baghdad. Pursley quotes "nationalist poets" describing Mosul as the "Jewel of Iraq," while the country's prime minister, Abdul Muhsin al-Saadun, called the province the "the 'head' of the 'body' of the Iraqi nation."<sup>29</sup>

In fact, the enthusiasm for acquiring Mosul among these native nationalists was so strong that Britain even tried to leverage its ability to deliver Mosul in order to legitimate the entire mandate project in the eyes of these local politicians. Meanwhile, in Mosul itself, the opinions of the local Kurdish inhabitants reveal another degree of complexity. Some, certainly, wanted independence, either for Mosul itself or as part of a larger Kurdish state. Others, however, favored joining Turkey, either because of preexisting ties from the Ottoman era or to avoid falling under the control of a Christian colonial power. And others, for their own political and economic reasons, concluded their interests would be best served if they were united with Baghdad. In the end, despite a League of Nations-sponsored effort to assess the views of the local population, the future of Mosul was decided in accordance with the dictates of great-power politics. Britain triumphed, and by extension the nationalists in Baghdad and the pro-Baghdad Kurds in Mosul did, too. To see this as the creation of an arbitrary border and an artificial state ignores the fact that it was also an accommodation of one set of local interests over another rival set.

Similarly, in Syria, local debates during the early mandate period shatter the illusion of an alternate set of borders that would have left all applicable national interests satisfied.<sup>30</sup> Faisal ibn Hussein founded the first postwar incarnation of a Syrian state in 1920, when he reluctantly declared himself king of a Syrian Arab Kingdom based in Damascus. Though Faisal's kingdom (see map) came to a rapid end when it was occupied by the French months later, the tentative borders proposed for it roughly correspond with the geographic region generally thought of as Greater Syria. Yet from its inception, Faisal's kingdom faced opposition, not only from Maronite Christians, who sought an independent state in Mount Lebanon, and Zionists, who sought their own state in Palestine, but even from citizens in other parts of what is now Syria. By the time of the French occupation, Faisal was using British funds to provide food subsidies to the people of Aleppo as a way to quiet the political opposition he faced there. For many residents of modern Syria's second city, it was not yet obvious that their political future lay in a state governed by Damascus.

Following Faisal's defeat and the Treaty of San Remo, when France set about organizing its new Middle Eastern territory, the French nonetheless feared the power of Arab nationalism as a force for anticolonial resistance. In order to thwart this, they initially envisioned a cynical plan to divide and conquer that led them to take the opposite approach of the British in Iraq. Instead of creating a larger state comprising multiple ethnicities, they sought to break what is now Syria down into its constituent parts. To do so, they carved out Alawite and Druze statelets, alongside an expanded territory around Mt. Lebanon for the Maronites.<sup>31</sup> Then, for good measure, they divided Aleppo and Damascus into separate statelets as well. Each had its own flag, stamps, and colonial administrative apparatus—intended to give it all the trappings of nationally defined autonomy.

However, the nationalist sentiment that the French hoped to thwart with these divisions ultimately undid them. Arab/Syrian nationalists, including those of Alawite, Druze, Damascene, and Aleppan origin, opposed the French plan to carve up what they saw as the future Syrian nation-state. In the words of an anti-French pamphlet published on the eve of the country's 1925 revolt: "The imperialists have stolen what is yours. They have laid



Source: Dhikrā istiqlāl Sūriyā published by Maṭba'at Tāhā Ibrāhīm wa-Yūsuf Barladī, 1920, Midafternoon Map.



hands on the very sources of your wealth and raised barriers and divided your indivisible homeland. They have separated the nation into religious sects and states. . . . To arms!”<sup>32</sup> In the end, the French relented. While they defeated the rebellion and maintained their hold on Syria for another two decades, they abandoned their plan to subdivide the region.

The one exception was Lebanon. Unlike the other states the French had proposed, Lebanon had a longer history of autonomy, going back to 1860, as well as a substantial population of Maronites who did not want to be part of a larger, predominantly Muslim, Syrian state. As a result, there were many who welcomed the French mandate and sought to use French intervention in the region to advance their own national goals. Thus in cooperation with Maronite elites, the French government created a Lebanese state that extended beyond the heavily Maronite areas of Mt. Lebanon to include several cities on the Mediterranean coast and also the Bekaa Valley farther inland. This gave France’s Maronite allies a more viable state, with access to ports to improve its economy and access to a fertile, grain-growing region in order to be more self-sufficient. Yet these expanded borders also gave the new state a substantial non-Christian population whose subsequent conflict with the Maronite-dominated political order would lead to the Lebanese civil war.

## The King-Crane Conundrum

In 1919, while the future of the Middle East was being debated at Versailles, President Woodrow Wilson sent an investigatory commission to the region to determine how the principle of national self-determination could best be applied there.<sup>33</sup> The commission, led by Charles Crane and Henry King, interviewed political leaders and ordinary citizens in the region, coming face to face with many of the debates and challenges outlined above. The most striking aspect of their report is in their consideration of how best to apply the nation-state model to the Middle East: They came to recognize the model’s limits, both in the region and more broadly.

For example, in tallying petitions from local residents they met on their tour of the Levant, the commission counted 1,061 “Against [an] Independent Greater Lebanon” and 203 in favor.<sup>34</sup> Yet this seemingly clear majority was belied by the fact that the pro-Lebanese sentiment was overwhelmingly concentrated in Mt. Lebanon itself. The commissioners’ proposed solution was to split the difference in a manner hard to reconcile with Wilsonian self-determination or the nation-state model. They recommended granting Lebanon “a sufficient measure of local autonomy” so as not to “diminish the security of [its] inhabitants.” But they also declined to recommend complete independence, arguing: “Lebanon would be in a position to exert a stronger and more helpful influence if she were within the Syrian state, feeling its problems and needs and sharing all its life, instead of outside it, absorbed simply in her own narrow concerns.”

Throughout the region, Crane and King’s investigations led them to express similar skepticism about the idea that dividing people up into homogenous nation-states was a political panacea: “No doubt the quick mechanical solution of the problem of difficult relations is to split the people up into little independent fragments,” they wrote.<sup>35</sup> “But in general, to attempt complete separation only accentuates the differences and increases the antagonism.” Among other things, the authors quickly concluded that dividing Iraq into separate Sunni, Shiite, or Kurdish states was not worth discussing, as “the wisdom of a united country needs no argument in the case of Mesopotamia.” Greeks and Turks, they concluded, only needed one country because the “two races supplement each other.” And the Muslims and Christians of Syria needed to learn to “get on together in some fashion” because “the whole lesson of modern social consciousness points to the necessity of understanding ‘the other half,’ as it can be understood only by close and living relations.”

What is important about the King-Crane report, whose recommendations from the outset were unlikely to influence French and British policy, is not that, as has sometimes been claimed, it represented a missed opportunity for a more stable Middle East. Rather, it reveals the inherent difficulty of drawing borders and creating modern states where they had not previously existed.

One need not praise the colonial officials who collectively drew the borders of the modern Middle East as being particularly prescient or principled to put their efforts in proper perspective. Certainly, they were not acting with the best interests of the region’s inhabitants in mind. Yet as the idealistic efforts of the King-Crane Commission reveal, even if they had been, it is not always clear what they could have done better. When well-intentioned observers confronted the question of how to create stable states by grouping or dividing the region’s population, they quickly discovered the contradictions involved in creating demographic homogeneity through perfectly drawn borders.

## POST-INDEPENDENCE PREDICAMENTS

Criticizing colonial officials for creating artificial states that failed to reflect the region's underlying ethnic and religious divisions does not merely ignore the extent to which this was ever possible, however. It also ignores the extent to which stable nation-states, in Europe and elsewhere, gained legitimacy through more than just the accuracy of their borders. Focusing on Sykes-Picot belies a more pertinent reality: In most stable states, borders gained their legitimacy through the success, military and political, of the states themselves. And, to the extent the populations within a set of borders became homogeneous, it was through a state-led process of assimilation, ethnic cleansing, or both.

To understand the divergence between stable and unstable states in the Middle East then, the crucial period to explore may be the decades after the region's postwar division. Here, the historical circumstances that led Iraq and Syria down a different trajectory from more stable states like Israel and Turkey become most clearly visible. In this case, it is not a matter of borders or diversity, per se, but rather of the way diversity was managed by ruling powers and state institutions within those borders.

### Strong States, Complicated Identities: Turkey and Israel

The contradictions of the state-building process can be seen in the experience of the two states in the post-Ottoman Middle East that, in contrast to Iraq and Syria, had the resources and military force to play a more active role in the creation of their own borders. Both Israel and Turkey ultimately emerged as strong states with strong national identities that, to unequal degrees, have been more democratic than their neighbors. Yet in each case, the historical and ideological origins of these nation-states is more complex than they initially appear. The work of the King-Crane Commission revealed the limits of the nation-state model in accommodating people's diverse identities, recommending more complicated institutional arrangements to deal with the discrepancies. The examples of Israel and Turkey, by contrast, show the complex ways that identity can be fashioned and debated even within the confines of the nation-state model. If the shortcomings of both the Israeli and Turkish state-building experience are apparent, it is a telling comment on the state of the region that they still appear to be two of the more successful cases.

Though the differences are considerable, it is valuable to consider how both Israel and Turkey, though officially secular, forged national identities by assimilating immigrants from diverse ethnic backgrounds around a common religious identity. Moreover, both countries forged relatively homogenous societies by expelling from their territory a portion of the population that appeared impossible to assimilate, while also opening, again to varying degrees, political space for those who did not share the majority identity to participate in the state as citizens.

The modern Turkish state, and its corresponding national identity, emerged from the violent expulsion of Anatolia's non-Muslim population and the—partially successful—assimilation of its non-Turkish ethnic and linguistic groups.<sup>36</sup> Following the Armenian genocide in 1915, Ottoman and then Turkish officials occasionally hinted that a similar policy might be applied against Arabs or Kurds. Yet after World War I, it was Anatolia's Greek Orthodox population that was subjected to a less violent but still forcible and sweeping process of ethnic cleansing. In 1923, the international community endorsed an agreement between Turkey and Greece to “exchange” the Muslim population of Greece with the Orthodox population of Turkey.<sup>37</sup>

The political and legal rationale behind the exchange illustrates how the international community understood the process of nation building in Europe and the Middle at the time. As explored by Ümit Özsü, the exchange was seen as a unique solution to the peripheral location of Turkey and Greece in the region.<sup>38</sup> In post-World War I Eastern Europe, mainly the former Austro-Hungarian territories, reciprocal treaties were seen as the principal means for protecting the rights of those populations that became minorities by ending up on the wrong side of new national boundaries. In the Middle East, by contrast, the international community, embodied in the League of Nations mandate system, expected colonial powers to ensure the fair treatment of religious and ethnic minorities who came under their control. Yet neither of these solutions appeared workable for Turkey and Greece. Colonial powers had failed in their attempt to occupy Turkey, yet they did not trust the government to abide by any minority-rights treaty that it signed. As a result, the deportation of minority groups as a means to protect them and create homogenous states came to be seen as the lesser evil by many local and European leaders alike. As will be discussed below, the fact that they may have been right is, above all, a testament to how badly both colonial occupation and international agreements failed to protect minority populations.

Following the population exchange, building a Turkish national identity subsequently hinged on uniting an ethnically diverse Muslim population. As the Ottoman Empire collapsed in the late-19th and early 20th centuries, over a million Ottoman Muslims fled to what is now Turkey from the Balkans and



the Caucasus. Many of these immigrants, along with Kurds and other elements of the Anatolian Muslim population, had fought together as Ottoman Muslims for the preservation of the empire, but it was unclear how this loyalty would be transformed in a new nation-state. Paradoxically, the logic of ethnic nationalism meant that assimilating non-Turkish minorities required pretending that there were not and never had been any minorities in need of assimilation. The first Turkish constitution captured this moment of transition well, declaring, “The people of Turkey regardless of their religion and race would, in terms of citizenship, be called Turkish.” The unspoken bargain was that any citizen, or at least any Muslim citizen, who was willing to do their part, play along, and embrace their Turkish identity would be accepted as a citizen in good standing. Those who refused to accept this identity, however, would face violent repression.

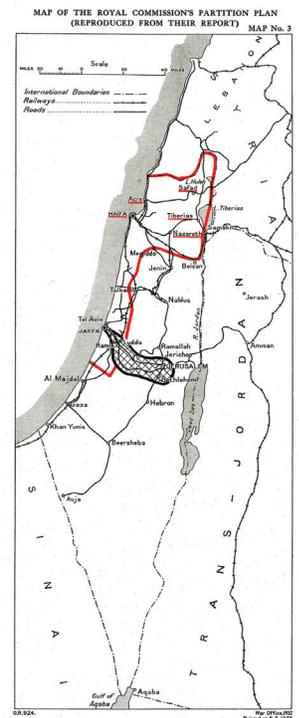
Those minorities who arrived as refugees, including Bosnians, Albanians, Bulgarians, and Circassians from the Caucasus, largely assimilated to the point where, by the second half of the 20th century, their presence was easy to overlook. To facilitate assimilation, both the Ottoman and Turkish government deliberately dispersed immigrants into geographically isolated communities across Anatolia.<sup>39</sup> Many of the Turkish Republic’s founders, in fact, had Balkan or Circassian origins, which both facilitated and demonstrated the extent of this assimilation. The Kurds, by contrast, were a much larger population, located in a region that had been free of centralized state control before the 20th century. Imposition of state authority, combined with Turkish identity, and for many religious Kurds a new secular ideology, provoked a degree of resistance in eastern Turkey that was absent elsewhere.<sup>40</sup> When the state violently crushed this resistance, suppressing armed rebellions with the help of planes and poison gas, then executing or exiling the leaders, it created a vicious cycle of violence and resistance that continues today.

Yet at the same time, many Kurds did assimilate. And so for decades, nationalists who refused to admit that anyone actually was Kurdish could still testify to Turkey’s inclusiveness by pointing out people who were widely known to be Kurdish and who had also been quite successful in modern Turkish society. Thus, figures like former Turkish President Turgut Özal or the pop star İbrahim Tatlıses served to demonstrate the promise of equal citizenship to anyone who was willing to accept it on Turkish terms.

As in Turkey, the emergence of a strong nation-state in Israel also reflects an uneasy mix of assimilation and expulsion, as well as ethnic and civic nationalism. Ironically, while British imperialists stand accused of ignoring ethnic and religious difference in drawing the region’s other national boundaries, in the case of Israel, efforts to do just this were violently ignored by both sides. The United Nations’ 1948 partition plan for the Mandate of Palestine, like the Peel Commission’s earlier 1937 effort (see map), seems to represent exactly the sort of demographically attuned proposal for creating homogenous ethno-national states that contemporary Sykes-Picot critics suggest could have been effective across the region. Yet both Zionists and Arab nationalists saw these proposals as falling short of their national needs. As a result, it was Israel’s military victory in 1949 that laid the foundation for the borders of the modern Israeli state.

At the same time, the war and its aftermath also forced Israel to confront the same questions of demography and identity faced by other aspiring nation-states. Some early Zionists had envisioned the formation of a binational state in which sovereignty would be shared between the region’s Jewish and non-Jewish inhabitants. But this view, always a fringe one to begin with, had become even more marginal after the violence of the Arab revolt. As a result, the Israeli victory in 1949 was accompanied by efforts—though how coordinated and systematic remains hotly debated—to expel non-Jewish Arab residents from areas that came under the nascent Israeli army’s control.

In part as a result of these efforts, the Israeli state that emerged from the conflict had a clear Jewish majority, which was amplified by the ongoing arrival of refugees and immigrants from Europe and the rest of the Middle East. At the same time, the incompleteness of these efforts also meant that the new state was left with a Muslim-Arab or Palestinian population proportionally larger than, for example, the Christian population remaining in Turkey after 1923. From the outset, this population was incorporated into the country’s civic life without ever being assimilated into its national identity. These Israelis though facing varying degrees of official and unofficial discrimination, could, from the beginning, exercise their rights as citizens, including forming political parties and voting. The country had no official language, allowing for the use of Arabic in official settings, and a number of issues relating to family law were handled by state-recognized sharia courts.



Source: Peel Commission Partition Plan, published by the United Kingdom Government, July 1937, Wikimedia.

The result is a situation where a strong sense of ethnic nationalism coexists with a commitment to civic inclusion sufficient to incorporate, if not fully integrate, the country's Arab minority. Most recently, the debate over a bill that would officially proclaim Israel a "Jewish state," captured the ambiguity of this arrangement. Even among those who unequivocally support Israel's identity as a Jewish state opposed the bill for fear that it would facilitate increased discrimination against Arabs. In the words of one author, being a "Jewish state" need not mean being an "exclusively Jewish state."<sup>41</sup>

## A Mandate for Failure

Unlike Israel and Turkey, the other countries in the Middle East did not have the opportunity to shape their own borders.<sup>42</sup> But imperial rule also prevented them from shaping their own populations as well. The mandate system proved an obstacle to ethnic cleansing—whether of the violent or legally orchestrated variety—as well as the creation of democratic or inclusive political structures that could build a sense of civic nationalism among diverse populations. Instead, in their effort to create and dominate new states with a minimum investment of money and manpower, colonial governments set up power structures that instrumentalized internal divisions. This enabled them to maintain the façade of an inclusive polity without establishing the political institutions or robust identities that could sustain it after colonial rule ended. Thus the experience of the mandate era states *after* their creation represents the crucial stage in understanding how the failure to reconcile institutions and identities contributed the violence these states are experiencing today.

The mandate-era states of Iraq and Syria were forged and maintained with violence. But in this they were not necessarily unique. Brutal violence also accompanied the formation of many other states that ultimately proved more cohesive. The difference is in how this violence intersected with other facets of state-building. In the mandate context, the violence was implemented in a manner that served to exacerbate preexisting divisions rather than serve as the foundation, however problematic, for new identities.

Britain, for example, put down Iraq's 1920 revolt with the help of extensive airpower, then dropped poison gas on Kurdish tribes who continued resisting. And in Syria, a massive 1925 revolt ended with French artillery shelling Damascus. But in both cases, colonial powers also triumphed by recruiting local allies along ethnic or tribal lines to fight on their side against the rebels. Not surprisingly, then, the result of these revolts, even when they were defeated, was to deepen social divisions within these countries and strip governing institutions of their legitimacy at the moment of their inception.

In Syria, for example, alongside the French government's effort to create ethnic sub-states, the colonial authority made a concerted effort to recruit minorities, specifically Christians and Alawites, into the army.<sup>43,44</sup> Ultimately, this did not prevent the emergence of Arab or Syrian nationalism among these communities, as French officials had hoped, but it did contribute to the continuing political relevance of Alawite identity within the state structure. Similarly, in Iraq, domestic instability made the British authorities dependent on a set of local allies whose political elevation would subsequently prove divisive.<sup>45,46</sup> After the Iraqi revolt, London installed King Faisal to rule the country on their behalf, hoping this would mitigate nationalist anger toward colonial rule. They also adopted a "tribal policy" that depended on the threat of aerial bombardment to win compliance from tribal leaders who were beyond Baghdad's authority. Yet this two-tiered form of rule had unintended consequences at both levels. Faisal and the Sunni urban elite he represented lost legitimacy through their association with the British mandate. So did the tribal leaders who had been protected and cultivated by Britain, intensifying the internal divisions within tribes and between the tribes and the state.

The consequences of these policies became apparent with independence. Faisal's family ruled the country until 1958, when his grandson was overthrown and executed in a military coup. The country's new leaders then severed Iraq's political ties to Britain and the West, seeking support from the Soviet Union instead.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, in Syria independence was followed by a series of coups and counter-coups, which continued until the establishment of the Assad dictatorship decades later.

At the same time, the mandates' reliance on divisive and violent forms of rule was not the whole story. While this aspect of colonialism forestalled more positive forms of nation building, mandate authorities also prevented heavy-handed forms of it as well. At the most basic level, mandate authorities prevented the widespread dispossession and deportation of minority groups under their control, as happened in Turkey and Israel. They also declined to put the full power of the state in the service of building new national identities. In other newly formed countries, governments that derived their legitimacy through nationalist ideology worked hard to impose corresponding national identities on their new citizenry. Social scientists have exhaustively documented the way these efforts spanned state institutions, particularly schools and the military. Though the tone of scholarship on these efforts is consistently critical, it also reflects the fact that the efforts themselves were often quite effective in forging cohesive identities.



The bitter irony in both Syria and Iraq was that after achieving independence, both countries embarked on nation-building campaigns using the full coercive power of the state. Yet in both cases, repressive Baathist regimes compensated for their late start and their enduring internal fissures by resorting to unusually draconian methods to preserve and enforce national unity. It was the inadequate, and in many cases counterproductive, nature of these efforts that in turn help to explain the post-independence debates over identity that wracked the Middle East.

## PAN-ARABISM AND ISLAMISM: STRONG STATES, CONFLICTING IDENTITIES

Challenges to existing borders do not always come from those seeking to divide existing states along ethnic or religious lines. There are also challenges that come from those seeking to unite them in accordance with more comprehensively imagined ethnic or religious identities. Yet as explored in this section, both of these challenges have consistently proved most potent when they reflect widespread frustration about the conditions within states themselves. Just as separatist movements emerge less from inherent ethno-religious divisions than from the failure of state institutions, pan-Arab and pan-Islamist movements grew in response to sustained critiques of the internal conditions within Middle Eastern states, whether this was anger at foreign influence or bad governance or both. As a result, while these ideologies initially sought to transcend and transform borders, they have so far proved most successful when they were fused with or co-opted by already existing states and national identities.

In looking at the postwar history of the Middle East, what stands out is the persistence of radical challenges to the region's state-based national identities, coupled with the continued failure of the principal challengers. Arab nationalism and Islamism both proved to be potent ideologies that posited a form of identity that would transcend the region's borders (often drawing on an explicit critique of their colonial origins in doing so). Yet as will be seen, both these ideologies have so far proved most powerful when they were co-opted by state-based nationalism. The two occasions where Arab nationalism and Islamism served as grounds for redrawing borders provide the exceptions that prove the rule. The short-lived experience of the UAR (1958-1961) and the Islamic State (2014-2017) both, in very different ways, show the limits of pan-Arab nationalism and Islamism as new identities on which to build states.

In the interwar period, the idea of transcending the region's San Remo borders to create a larger Arab state was most seriously discussed as a Hashemite-led dynastic project. With different branches of the family ruling Iraq and Jordan, Hashemite rulers entertained a vision of uniting their realms, ideally as a precursor to incorporating Syria and realizing the aspirations that were thwarted with San Remo. Yet while this project remained under discussion through the 1930s, and even received some revived interest amid the political transformations that followed World War II, it never moved beyond the realm of abstract geopolitical possibility. Among other problems, the Hashemite rulers of Iraq during this period had more than enough trouble ruling the territory they already had, which required managing relations with a diverse array of distinctly local constituencies. More importantly, though, was the fact that through the 1950s the Hashemite family in both Iraq and Jordan was dependent on British support to maintain their position. That meant that so long as the British government was committed to maintaining the San Remo division, there was little possibility that any Hashemite ruler could seriously seek to overturn it.

Not surprisingly, then, the most sustained Arab nationalist challenge to the regional state structure would emerge as a distinctly anti-imperialist, anti-British movement, led in the 1950s by Gamal Abdel Nasser.<sup>48,49</sup> Nasser's prominence across the Arab world, and the appeal of his pan-Arabism, were firmly rooted in his success challenging British power in Egypt itself. The spread of Nasserism around the region, as well as the eventual creation of the UAR, could not have happened without Nasser's domestic victories. Nasser initially came to power by overthrowing the pro-British monarch King Faruk, whose wealth and corruption had come to symbolize the deleterious influence of Western power in the region for many Egyptians. More important, though, was Nasser's triumph in the Suez Crisis, first in nationalizing the canal and then in surviving the subsequent Anglo-French-Israeli operation to retake it.

The years following the Suez Crisis revealed the widespread appeal of Nasser's Arab-nationalist, anti-imperialist model. Yet it also revealed the limits of this pan-Arabism as a foundation for transforming political borders in the region. That this project succeeded, even briefly, between Syria and Egypt seems, in retrospect, more like a unique historical accident rather than the inevitable outgrowth of a larger ideological trend. Often forgotten is the fact that the UAR emerged not as a result of Nasser's insistence but at the suggestion of Syrian leaders, driven as much by short-term domestic political objectives as by ideology. For members of the Syrian Baath movement, the principal threat to their power appeared to come from their left, in the form of the Moscow-oriented Syrian Communist Party. In this context, they saw an alliance with the ideologically aligned and triumphant Nasser

as the best way to forestall a Communist takeover of the country. Nasser, in fact, was initially skeptical of the Syrian push for full union but was eventually convinced both by the Syrian Baathists' concerns and, it seems, by the sense that it was too good an opportunity to pass up.

Ironically, one of the first results of the formation of the UAR was to make political union appear more plausible for the region's pro-British monarchs. With Nasserist officers threatening to overthrow the Hashemite monarchs of both Iraq and Jordan, the possibility of joining the two in a "Hashemite union" took on a newfound appeal as a way to both co-opt and more successfully resist Nasserist currents. If this effort had ever stood any chance of working, it ultimately proved to be too little too late. In 1958, Iraqi officers, led by Abd al-Karim Qasim, toppled Iraq's Hashemite monarchy, while Jordan's king was forced to request the support of 1,700 British paratroopers, who were hastily transferred from Cyprus to Amman that same year to prevent either a coup or a Syrian intervention. Following Qasim's coup, Iraq appeared to be in line as the next addition to the UAR. Iraq shared a lengthy border with Syria, and Qasim shared Nasser's ideological commitment to pan-Arabism, anti-imperialism, and socialism. Yet Qasim had personal and political issues with Nasser himself, and he also harbored fears over losing his and his country's independence as part of the merger.

At the same time, the Syrian leaders who initially supported the union were realizing that they might have done well to consider this risk as well. After resisting the union initially, once it was implemented, Nasser moved to impose his ideological and political will more firmly and unilaterally than Syrians had expected. He replaced Syrian politicians with his own loyalists, both Syrian and in many cases Egyptian, thereby marginalizing many of the Syrian Baathists who had initially proposed the union. He went on to dissolve all of Syria's previous political parties, with the exception of one branch of his National Union Party, which he also dominated. In trying to intensify his control, Nasser even redrew internal borders, ending Syria's existence as an autonomous region within the UAR. Against this backdrop, a collection of Syrian officers held a coup in 1961 aimed at reasserting Syrian independence. They did not initially demand that Syria withdraw from the UAR, but simply that its autonomy within the union be recognized. But Nasser was not willing to settle for anything less than the complete union under his control. Unwilling to compromise, but lacking the military means to force Syria to remain in the union, Nasser was ultimately unable to prevent its dissolution.

After 1961 and the failed example of the UAR, appeals to Arab unity remained strong, but they were largely understood in the context of political cooperation between sovereign and independent Arab states. Indeed, even in this context, Arab nationalism as a shared identity often proved incapable of overcoming deep political divides in the region, as symbolized for many by the defeat of Arab armies in their 1967 war with Israel.

In this context, many observers have seen the failure of pan-Arab nationalism as facilitating the rise of Islamism, another ideology that sought to transcend regional boundaries in the interests of more effectively confronting the West. Tracing the emergence of modern Islamism in the 20th century highlights its ideological parallels with pan-Arab nationalism as an alternative to the Middle East's modern-day state structure. But it also highlights the fact that it faced, and continues to face, similar limitations.<sup>50</sup> Even as Islamist parties have risen to power in the region, they have largely been constrained by the region's existing political geography. Whether this continues to be the case remains to be seen, but the story of Islamist movements up to today shows the enduring power of states to shape the way their inhabitants conceive of and express their political interests.

As discussed above, in the late-19th and early 20th centuries, Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II sought to revitalize the title of "caliph" as a way to project power throughout the Ottoman Middle East and the Islamic world. Even after Abdulhamid was deposed, his secular successors in the Committee of Union and Progress tried, with limited success, to continue using the concept to bolster their religious legitimacy. The Ottoman Empire's declaration of jihad in World War I, for example, sought to consolidate the political loyalty of the Muslim population particularly in the Arab parts of Ottoman territory. But with the Ottoman defeat in 1918 and Ataturk's decision, in 1924, to formally abolish the caliphate, the role of pan-Islamic institutions in a politically divided region would inevitably become more complicated.

Many Muslims, both in the Middle East and around the world, protested the abolition of the caliphate and hoped that the institution would be continued. Yet many others were rapidly becoming more eager to pursue their political interests on secular terms. In the end, there was no consensus over who, if anyone, could lay claim to the title.<sup>51</sup> Many contenders ultimately seemed to think that having a caliph was only truly important if they were chosen for the position. Perhaps most famous among the contenders was Husayn ibn Ali, Sharif of Mecca. Husayn hoped that after driving the Ottomans out of the Middle East during the Arab revolt, he could use his control over Mecca and Medina to claim both the religious and temporal powers of the caliph. Yet as Husayn's political fortunes crumbled, first with his son's loss of the Syrian kingdom, then with his own defeat by the



Saudis in 1926, his aspirations became increasingly implausible. By the time Husayn officially declared himself caliph, supposedly at the insistence of a select group of Muslim leaders, his power had dwindled to the point where the declaration seemed like an act of pure desperation.

The Egyptian monarchy, meanwhile, had a claim of its own. Despite having, unlike Husayn, no plausible claim of descent from the prophet's family, King Fuad made the case that Egypt was uniquely suited to the caliphate "because she took the lead in religious education and had a vast number of highly educated and intelligent Muslims." Not only did Fuad struggle to convince Muslims from other countries to accept his claim, but he also met firm resistance from his domestic political opponents. Egyptian liberals, for example, as well as political elites represented in the country's parliament, opposed any move they feared might strengthen the King's hand not only regionally but at home as well. In the 1920s, Libya's King Senussi as well as the Saudi King Abdul Aziz briefly considered making their own bids to be recognized as caliph, but both quickly concluded they had even less support than Husayn or Fuad and never formally sought to advance their claims. The result was that by the time of World War II, the idea of political unification under an Islamic identity had become increasingly marginal, embraced only by nascent Islamist movements that found themselves excluded from, and in opposition to, the region's prevailing political currents.

In the same years that King Fuad was considering a possible role as caliph, the seeds of another transnational Islamist movement were being sown in Egypt with the formation, in 1928, of the Muslim Brotherhood. Though the Brotherhood, since its inception, has been consistent in supporting a global caliphate that would, in one form or another, transcend the Muslim world's present political boundaries, this was seldom the main focus of its activism or appeal. Instead, even as it spread from Egypt and found branches in states across the region, each of these branches were predominantly concerned with advancing its power and ideology within its individual state. These branches cooperated, and saw unification as a desirable long-term goal, but with so many more pressing obstacles the caliphal aspiration remained secondary.

At a domestic level, the Muslim Brotherhood, its offshoots, and the groups it inspired gained credibility from the failure of secular, Arab nationalist regimes. They presented their calls for religiously oriented justice as an alternative to the corruption of these regimes and, in the international realm, promoted Islamic unity as a means to achieve the success against the West that had ultimately eluded Nasserist revolutionaries. To the extent that many Islamist appeals to transnational political solidarity resonated, in other words, it was for much the same reason as pan-Arab ones. And yet, if pan-Arab attempts to redraw borders had their brief moment of success with the UAR, similar success for Islamist movements has been even more fleeting. Broadly speaking, Islamist movements across the region have only risen to power in strictly nationalized contexts. When Islamists have taken control, most dramatically in Iran, then subsequently in Turkey, and, briefly, Egypt, their regionally focused religious rhetoric and political ambitions have consistently been deployed in service of advancing the traditionally defined geopolitical interests of the states they are running. In this sense, Iran's efforts to export its revolution across the Islamic world appear similar to Nasser's efforts to promote Arab nationalist revolutions in the region: In both cases the revolutionary ambitions were real, but they were also clearly intended to benefit Tehran and Cairo, respectively.

More dramatically, the example of the Islamic State reveals an admittedly extreme case of the challenges faced by an Islamic movement that arises outside of the region's existing state structure and tries to change it by force. First and foremost, the Islamic State was as much a consequence of the breakdown of regional states as it was a cause. The fracturing of first Iraq and then Syria created the violent and chaotic space in which the Islamic State could briefly carve out a political entity that transcended the region's existing borders. Moreover, the territory that the Islamic State seized was not a particularly desirable piece of real estate—maps of the inhabited land in the area often made it seem, even at its peak, like a thin spiderweb of roads and rivers spread across an empty desert. Despite this, the Islamic State proved relatively short-lived. Certainly the group's brutality had much to do with this, but, by posing a threat to the territorial status quo, it ultimately helped to forge a surprisingly diverse coalition dedicated to its destruction. While it remains unclear how decisively the Islamic State will be defeated, and—painfully—how unlikely that stability will prevail in the aftermath of its defeat, it seems increasingly certain that despite its efforts, the de jure borders of the region will prevail.

Before the critique gained such a widespread following in the West in recent decades, Arab nationalists and Islamists led the way in arguing that the Sykes-Picot borders were an artificial division of the Middle East and an assault on what they saw as its natural unity. For both movements, criticism of Sykes-Picot served to link the goal of transcending regional borders to a broader critique of the West and Western imperialism. And yet both movements ultimately proved more successful in challenging corrupt or unrepresentative governments within the region's post-World War I borders than when they tried to change the borders themselves.

## CONCLUSION

In the hope of properly applying history to the current challenges faced by Middle Eastern states, this section makes three interrelated arguments. First, it is wrong to assume that the Ottoman Empire was doomed to collapse because of its multinational character, or that the states that emerged in the post-Ottoman Middle East were equally doomed because they were not created along ethno-religiously homogenous lines. Second, to imagine that homogenous states, then or now, could be created by redrawing borders ignores the messy reality of separating intermingled populations. Homogenous nation-states do not come into being when preexisting, geographically self-contained nations achieve statehood, but rather through an often-violent process of assimilation and displacement. Third, where states, and their borders, have achieved legitimacy in the eyes of their citizens—and are therefore relatively immune to revisionist challenges posed by sub- or super-national identities—this legitimacy has often been built through the success of the state itself. Alongside the brutal methods states commonly use to achieve national homogeneity, successful states also solidify the identity-based loyalty of their citizens through successful and inclusive governance.

In short, the conflicts currently tearing apart Middle Eastern states today are not the direct result of the region's preexisting ethnic and religious diversity, or its lack of ethnically homogenous nation-states. Rather, they are the result of historical and geopolitical circumstances that prevented the region's states from achieving legitimacy in the eyes of their citizens. Identifying the Middle East's problem as a lack of "real" nation-states rooted in a lack of authentic borders risks placing an unwarranted faith in the ability of territorial and demographic adjustments to bring an idealized nation-state model into reality. It ignores the challenges that would have accompanied any set of borders, as well as the often-brutal methods through which demographic homogeneity has been historically achieved.

★ ★ ★

*Identifying the Middle East's problem as a lack of "real" nation-states rooted in a lack of authentic borders risks placing an unwarranted faith in the ability of territorial and demographic adjustments to bring an idealized nation-state model into reality.*

States are not empty vessels whose populations or institutions can be molded at will. But neither are they prisoners to the circumstances of their creation, capable of success only when their initial geography and demography are in perfect alignment. As seen in the history of both the Middle East and Europe, strong states have succeeded through inculcated identification and loyalty by inclusively distributing rights and services on the basis of citizenship while drawing on what forms of shared identity their populations possessed.

Looking forward, this history provides a reminder that the legitimacy of borders hinges not on fixed ethnographic criteria but on the views and desires of local inhabitants. Ultimately, the borders of modern states become "real" to their inhabitants to the extent these states themselves become the central focus of their citizens' political loyalties. In certain cases, such as when it is overwhelmingly demanded by populations that have been irrevocably divided by violent conflicts, redrawing borders may prove necessary as a policy of last resort. But the experience of the past century suggests it should always be pursued as a necessary evil rather than a panacea.

As important, moving beyond a fixation with borders allows for a greater focus on other factors that can help states secure the consent of the governed. The subsequent sections of this paper explore the potential and the limits of two of the most important among these: creating a conducive international environment through a balance of power and decentralizing state power through federalism.



# Balance of Power: Geopolitics Steps on the Scales

In November 2017, Russian President Vladimir Putin met with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in the Black Sea resort of Sochi to discuss the future of Syria. If the resulting photograph of the three leaders clasping hands did not have quite the same iconic status of Roosevelt, Stalin, and Churchill sitting together a little ways up the coast at Yalta, it was nonetheless intended to symbolize something similar. In this case, though, it was Syria, not Europe, that, in the aftermath of a brutal war, was to have its future determined by a meeting of the pertinent powers. Where the meeting of the big three was supposed to stabilize postwar Europe, some have optimistically predicted that bringing together a leading representative from the main Sunni and Shiite backers of the Syrian civil war under the aegis of Russia could bring stability to Syria.

If “artificial boundaries” serve as the source of the Middle East’s instability for many historically focused analysts, another popular theory focuses on the pernicious role of the Iranian-Saudi, or more broadly, Sunni-Shiite, rivalry. According to this theory, in Syria, most prominently, but also in Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon, the competition between Sunni and Shiite powers has been the main force driving chaos by turning local disputes into increasingly violent proxy wars.

This contemporary geopolitical diagnosis of the region’s instability posits its own potential solution as well, with many policymakers arguing that creating a regional balance of power between states or sects will enable the resolution of corresponding domestic conflicts. If the Iranian-Saudi rivalry is destabilizing the region, perhaps establishing a balance of power between these two states (and their allies) could provide the key to stabilizing it. Whether through a negotiated settlement or by strengthening one of the two sides, the balance of power approach seeks to create great power parity with the hope that this will lead Tehran and Riyadh to abandon the disruptive policies that are exacerbating ethnic and sectarian conflicts in neighboring states.

In different forms, this logic appears to have animated the regional policies of both the Obama and Trump administrations. Obama, according to Jeffrey Goldberg’s attempt to distill an “Obama doctrine” in *The Atlantic*, believed that, “the Saudis need to ‘share’ the Middle East with their Iranian foes,” or in Obama’s words:

*The competition between the Saudis and the Iranians—which has helped to feed proxy wars and chaos in Syria and Iraq and Yemen—requires us to say to our friends as well as to the Iranians that they need to find an effective way to share the neighborhood and institute some sort of cold peace.*<sup>52</sup>

Similarly, following a lengthy interview with Obama, *The New Yorker*’s David Remnick concluded that the president envisioned “a new geostrategic equilibrium, one less turbulent than the current landscape of civil war, terror, and sectarian battle.”<sup>53</sup> In the words of Marc Lynch, writing in defense of Obama’s policy, “[t]he end state” would be “the construction of a stable regional balance of power” involving Iran and Saudi Arabia.<sup>54</sup>

Ironically, while the Trump administration has sought to distance itself from Obama’s approach to foreign policy, and it has indeed taken a different tactical approach to the Middle East, it seems to be operating on a different version of the same logic. The current administration believes that Obama in fact disturbed the regional balance by tilting too far toward Iran, giving Tehran an opportunity to sow chaos in the region and putting Sunni states on the defensive. In making an early visit to Riyadh, for example, Trump signaled a desire to shift that balance back, offering increased support for aggressive Saudi policies against Qatar, for example, that were designed to shift that balance back toward the Saudi-led Sunni axis.

To date, however, efforts to promote a balance of power in the region—either by negotiating with and accommodating Iran under Obama or trying to empower Sunni allies under Trump—have only led Iran and Saudi Arabia to double down on their disruptive policies. This section looks at the historical and contemporary factors that explain why this has been case. Viewed in historical context, expectations that the balance of power can prove to be a stabilizing force have often proved illusory, in part because of the inherent difficulty of accurately assessing the relative power of opposing blocs. In the current Middle Eastern context, moreover, these inherent differences are amplified. First, the Sunni-Shiite divide is not as clear as outside observers sometimes assume, and it does not map as neatly onto the current conflict as many, both in and outside the region, would like to believe. Alongside this, the prominent role played by proxy forces in the Iranian-Saudi rivalry has proved particularly destabilizing. Iran, most prominently, has used

terrorist groups and nonstate actors like Hezbollah to advance its interests by undermining regional governments, while Saudi Arabia, for its part, has sought leverage through its promotion of radical Sunni actors and ideology, which has continued to yield violence and unpredictability.

This does not mean that policymakers were wrong to identify Iranian-Saudi conflict as a primary source of regional instability; nor does it mean that forging a balance of power has no role in stabilizing the region. Instead, it suggests that stability can only be achieved through the right kind of balance of power, secured through the right means. Understanding how establishing a balance of power could help bring stability to the Middle East requires looking at the range of ways the concept has been understood and implemented in modern history. Looking at historical examples helps illustrate when and in what circumstances a balance of power can serve as a stabilizing force as opposed to a destabilizing one.

## CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW

In nonacademic foreign policy discussions, “balance of power” gets used in three principal ways: to describe a geopolitical situation, a specific foreign policy, and a theory of international relations.<sup>55,56,57</sup> In the first meaning, “balance of power” is simply used to denote a state where two or more rival states have relatively equal forces at their disposal, creating a military or political balance between them. The second meaning refers to a policy pursued by an individual state that seeks to maintain such a balance between neighboring states as a way of preventing any one of them from becoming powerful enough to pose a threat. Finally, in the third sense, it refers to a theory of international relations based on the assumption that, since individual states will naturally pursue a balance-of-power policy, they will join together to resist the emergence of powerful rivals, thereby maintaining a rough parity in any competitive interstate environment.

Looking at the first two definitions in the context of U.S. policy in the Middle East, the pertinent historical questions involve how states have gone about establishing a balance of power, and what the consequences for stability have been when such a state exists. In exploring the pursuit of a balance of power as an active state policy, the 19th-century Concert of Europe offers a valuable historical reference point, while the Cold War provides the most useful case study for understanding the stabilizing and destabilizing effects of an existing balance of power. If history is any guide, Yalta might serve as a cautionary tale for anyone hoping that a suitable arrangement between outside powers can bring order to the Middle East’s divided states.

### The Concert of Europe

The Concert of Europe famously emerged out of the Congress of Vienna following the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, when representatives of the victorious powers sought to create a diplomatic architecture that would prevent future bids for continent-wide supremacy.<sup>58</sup> Out of this emerged a more elaborate faith in the ability of carefully managed diplomatic relations between Europe’s great powers to forestall the outbreak of war. In theory, at least, any state that sought to enhance its own power at the expense of its neighbors, thereby disrupting the continent’s balance, would find itself opposed by all others. While this had eventually happened with Napoleon, the hope was that if such opposition were guaranteed, it would preempt the temptation toward aggression entirely.

With a handful of exceptions—primarily the Crimean War and the Wars of German Unification—the Concert of Europe maintained peace on the continent for almost a century, until it fell apart spectacularly with World War I. What explains this success, then, and how, if at all, can its lessons be applied to the Middle East?

Some accounts of the Concert of Europe focus on the decisive role played by the era’s legendary diplomats and leaders. Certainly, the appearance of a few more statesmen on par with Castlereagh, Metternich, or Talleyrand could only improve the situation today. But to focus too much on these individuals overlooks the deeper factors that helped the Concert of Europe prove enduring. In this regard, the most striking feature of the Concert of Europe was the ideological consensus that helped sustain the 19th-century balance of power—something that is strikingly absent in the contemporary Saudi-Iranian rivalry.

Under Napoleon, France was not only an expansionist state that posed a military threat to the rest of Europe, but also an ideological threat to the continent’s other regimes. Because of its revolutionary character, this threat was felt as strongly in liberal monarchies like England as it was



in absolutist monarchies like Russia. After Napoleon's defeat, the specter that the French revolution created proved a unifying force in European diplomacy, giving rival statesmen a shared interest in cooperating not only to protect their borders but also their collective hold on power. Subsequently, as the century went on, the continent's ideological divide became reconfigured, increasingly pitting democracies like France and England against the autocratic states of Germany, Russia, and Austro-Hungary. But even against this rift, a shared fear of radical uprisings united these governments. In particular, the revolutions of 1848 created a new threat to European governments that reinforced a shared commitment to maintaining order.

As the idea of the balance of power grew into a theoretically articulated and consciously pursued aim of diplomats across the continent, the ideological assumptions behind it were sometimes acknowledged. Specifically, states that committed to preserving the continent-wide balance of power were accepting, either implicitly or explicitly, the legitimacy of their partners in this endeavor. This did not mean there were no ideological differences, of course, but it meant that all states that were part of the Concert of Europe saw each other as existing within a tolerable ideological range. Embracing the balance of power meant rejecting any ideologically driven efforts to destroy other states or forcibly change their regimes. Thus the Ottoman Empire's inclusion within the concert was important, and controversial, because it placed the empire within this consensus. For Britain, including the Ottoman Empire in the concert fit with the government's ongoing but frequently criticized support of the sultan as a bulwark against Russia's southern expansion: It meant accepting the empire's endurance at the expense of seeking territorial gain or advancing the ideologically appealing cause of Balkan-Christian independence.

It was within the context of this ideological consensus that diplomats sought to manage the crises that did occur during the 19th century.<sup>59</sup> The intra-European wars that took place during that period remained limited, with an understanding that the stakes were not existential and, no matter how dramatic the outcome on the battlefield, the ultimate political results would be adjudicated through diplomatic conferences. The Crimean War, for example, saw three other powers—Britain, France, and the Ottoman Empire—join together to check the expansion of Russian power. When Russia was defeated, the victorious powers largely sought to reestablish the status quo ante, returning territories captured during the war and going one step further by demilitarizing the Black Sea. Subsequently, the more dramatic Prussian victories over Austria-Hungary and France in the 1860s radically reshaped Europe by leading to the creation of modern Germany. But even here, the goal of the powers in the aftermath of each of these wars was to incorporate the emerging German state into a revised concert and limit the territorial concessions made by the defeated powers. The limits of these efforts were eventually felt decades later with the outbreak of World War I, but for half a century they managed to keep the peace. Finally, when the Russo-Turkish war (1877-1878) led to a dramatic Ottoman defeat, the diplomatic intervention of the great powers at the Berlin Conference served to considerably walk back the gains that Russia, and its client, Bulgaria, obtained in the war itself.

In this way, the Concert of Europe sought to ensure continuity for the continent-wide political order and also to ensure that military defeat would not call a country's existence into question. The eventual outbreak of World War I throws into sharp relief the way these facets of 19th-century diplomacy served to keep the peace. That the conflict saw the complete collapse of several European states, in which drastic territorial losses were accompanied by the fall of longstanding regimes, raised the stakes for future conflicts and introduced a powerful new ideological element into diplomacy. The transition to an era of total war, in which the existence of nation-states hung in the balance, helped ensure the inevitability, scope, and savagery of World War II, and it helped set the stage for the Cold War as well.<sup>60,61,62</sup>

## The Discordant Concert of the Gulf

In assessing the prospects for a stable balance of power in the Middle East today, the ominous and unavoidable conclusion is that the factors that made it possible in 19th-century Europe are largely absent. The conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia has taken on a distinctly ideological character, and on both sides, the stakes are frequently presented as being life or death. In this context, the fragility of both regimes has led not to a shared interest in mitigating conflict, but rather an intensification of it. Moreover, the complex identities in the region, which do not always neatly conform to an imagined division between Sunni and Shiite, further complicate the possibility for establishing a stabilizing balance of power. Coupled with the destabilizing reliance of both sides on proxy forces, this makes the situation in the Middle East today less like the Concert of Europe and more like the Cold War in the Third World, where great-power rivalry played a consistently disruptive role. These complications, coupled with the inherent role of misperception in undermining the smooth functioning of the balance of power, explain why, over the last several decades, U.S. policy in the Middle East, from the invasion of Iraq to Syria today, has consistently mismanaged the regional balance.

Before the Iranian Revolution, Saudi Arabia and Iran were, in President Richard Nixon's formulation, intended to serve as the "twin pillars," securing a stable, pro-American political order in and around the Persian Gulf. The Iranian and Saudi royal families had different religious and ideological affiliations—the Shah was a devotee of secular high-modernism, the Saudi King of Wahabbi Islam—but a shared geopolitical orientation, as well as a shared ideological aversion to Communism, which transcended these differences.

With the Iranian revolution, however, the newfound ideological chasm between Iranian and Saudi leaders took center stage in a sudden and dangerous geopolitical conflict. Iran's revolutionary ambitions, and aggressive actions to promote them, represented a clear threat to Saudi Arabia's internal stability and regional standing. Through its pan-Islamic rhetoric, Iran's new regime sought to claim the mantle of Islamic leadership across the Sunni-Shiite divide. Moreover, given the Saudi government's close relationship to the United States, the Iranian regime's intense anti-American and anti-Israel stance risked undermining Saudi Arabia's delicate and contradictory efforts to present itself as the champion of an explicitly anti-Western religious ideology. More specifically, if Iranian rhetoric challenged the Saudis' ideological legitimacy among Sunni Muslims domestically and around the region, it also posed a more specific threat because of its sectarian appeal to Saudi Arabia's Shiite minority. Among many incidents that intensified these fears were a series of protests launched by Shiite pilgrims during the Hajj. First in 1981, pilgrims began chanting political slogans inside the Great Mosque in Mecca, leading to violent clashes with police that intensified in subsequent years.

At the same time, Iran's new leaders were quickly given cause to feel that their revolution and their country were at risk. When Saddam Hussein invaded Iran in 1980, he hoped to seize an Arab-populated and oil-rich part of the country's territory, as well as to destroy the Islamic revolution before it had a chance to spread. Iraq acted with the support of Saudi Arabia and other conservative Gulf regimes, which were increasingly drawn into the conflict as Iran targeted their shipping in the Gulf itself. The degree of regional and international support that Iraq received in the conflict, even when Baghdad began using chemical weapons against Iranian soldiers, helped emphasize the existential nature of the conflict for the Iranian regime, as well as the degree to which it appeared to have transcended preexisting international norms.

Paradoxically, the outcome of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq intensified both Saudi and Iranian threat perceptions. For Saudi Arabia, which is particularly focused on the scope of Iran's Shiite proxies, the invasion brought a Shiite government to power in Baghdad and expanded the reach of Iranian backed Shiite militias across the country. For Iran, however, which is focused not on the threat posed by the Saudi military but rather by that of its ally the United States, the invasion brought U.S. forces to its doorstep, and initially created the fear that Iran itself might be their next target.

From these origins, the current direction of the Saudi-Iran rivalry has only amplified historically grounded fears and intensified the perception of enduring ideological enmity. Saudi Arabia perceives itself as becoming encircled by Iranian proxies, stretching from Iraq through Syria to Lebanon, and now threatening Saudi Arabia from its southern flank via the Houthis in Yemen. The ability of Houthi forces to launch missiles targeting Mecca itself has made the nature of this threat appear all the more fundamental. On the Iranian side, the uprising against Assad in Syria initially threatened to remove Iran's most powerful and loyal regional ally, and specifically the one Arab country that had taken Iran's side during the Iran-Iraq War. Subsequently, the rise of ISIS presented Iran with an example of a particularly vicious sectarian actor targeting Shiites in both Syria and Iraq in the most existential possible terms.

While international dynamics served to intensify the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, domestic developments in both countries did as well. Iran's support for Shiites—along with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries such as Bahrain—has been both rhetorical and militant. Iranian attempts to organize violent resistance among Shiite groups, in particular, has led to a backlash from Gulf governments, intensifying the already considerable persecution ordinary Shiites face at the hands of Sunni governments. The Saudi government's early 2016 execution of a prominent Shiite cleric on dubious terror charges, for example, and Bahrain's 2017 crackdown on Shiite nongovernmental organizations exemplify the way Gulf states overreact to Iranian provocations and, in doing so, intensify the sectarian nature of their rivalry with Iran.

A sectarian ideological conflict in which both sides feel the stakes are existential ensures that, even if the forces that both Saudi Arabia and Iran have at their disposal are roughly equal, the result of this balance is more likely to be destabilizing than stabilizing. This is all the more true when both sides rely heavily on proxy forces to advance their regional interests. A conflict in which both parties are primed to escalate by inciting and arming proxies in other countries, as has happened in the wider Middle East over the past decade, creates the ideal conditions for state failure.



## The Cold War

In this regard, the most pertinent historical analogy for the Saudi-Iran rivalry is not the 19th-century Concert of Europe but the Cold War. Though taking place on a global scale, the dynamics of the Cold War show several key similarities to those at play in the Gulf and wider Middle East today. Most prominently, as a geopolitical conflict between two powers, the Cold War also carried a heavy ideological component for both sides.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, it was seen in both the United States and the Soviet Union as having an existential character, not only because of the threat of nuclear war but also because both sides saw the other as seeking to impose a universalist ideology at their expense.

When viewed from Europe, the Cold War has sometimes in retrospect appeared to be a “long peace,” it has proved profoundly destabilizing when viewed from a global perspective.<sup>64</sup> The ideological and all-encompassing nature of the conflict led both sides to sponsor proxy forces across the Third World, inflaming civil wars in fragile states with long-term consequences. For both Washington and Moscow, the benefits of undermining their rival’s Third World allies almost always outweighed any sense of perceived risk from these policies. Especially at times of intensified Cold War tensions, as in the 1950s or again in the 1980s, sponsoring coups and insurgencies proved an effective tool for both powers to advance their geopolitical interests.

The violence in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, like the violence that spread in regions like Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America during the Cold War, results from local conflicts getting incorporated into a great-power conflict. Moreover, just as the United States and Soviet Union could consistently find Communist and anti-Communist local actors in countries around the world, because of the religious composition of the Middle East, Iran and Saudi Arabia can consistently find sectarian allies where they need them.

More importantly, just as many Cold War-era insurgents and dictators adopted Communist and anti-Communist orientations somewhat opportunistically to win outside support, sectarian identities have proved equally susceptible to opportunism. The beliefs of the Syrian Alawis who make up the dominant force in Assad’s government, for example, are not those of the orthodox Shiite clerics running Iran. Similarly, in Yemen, the Houthis are members of the Zaidi sect, which split off from Iranian “twelver” Shiism in the eighth century. Even in Iraq, where Iran has been relatively successful at cultivating Shiite allies, the inherent religious basis of these ties should not be overstated.<sup>65</sup> During the 1980s, most Iraqi Shiites fought with their country’s army against Iran, and even today, as many of them welcome Iranian support in advancing their interests, their religious loyalty remains tied to Iraqi Shiite leaders like Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. On the other side, the perceived threat from Shiites and the desire for outside support has led secular Sunni actors to either reinvent themselves as or to make common cause with religiously motivated jihadis. Their degree of sincerity is unknowable, but the results, as shown with the growth of al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia, have been dramatic.

## MISPERCEIVING THE BALANCE

Finally, when looking at the failure of U.S. policy to stabilize the Middle East by adopting a balance-of-power approach, a more general point of historical comparison stands out. In a variety of geopolitical circumstances, balances of power have proved less stable, and efforts to promote them less stabilizing than expected because politicians and diplomats have erred in assessing where the balance lies. The examples are numerous: In 1866, for example, Napoleon III believed that the power of Austria-Hungary represented the biggest obstacle to advancing French interests in Europe.<sup>66</sup> As a result, he helped facilitate Prussia’s victory over the Habsburgs, thereby setting the stage for his humiliating defeat at Prussia’s hands less than a decade later. Or, to take a similar case, in the 1920s many British statesmen feared that, with Germany’s defeat, France had become the continent’s preeminent power, and by extension the biggest threat to the British Empire.<sup>67</sup>

Ironically, Iran’s prominence in the Middle East today, and the destabilizing consequences that follow from it, represents the result of repeated miscalculations by successive U.S. administrations that underestimated its power in their approach to the region. First, in toppling Saddam, the Bush administration misidentified the country that posed the most dangerous threat to U.S. interests and allies in the region. In doing so, Bush helped tip the balance of power decisively in Iran’s favor for the first time since the start of the Iran-Iraq War. Then, the Obama administration, while seeking to shift away from the perceived militarism of its predecessor toward an approach based on negotiation, inadvertently doubled down on Bush’s fundamental miscalculation. Obama in turn assumed that by limiting Iran’s nuclear program while acknowledging Iran’s role as a power in the region, he could create a balance that would enable the United States to withdraw from the Middle East. Yet the result of this miscalculation was to further facilitate Iran’s expansion and alarm Washington’s longtime Gulf allies.

## The (Wrong) Gathering Storm

The relationship between Iran and Iraq, two hostile and disruptive regional powers fiercely at odds with one another, always sat uneasily with the balance-of-power concept. From backing both sides during the Iran-Iraq War—of which Kissinger famously said, “It’s a pity both sides can’t lose”—to the subsequent policy of dual containment during the 1990s, U.S. policy sought to maintain a balance between the two states but also to do so in a way that put the maximum pressure on both. Yet with the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the United States fundamentally disrupted this balance, opening the way for intensified Iranian influence in Iraq and the region. The miscalculation that threw off the balance, in this case, appears twofold. First, American policymakers exaggerated the extent of Saddam’s power, most notably in their inaccurate assessments of the state of his weapons-of-mass-destruction programs. Second, American policymakers failed to anticipate the difficulty of rebuilding a strong and stable Iraq after the fall of the Baath regime, and therefore they largely ignored the possibility that the invasion would influence the balance of power to begin with.

When hostilities broke out between Iran and Iraq following the Iranian revolution, the outcome most desired by the United States was a prolonged military struggle that could degrade and weaken both sides. To accomplish this objective, the United States sought to ensure that neither nation could gain a comparative and definitive military advantage over the other. Iran dominated the early years of the conflict, pushing into Iraq and controlling territory, seizing oil, and devastating the Iraqi military. In response, the United States began secretly providing Iraq with highly classified intelligence to help counter the Iranian advance, while also covertly supplying American-made military equipment to Saddam’s forces. It was originally believed this support began in 1984; however, declassified reports and statements show that the Reagan Administration began these operations in 1982, fearful of Iran overrunning vast swaths of Iraqi territory.

By the end of 1985, the momentum began to shift toward Iraq as the military reclaimed captured territory and began a significant thrust into Iranian territory. Top American policymakers and officials increasingly worried that Saddam’s forces could overrun and eventually topple the Iranian regime, gaining full control of the country’s oil and natural gas reserves. This led Washington to attempt to prop up the Iranian military and gain leverage over the Soviet Union. U.S. support for Iran continued until 1987 when the Iranian navy began restricting navigation in the Persian Gulf and attacking Kuwaiti oil tankers. In Operation Earnest Will, the U.S. Navy then flagged Kuwaiti vessels, offering protection and escorts for the oil tankers against Iranian mines and air attacks. Later, after the sinking of the *USS Samuel B. Roberts* in 1988 due to a mine, the United States launched Operation Praying Mantis, the largest naval attack and engagement since World War II, destroying Iranian naval vessels and aircraft.

Support for both sides weakened dramatically in 1988 when it became known that Saddam was conducting chemical-weapons attacks on Iranian civilians. Simultaneously, the United States and Iran began engaging in bitter military disputes, and by the end of the year, the United States helped broker a U.N. cease-fire deal between the two countries.

But with Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990, combined with Iran’s continued support for terrorism around the region, it quickly became clear that if the regional balance survived the Iran-Iraq War intact, both states, however weakened, still posed serious threats to U.S. interests. This led to a policy of dual-containment, in which the United States sought to simultaneously weaken both sides of the balance. U.S. sanctions against both countries remained in place throughout the 1990s, while Washington imposed a no-fly zone over significant portions of Iraq and worked through a variety of channels and allies to combat Iran’s unconventional threats in the region.

By the late 1990s, however, a bipartisan consensus emerged that Iraq represented the biggest threat to the United States and was the country most likely to break out of its containment. Following the Gulf War, the extent and progress of Iraq’s weapons-of-mass-destruction programs had surprised U.S. intelligence agencies; the recognition that they were much further advanced than Washington had anticipated created a lingering sense of suspicion that persisted over the next decade. Similarly, revelations about the extent of corruption in the U.N. oil-for-food program called the sanctions regime into question. It appeared to be far more successful in causing deprivation for ordinary Iraqis than in curbing the regime’s behavior, leading many to worry that, amid growing international opprobrium, it would soon be abandoned.

Against this backdrop, the focus in the early 2000s was squarely on Iraq, so much so that the balance of power was not a major factor in policymakers’ thinking in the lead-up to the 2003 invasion. To the extent that the balance of power was a factor, their prevailing belief that Iraq would be quickly reconstituted after Saddam was toppled, and that Iran would simultaneously be cowed by the display of U.S. military power, left them seemingly unconcerned with the risk of upsetting the balance.



As a result, Washington failed to anticipate how the invasion would embolden Iran in the region and allow for an expansionary authority to increase its influence among neighboring states. Particularly, Bush failed to foresee any aggressive moves by Iran to partner with the newly installed and U.S.-supported Shiite regime after de-Baathification purged the government and civil society of any former members of Saddam's government. Thus, the United States provided Iran with a key advantage, a friendly government looking to consolidate its power over a fractured state while posing as the champion, even avenger, of a previously downtrodden community.

## Tippling (Over) the Balance

For President Obama, U.S. disengagement from the Middle East was a paramount strategic priority, one that he sought to accomplish by establishing a sectarian balance of power that could provide a self-sustaining regional order. ISIS, Obama appeared to believe, disrupted the process of rebalancing that his administration had begun with signature initiatives like the Iran nuclear deal. Restoring some semblance of order, in this view, required defeating ISIS and resuming the previous agenda.

Seeing Iraq's rapid unraveling following the overthrow of Saddam, Obama entered office in 2008 already pessimistic about the ability of U.S. military power to transform Middle Eastern societies. Though the Arab Spring might have interjected a brief glimmer of optimism into Obama's, and much of the world's, assessment of the region, after its ultimate failure, Obama took an even more realist and dour view.<sup>68</sup>

Given his strong conviction that United States has few interests in the region and even less power to influence it, Obama sought, with some urgency, a way to disengage responsibly, leaving behind some minimal order that would reduce or eliminate the need for constant U.S. intervention. The solution Obama struck on was a regional balance of power between competing Sunni and Shiite blocs. Rather than attempting to overcome what he described as the region's "millennia-old" sectarian cleavages, Obama seemed to conclude that they needed to be incorporated into the region's new balance. "If we were able to get Iran to operate in a responsible fashion—not funding terrorist organizations, not trying to stir up sectarian discontent in other countries, and not developing a nuclear weapon—you could see an equilibrium developing between Sunni, or predominantly Sunni, Gulf states and Iran in which there's competition, perhaps suspicion, but not an active or proxy warfare," Obama said in a 2014 interview.<sup>69</sup> Or as deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes subsequently suggested, with the Iran deal "the world of the Sunni Arabs that the American establishment built [over past administrations] has collapsed."<sup>70</sup>

Rough strategic parity between a Saudi-led Sunni faction and an Iranian-led Shiite camp could, in this view, create a form of bipolar regional order. And creating this balance of power, in turn, became the best way to prevent the United States from being sucked in to the impossible task of managing the region's insoluble conflicts. The consequences of this outlook on the administration's Syria policy were not hard to discern, either. An intense focus on defeating ISIS militarily was accompanied by a renewed willingness to accept a negotiated settlement in Syria, where Assad stayed in power, thereby contributing to a broader sectarian balance.

But as Obama's Iran deal moved toward completion, ISIS emerged and threw the region into complete disarray. ISIS owed its existence in part to the fears of Sunni states who felt, correctly or not, that they were on the losing side of a changing regional balance. The conflict in Syria had already ignited—and Iran had already heavily intervened in it—several years before the emergence of ISIS or the signing of the Iran nuclear deal. The region was, therefore, already in the midst of a sectarian struggle for power as American policymakers were deciding to help tip the balance toward Iran.<sup>71</sup> That is to say, while the Obama administration felt that Washington's Sunni partners enjoyed a destabilizing preponderance of power, they themselves feared the balance of power had already tipped in Tehran's favor and additional U.S. concessions to Iran would in fact create an imbalance. Thus, Washington's efforts to rebalance the region were seen as dangerous concessions to Iran by crucial regional actors, especially when they were not accompanied by reassuring rhetoric, much less strategic gestures, from the administration.

In this context, for countries like Saudi Arabia and Turkey, radical Sunni fighters in Syria initially appeared as allies in an effort to contain Iranian influence in the region—a form, in other words, of counterbalancing. Neither country necessarily supported the religious agenda of these proto-ISIS jihadi groups, but as the terms of regional conflict came to seem increasingly sectarian and as their erstwhile U.S. partner seemed to move increasingly closer to their Shiite enemy, Sunni radicals became natural allies for the region's Sunni powers. The rise of ISIS was enabled by, not the cause of, this combustible mix of inflamed Sunni grievances and the influx of fighters, arms, and money from outside Syria.<sup>72</sup> In short, ISIS itself is a

reminder that attempting to resolve the region's conflicts through a grand sectarian balancing act risks further destabilization if the fundamentals of that balance are misunderstood, or understood differently by those in the region, and the rebalancing is undertaken too rapidly or abruptly.

## Mounting Complications

If the Obama administration thought that ISIS was a cause, rather than a consequence of regional imbalance, the group's defeat is now likely to prove how much larger the challenges to creating a regional balance are. Between 2015 and 2018, ISIS's territorial losses were accompanied by growing tension between other actors in Iraq and Syria, bringing to the fore a growing range of increasingly well-armed actors. This has not only opened up new conflicts, which are destabilizing in themselves, but it has expanded the potential scope of Iranian-Saudi competition, creating new potential proxies whose loyalty each side can potentially bid for.

In Iraq, ISIS's defeat came about as a result of a remarkable joint campaign involving Kurdish peshmerga and Iraqi forces operating with the support of both Washington and Tehran. Not surprisingly, the liberation of Mosul set the stage for a long-simmering conflict between the Kurdistan Regional Government and Baghdad to upset the internal balance of Iraqi politics. Moreover, Kurdish President Massoud Barzani's destabilizing decision to hold an independence referendum, as well as the political calculations that led the central government to respond to that decision with force, offer an elegant demonstration of the problems with negotiating a balance of power. Barzani, for his part, appeared empowered to challenge Iraq's internal status quo in part because he calculated that he could leverage American concerns about Iranian influence in the region to secure U.S. support for his move, even as Washington repeatedly told him to back down. Then, in turn, when Barzani went ahead with his bid for independence, Iran, seeing an opportunity to counter what it believed to be an advance for the countervailing American-led Israeli-Saudi bloc, offered its full support to Baghdad in reversing the referendum by force. Iran's efforts to undermine Kurdish independence proved even more destabilizing when Tehran exploited the divisions between rival Kurdish factions—the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—by pressuring PUK forces to withdraw from Kirkuk in advance of an Iranian-backed Iraqi occupation of the city. In the subsequent intra-Kurdish recriminations, KDP leaders accused their PUK counterparts of treason, PUK leaders condemned Barzani and the KDP for their reckless support of the referendum, and tensions between the two sides quickly became worse than they had been at any point since they fought each other in a civil war two decades ago.

If this array of conflicts were not complicated enough, the defeat of ISIS has also made it possible for smaller minority groups like the Yazidis to be incorporated into intra-Kurdish conflicts that themselves are embroiled in larger regional tensions. In the border region of Sinjar, for example, between Iraq and Syria, the Yazidi population, and its associated militia forces, are now an object of competition between regional powers. While leading Yazidi political figures had originally been aligned with the Barzani and the KDP, the failure of KDP peshmerga to protect Sinjar in the face of ISIS led to a newfound alliance between the region's Yazidis and Democratic Union Party-aligned Kurds. This was accompanied by a growing alignment between Yazidi forces and Iranian-backed Iraqi militias, with the main Sinjar militia eventually being incorporated into the predominantly Shiite popular mobilization unit structure.

The proliferation of actors, interests, and conflicts in the wake of ISIS's defeat provides a reminder that the balance of power works best when dealing with a limited number of discrete and well-defined states, whose interests, and borders, are clearly legible. It is not just that power imbalances create chaos, but that in chaotic and fragmented environments, a stable balance of power is harder to achieve precisely because of the multiplicity of actors and alliances that are, by necessity, involved in it. In this regard, if creating a balance of power can be stabilizing, stabilizing the region by reducing the number of crisis points can help bring balance.

At the same time, the fleeting coalition that emerged in opposition to ISIS, and the speed with which it broke down, also serves as a reminder of the new challenges that might emerge if a regional balance can be achieved. In their own way, power imbalances can also create an illusion of stability, as smaller powers band together in opposition to an emerging threat. For all the advantages that a rough Saudi-Iranian balance of power could bring to the region, policymakers should also be prepared for the new fissures that will need managing. As discussed above, the narrative of Sunni-Shiite conflict, and the Iranian-Saudi power struggle that helps drive it, has also created its own coalitions between states that are less ideologically similar than they seem from the outside. As long as Shiite groups in Iraq and Syria feel they are facing existential threats, for example, they will remain largely loyal to Tehran. But if this fear dissipates, their frustrations may come to the fore. In this regard, balancing Saudi Arabia and Iran could inadvertently bring some of the region's more traditional conflicts to the fore as well.



## CONCLUSION

The recent history of the Middle East and the less recent history of the global political order suggest that establishing a minimal balance of power between rival forces in the region will be a necessary but not sufficient step for restoring order to fractured countries like Iraq and Syria. Ultimately, stability will depend on not only getting the balance right, but on getting the right kind of balance, where both sides feel confident enough to abandon their support for proxy actors around the region. But as long as identities remain in flux and existing states remain divided, the temptations for both sides of the Iran-Saudi, Sunni-Shiite rivalry to continue playing a destabilizing role will remain difficult to resist. Moreover, the United States is unlikely to ever have as clear a perception of where the regional balance stands as it would need to deftly put its finger on the scale.

With all this in mind, U.S. interests could perhaps be best thought of in terms of seeking to avoid an obvious imbalance. This would involve taking steps to contain Iran around the region, while also preventing unsustainable Saudi escalation in counterproductive conflicts like the civil war in Yemen. These measures, which will be discussed further in this paper, must be carried out with an awareness of the complexity of the religious and ethnic landscape in the region—meaning both the divisions within the seemingly coherent Sunni and Shiite blocs, as well as the other divisions in the region that both blocs attempt to exploit. Ideally, a successful strategy would work to achieve a minimal balance while independently and simultaneously addressing other destabilizing factors that make a more robust balance impossible.

# Federalism: Centripetal or Centrifugal?

Another view of how Middle Eastern states have failed, and contributed to the rise of sectarianism, sees the solution not in borders or in a balance of power but in transforming governing institutions. While the starting assessment of the region's problems might be the same—the centrifugal force of irreconcilable ethno-sectarian divisions pulling apart states and societies—this view approaches these divisions as a set of overlapping and sometimes clashing interests on the part of their citizens. The more heterogeneous a society is, the more such clashes of interests it will have to resolve. The key to political order in such cases are the political institutions and processes for adjudicating disputes and distributing scarce or contested resources, such as political power or state revenues, among different components of society. For those that see political institutions as bearing as much, if not more, responsibility for the fate of societies as the borders they inhabit, it is common to invoke federal systems of government as the best solution for governing divided societies.

## THE NEW FEDERALISTS

In 2016, for example, U.N. Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura announced that the possibility of a “federal solution” to Syria was being discussed at Geneva while the country's Kurdish leadership declared that they intended to create a federated state of their own in the north of the country.<sup>73</sup> Given the seeming stalemate brought on by over seven years of war, as well as the depths of the divisions it has created within Syrian society, federalism holds an obvious appeal as a compromise solution. Assad has proved his commitment to staying in power, while opposition fighters have proved their own commitment to refusing to live under Assad. In the face of this contradiction, federalism—a political system that allows a significant amount of autonomy for individual communities while maintaining some sort of weak central government and, therefore, territorial integrity—offers a potential way out of an otherwise insoluble dilemma.

Over the past year, a growing number of articles have discussed the federal solution, and think tanks such as the Brookings Institution have prepared more detailed reports on what it might look like in Syria. Regional supporters of federalism have touted its benefits as well. Writing in *The National Interest*, for example, Sirwan Kajjo argued that Syria is already “extremely fragmented,” but “a more federal system of governance could help the state's many regions and peoples live under one roof.” In the best-case scenario, giving Sunnis and Shiites the “chance of self-rule would undoubtedly enhance the concepts of coexistence and tolerance between the two sides.”<sup>74</sup>

Yet even with debate over federalism growing, there has been little consideration of how the concept could best be applied. Indeed, the casual way the term is often used in policy discussions today has provoked much opposition from those who fear it is simply serving as a euphemism for institutionalizing the country's current divisions on the way toward a more permanent partition.

In other cases, explorations of decentralized solutions purposely avoid addressing long-term solutions in order to build momentum from current dynamics: The Brookings Institution's 2015 study, for example, “Deconstructing Syria: Towards a regionalized strategy for a confederal country,” takes as its starting point the fact that a “comprehensive, national-level solution is too hard even to specify at this stage, much less achieve.” Instead, it proposes an “ink-spot” campaign in which local developments eventually coalesce into a nation-wide solution. As the report explains:

*The strategy would begin by establishing one or two zones in relatively promising locations, such as the Kurdish northeast and perhaps in the country's south near Jordan, to see how well the concept could work and how fast momentum could be built up. Over time, more might be created, if possible. Ultimately, and ideally, some of the safe zones might merge together as key elements in a future confederal arrangement for the Syrian state. Assad, ISIL, and al-Nusra could have no role in such a future state, but for now, American policymakers could otherwise remain agnostic about the future character and governing structures of such an entity.*<sup>75</sup>

Yet this approach, one of seeming de-facto federalism, has also inspired considerable backlash, in large part precisely because it fails to anticipate a sustainable end-state. In “Why Talk of Federalism Won't Help Peace in Syria,” journalist Michael Meyer-Resende argues in *Foreign Policy* that for “Western powers . . . who fear a complete dissolution of Syria, federalism may seem like the best solution they can hope for.” But for those in the region, examples of gradual federalism, such as Ukraine or Libya, only stoke “fear that granting autonomy to federal units can lead quickly to full-blown secession, hastening dissolution rather than helping put a country back together.”<sup>76</sup>



## THE MIDDLE EAST'S LOST FEDERAL HISTORY

Far from a new concept, federalism has a rich and often forgotten history in the Middle East. It was, in the decades following World War II, perhaps the region's favored political system, with numerous attempts to create federated states. Almost all of these schemes—such as the UAR (1958-1961) between Egypt and Syria, the Arab Federation (1958) between Iraq and Jordan, and the Federation of South Arabia (1962-1967) within modern Yemen—have been unsuccessful. The main exception is the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a federation of seven Gulf emirates formed in 1971 that lasts to this day.

Reviewing this history can reveal important lessons about the practicalities of federal systems, why and when they work, and why they fail in the Middle East. These lessons reveal the difficulty of applying federal solutions to the ethno-sectarian conflicts plaguing the region today. Indeed, it turns out that federalism works best as a means for uniting political entities that share something in common, not dividing political foes that cannot stand each other.

The most famous example of a Middle Eastern federation from the post-World War II era is the UAR, a union of Egypt and Syria that lasted from 1958 to 1961. As discussed above, the roots of the UAR go back to 1952, when Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser overthrew the British- and American-backed monarchy of Egypt and installed himself as leader of the country. Nasser became associated with the ideology of pan-Arabism or Arab nationalism, the notion that the millions of Arabs spread throughout the Middle East and North Africa were part of one Arab nation—rather than just Egyptians, Syrians, Iraqis, etc.—that ideally would eventually be united in one sovereign Arab state.

The 1956 Suez Crisis had cultivated an image of Nasser as an Arab leader who had successfully resisted European imperialism after decades of Anglo-French domination of the Middle East. People throughout the Arab world championed Nasser as their hero and became infected with the spirit of pan-Arabism. Infused with this ethos, the Syrians approached Nasser about uniting with Egypt. Their negotiations resulted in the UAR, whereby Nasser's Egypt effectively annexed Syria. The UAR was subsequently overthrown by a group of Syrians discontented with the union in 1961.

Another major attempt at Arab federalism was the Arab Federation formed between Iraq and Jordan in 1958. The Arab Federation was a direct response to the formation of the UAR: The Iraqis and Jordanians united as a way to resist Nasserite influence in the region. The Iraqis and Jordanians were also bound together by their royal families: Both King Faisal II of Iraq (and his regent, Abdul Ilah) and King Hussein of Jordan were members of the Hashemite family, who had fought with the British against the Ottomans in World War I and who had once aspired to rule much of the Middle East. Like the UAR, the Arab Federation also collapsed under a coup. On July 14, 1958, Abdul Salam Arif, Abd al-Karim Qasim, and other revolutionaries overthrew and killed Faisal II, Abdul Ilah, Prime Minister Nuri al-Said, and the entire royal family. Hussein remained the only Hashemite ruler in the Middle East.

The Federation of South Arabia was a third notable Middle Eastern federation of the period; however, this federation was orchestrated by the British, rather than local leaders. The British had begun building a sphere of influence in what is today Yemen in the middle of the 19th century. Like the Suez Canal, Yemen and the south of the Arabian Peninsula were critical as part of the route between the Mediterranean Sea and India. In the era of decolonization following World War II, London reevaluated its colonial commitments across the globe. In 1962, it consolidated several of its possessions in the south of what is today Yemen into the Federation of South Arabia, a consortium of states under British protection. In 1963, the prize British coastal colony of Aden was incorporated into the federation.

The Federation of South Arabia had to contend with the neighboring Nasser-supported Yemen Arab Republic (YAR). The YAR had been established in 1962 when Yemeni revolutionaries inspired by Nasser and his pan-Arabist ideology deposed King Muhammad al-Badr of the existing Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen. (Both the Kingdom and the subsequent YAR are also sometimes known as North Yemen.) A civil war ensued between the YAR and Egyptian troops, which were both backed by the Soviet Union, and forces loyal to the previous Yemeni government, which were supported by Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Britain. Meanwhile, in 1963, a paramilitary Marxist organization backed by the YAR government known as the National Liberation Front launched an insurgency in the Federation of South Arabia. Facing an insurgency within the Federation of South Arabia and a civil-war-turned-proxy-war in the neighboring YAR, the British decided to abandon their base in Aden. On November 29, 1967, the last British troops left Aden; the following day, the Federation of South Arabia fell to the National Liberation Front and became part of a new Marxist state called South Yemen.

Farther to the northeast of the Arabian Peninsula, Britain also had another series of protectorates: the seven Trucial states—the most powerful of which were Abu Dhabi and Dubai—Bahrain, and Qatar. Britain also prepared to withdraw from this region, leaving these nine polities to begin negotiations about their future in 1969. The Bahrainis and Qataris were skeptical about uniting with the Trucial states, but six of the seven Trucial states formed the United Arab Emirates on July 18, 1971. The following year, the seventh Trucial state—Ras al-Khaimah—joined. This conglomeration of emirates has endured to this day.

Upon scrutiny of the histories of attempted Middle Eastern federations, at least four key ideas emerge. First, for a federal scheme to work in the long-term, it is paramount that the leaders of all major parties involved be fully committed to forming the proposed federation. Immense enthusiasm from one party is not sufficient to compensate for a lack of enthusiasm from another. This is illustrated by the determination of the constituent leaders of the UAE to form a union, contrasted with the relative lack of commitment of the Egyptians to form a union with Syria.

The UAE was primarily the brainchild of the local emirs of the Trucial states, particularly Sheikhs Rashid and Zaid, the leaders of Dubai and Abu Dhabi respectively. The leaders were mainly concerned with the power considerations that drew them toward forming a union. Specifically, to the leaders of small emirates, a federation would allow the leaders of Dubai and Abu Dhabi to consolidate their power and more effectively protect themselves from external threats.<sup>77</sup> Sheikh Rashid of Dubai and Sheikh Zaid of Abu Dhabi also saw the union as a way for their emirates to become part of a larger state that could be a more dominant actor in the Gulf. In the words of one historian “the emergence of the UAE from the seven Trucial States essentially derived from the initiative of Sheikh Zaid of Abu Dhabi and Sheikh Rashid of Dubai. . . explain[s] its endurance and success.”<sup>78</sup> In other words, local leaders’ investment in a federal structure contributed significantly to its longevity.

By contrast, the Egyptians were markedly less enthusiastic than their Syrian counterparts about the UAR. In “The United Arab Republic,” Monte Palmer writes that the “UAR formed because the Syrians approached the Egyptians, almost as supplicants.”<sup>79</sup> In this regard, the UAR was really the brainchild of a coterie of Syrian elites who felt pressured by their countrymen to form a union with Egypt. Nasser, when approached by the Syrians, subsequently “imposed” conditions on the Syrians. The UAR was not a federation of equals: It was a temporary union of a somewhat reluctant patron and enthusiastic client.

Several factors can explain the relative lack of interest among the Egyptians toward the merger with Syria.<sup>80</sup> First, the Egyptians felt that the union came about too easily. In addition, the Egyptians doubted whether the union rested on a strong economic or ideological foundation. The Egyptians were half-heartedly committed to the UAR from the start.

The next key lesson, demonstrated by the contrast between the Federation of South Arabia and the UAE, is that externally imposed federations tend to fail in the Middle East. The Federation of South Arabia was a superstructure imposed on its inhabitants by the British that lacked the legitimacy and permanence of a union promoted by local rulers. The federation was deemed as a temporary structure by the locals, who thought that the neighboring Yemen Arab Republic would prove much more enduring. This led to the federation’s downfall. Sir Kennedy Trevaskis, Britain’s high commissioner for Aden, lamented at the time, “Our failure to build up the Federation as a serious contender for the loyalty of its inhabitants during the past year has resulted in a steady and, recently, rapid corrosion of public confidence in the face of the increasing pressure from the U.A.R./Y.A.R. and their allies.” Trevaskis added, “Since the ‘man on the street’ now believes a Nasserite Y.A.R. is firmly established in the Yemen and since, from lack of funds and unduly obtrusive British control, the Federation has failed to make a real impact or an effective Arab Government with a potential for independence, there is a growing tendency to climb on the Nasserite Y.A.R. bandwagon.”<sup>81,82</sup> The Federation of South Arabia did not inspire loyalty among its citizens; it was thus easy prey for the YAR and Nasser.

In contrast to the Federation of South Arabia, the effort to create the UAE was spearheaded by local emirs, giving the union a fortitude that the Federation of South Arabia lacked. As previously illuminated, the leaders of Abu Dhabi and Dubai were the main actors in the formation of the UAE. Should the UAE have been imposed on the people of the Trucial states, it is unlikely it would have lasted long.

Furthermore, while it is critical that outside powers not be the primary agents who install a federation in the Middle East, history also illustrates that a gentle nudge by an outside power can be beneficial to the creation of a successful federation. The prime manifestation of this is the UAE, where the British were not the prime movers behind the negotiations, but they indicated to the local rulers that London would be satisfied should their negotiations succeed. Smith discusses how C.J. Treadwell, a former political agent and subsequently Britain’s first ambassador to the UAE, claimed



that “without our guidance, coaxing, encouragement and plain interference, it would all have come to nothing.” Treadwell concluded that “the British had done much to bring Zaid and Rashid together.”<sup>83</sup> A foreign power imposing a Middle Eastern federation has proved to be quite detrimental; but a foreign power supporting the formation of a federation by local actors has been quite beneficial.

Finally, the main motivation to form a federation has historically been security and power politics. When they feel vulnerable and isolated, local leaders will often try to form larger political units with neighbors and co-ethnics in order to strengthen their position.

For example, pan-Arabism was appealing to Syria after its independence in 1946 in a Middle East still dominated by outside powers (such as Britain and the United States) and larger Arab states like Egypt, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. In “Arab Unity Schemes Revisited: Interest, Identity, and Policy in Syria and Egypt,” Eberhard Kienle connects Syrian attempts at Arab unity (namely the UAR) with Syrian efforts at expanding their identity to include all Arabs.<sup>84</sup> Kienle argues that “attempts to imagine and talk into existence a larger and more populated community may be linked to a sense of vulnerability in the face of largely, although not exclusively, external threats. Hence, unity schemes served to house this enlarged community under the roof of one state, thus maximizing its protection in accordance with the logic of the nation-state.” Feeling threatened by outside powers, Syrians sought to conceive of themselves as being part of a larger Arab community; this in turn gave them a chance to form a larger Arab state, which would provide them with greater protection against their enemies.

By the same line of reasoning, pan-Arabism was particularly attractive to Nasser’s Egypt when it took a leap in the dark by challenging Britain and France in the 1956 Suez Crisis. Kienle argues that under Nasser, Egypt began echoing the rhetoric already emanating from Syria. He explains that for Egypt, the 1950s “was a period in which support for Egyptian policies needed to be mobilized outside Egypt proper; most conveniently this could be done in the Arab world.” According to Kienle, Egypt was following the same logic as Syria: By emphasizing its identity as part of a larger Arab community, Egypt could hope to become part of a larger Arab state that would safeguard it against its enemies. Like with Syria, Egypt pursued pan-Arabist rhetoric and its logical result of Arab federalism because of security concerns. Nasser used pan-Arabist rhetoric to mobilize support in the Suez Crisis and its aftermath, a period in which Nasser thumbed his nose at the imperial power.<sup>85</sup> Thus security considerations moved leaders to embrace pan-Arabist ideology and its corollary, Arab federalism.

The primary impetus for the formation of the Arab Federation between Iraq and Jordan was also security. Reeva S. Simon explores the reasoning of Iraq’s and Jordan’s leaders in “The Hashemite ‘Conspiracy’: Hashemite Unity Attempts, 1921-1958.” According to Simon, after Nasser took power in 1952, “the goal of the monarchs was to preserve their Hashemite thrones and their conservative regimes against pressure from the radical Arab governments. When Egypt took the initiative for Arab unity from Iraq by forming the UAR with Syria on the first of February 1958. Iraq’s defensive reaction was the formation of the Arab Federation with Jordan thirteen days later.”<sup>86</sup> Feeling threatened by Nasser and the Arab regimes that aligned with him (for example, Syria), Iraq and Jordan’s solution was to consolidate their strength in a federation.

Finally, as previously mentioned, Smith posits that a feeling of insecurity drove the emirs of Abu Dhabi and Dubai to establish the UAE. By uniting, the leaders of the Trucial states believed they had a better chance of surviving in the unstable and competitive postcolonial Middle East.

## CONCLUSION: THE IDENTITY OF UNITY AND DIVERSITY

While all these largely failed and forgotten attempts at federation in the Middle East consisted of joining together separate states into a new, larger configurations, the sort of federalism envisioned for Syria and already in place in Iraq is of course one of dividing existing states into smaller political structures. It also seemingly avoids the major historical pitfalls that beset the region’s past attempts at federalism. And yet those attempts seemed to understand something about federalism that its current proponents miss: that for coexistence in a single state, federal or not, to be possible, the centripetal force that drives people together has to remain more powerful than the centrifugal force driving them apart. Federalism might be a means for managing diversity, but it only succeeds when it makes the case for unity.

The logic of federal solutions for Syria and Iraq is similar to that of redrawing borders, but its implementation less drastic. If ethnic homogeneity breeds stability, then creating political structures representative of distinct identity groups, even within a heterogenous state, must help promote political order. The ability of groups, be they identity- or interest-based, to pursue their objectives through legitimate government institutions and

resolve their conflicts through legal structures will contribute to overall stability. It is a view fundamentally grounded in the idea that the diversity of society can be managed through creative institutional design within a single state.

This approach to federalism-as-diversity is rather different than the failed Middle Eastern attempts to use federalism as a unifying tool. The failure of the latter, the repeated inability of existing states to merge into a federal entity, might suggest that federalism is better suited to uses it is suggested for in Syria and Iraq: managing diversity. But this would be to misread the causes of federalism's historical difficulties in the region.

Attempts to forge federations, like the UAR, did not fail simply because of the pragmatic difficulties of conjoining existing states. Nor due to the lack of good strategic or political reasons for creating such a union. They failed because there was not enough common ground and shared desire pulling the constituent members together. Too often, the idea of federation was one-sided or external, rather than common to all the states to be united. In those cases, the federation never took. Only where all the parties felt like there was already a shared bond, like the UAE, did the federal experiment end up sticking.

This need for center of gravity that unites disparate elements of a society, not the institutional design that enshrines protections for diverse interests, is perhaps the most overlooked yet critical part of success in federal systems. Maintaining such a centripetal force is difficult, but possible in cases where federalism is supposed to account primarily for diversity in socioeconomic interests, as in the United States. In Federalist Paper Number 10, James Madison famously decries the evil of interests turning into factions that form tyrannical majorities. He describes “the regulation of these various and interfering interests,” as “the principal task of modern legislation.”<sup>87</sup>

Madison rejects out of hand solutions that would seek to eliminate factions from society altogether and opts to design a form of government so as to control their effects, that government being a republican union of states. The benefits Madison sought were twofold. First, he argued that a republic can encompass a greater territory and population than a direct democracy, allowing “a greater variety of parties and interests.” This would “make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens.”<sup>88</sup> Secondly, the federal structure of a central union composed of states would, in effect, create a firewall between factions and the national government. As Madison argued:

*The influence of factious leaders may kindle a flame within their particular States, but will be unable to spread a general conflagration through the other States. A religious sect may degenerate into a political faction in a part of the Confederacy; but the variety of sects dispersed over the entire face of it must secure the national councils against any danger from that source. A rage for paper money, for an abolition of debts, for an equal division of property, or for any other improper or wicked project, will be less apt to pervade the whole body of the Union than a particular member of it; in the same proportion as such a malady is more likely to taint a particular county or district, than an entire State.*<sup>89</sup>

This argument only works, however, when the constituent elements of a federal system are not coequal with the interest groups that the system is meant to manage. Madison prescribes devolving authority to states, counties, and municipalities not so that each one can be given over to a specific faction, but so as to create multiple levels of representation that can in effect prevent local factions from growing into broader threats to the nation. Interest groups, in this federal vision, are to be managed, splintered even, rather than empowered.

Perhaps even more importantly, if somewhat less apparently, Madison describes the act of representation itself as a way of fundamentally disarming and deconstructing factions. “Passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens,” he writes of popular opinion, “whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country, and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations” will reveal “the public good [better] than if pronounced by the people themselves.”<sup>90</sup> Although Madison's argument might depend somewhat too heavily on the ideal of a disinterested patrician class, the procedural equivalent can easily be divined. The greater and more diverse the territory and population where a representative is from, the greater and more diverse the interest groups that official will be representing. The act of having to balance between them will yield a more temperate and stable outcome than either direct democracy or the selection of officials on the basis of representing specific interest groups.



Thus, ultimately, Madison argues that the federal solution to a fractious society lies in its ability to foster something like a sense of the public good and instill, at least in representatives, a shared commitment to identifying and serving that good. “The federal Constitution,” he concluded, “forms a happy combination in this respect; the great and aggregate interests being referred to the national, the local and particular to the State legislatures.”<sup>91</sup> The benefit of having the central government address only “great and aggregate interests” is not only that local factions have been, effectively, diluted by the political process by that point but also that the very existence of shared national-level issues is what gives state governments their ability to address and contain local factions.

Without a shared identity or common purpose, the UAR foundered and Yemen has suffered multiple civil wars. Coming out of massive political conflict, a federated system is unlikely to make Sunnis, Shiites, Kurds, Yazidis, Christians, and the myriad other ethno-sectarian groups in Iraq and Syria feel any less betrayed or any more charitable toward one another.

Federalism works when there is a shared, centripetal force that keeps a diverse society together through some sort of shared conception of common purpose and public good. It is a union of both difference and, crucially, identity. It is not a way to tame centrifugal forces nor a mechanism for building institutions over otherwise irreconcilable differences of identity.

# Bosnia: A Case Study in Contradictions

In looking at the challenges involved in rebuilding the Middle East over the coming decade, the experience of U.S.-European intervention in the former Yugoslavia offers an inevitable point of comparison. Yugoslavia, like Syria and Iraq, was a multiethnic society that had emerged out of the Ottoman Empire—and then subsequently experienced decades of authoritarian rule before descending into a brutal, identity-based civil war. Unfortunately, the exhaustive literature exploring the success and failures of internationally sponsored state-building efforts in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Kosovo suggest that this experience offers a better a case for lowered expectations than a model for future efforts. Reviewing this literature, in other words, offers a reminder that even in the best possible conditions—and those that were present in the Balkans were considerably more promising than those that exist in the Middle East today—both rebuilding multiethnic societies and partitioning them are enormously fraught processes.

Yet this does not mean there are no lessons to be drawn. Indeed, learning to approach the task of stabilizing post-conflict states from a more realistic perspective can help policymakers focus their efforts on the most crucial challenges instead of wasting resources in pursuit of unattainable goals. Given the numerous challenges both Bosnia and Kosovo continue to face, neither can be called a “success story.” But when these two countries are compared with Iraq and Syria, any steps that could bring the Middle East closer to the degree of nonviolent dysfunction currently enduring in the Balkans should be welcomed.

In BiH, the federated state structure that emerged from the civil war, as well as all the problems this structure has caused, have been heavily debated over the ensuing two decades.<sup>92,93</sup> Both the system of government designed for Bosnia at the Dayton Accords, as well as the international community’s subsequent implementation of it, have been heavily critiqued from within Bosnia and without.<sup>94</sup> Yet reviewing these—often contradictory—critiques raises the question of whether critics expect too much from Bosnia, from the international community, or from both. That is to say, much criticism of the Dayton Accords and their postwar implementation relies, either explicitly or implicitly, on the assumption that Bosnia could be rebuilt as a single, democratic, well-functioning and multicultural state relatively quickly after the horrors of the country’s civil war. Yet the case for this optimistic counterfactual has never been convincingly made.

To the contrary, looking at the origins of many of the most problematic aspects of the Dayton Accords shows how, at every stage, they emerged from structural and political challenges that defied other solutions. Indeed, many of the conflicts over implementing Dayton were inherent in the conflicts that drove the war itself. At successive stages in Bosnia’s postwar political development, international actors realized the shortcomings of the steps they were taking from the democratization perspective but saw the more powerful short-term advantage in preventing a lapse back into violence.

## A COMPLEX ENTITY: THE DAYTON CONSTITUTION

BiH, in its current form, came into being with the Dayton Accords, whose fourth Annex became the constitution for the new state.<sup>95</sup> The accords provide for a consociational state whose territory and government bodies are carefully divided along ethnic lines between Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims). A brief overview of the state structure envisioned by Dayton serves as an introduction to the challenges BiH has faced since its inception.

Territorially, BiH is divided into two constituent entities: a joint Bosniak-Croat Federation (covering 51 percent of the territory) and the Republika Srpska (covering the other 49 percent of the territory). The Bosnian-Croat Federation, in turn, is divided into 10 cantons, each of which has its own government. Some cantons are ethnically mixed and have special laws implemented to ensure the equality of all constituents. Each canton consists of municipalities: Five of them are majority-Bosniak, three are majority Croat, and two are ethnically mixed. Both the Bosniak-Croat Federation and the Republika Srpska (RS) are further divided into municipalities, which have their own local governments. The country also has a number of “official” cities whose mayors hold a degree of power in between that of the municipalities and cantons. Finally, adding to this complexity is the territory of Brcko, which officially belongs to both the federation and to RS but is governed by neither and instead under the purview of a local government. For election purposes, its citizens can choose whether to participate in either the federation or RS.

The complexity of the central government mirrors the complexity of the country’s territorial configuration. The seat of the presidency, primarily responsible for the country’s international relations and military, is a three-member body that rotates every eight months between a Bosniak, a Croat, and a Serb, each of whom is elected by a plurality of votes among members of their respective ethnicities. The country’s parliamentary assembly



consists of the National House of Representatives (a 42-member body made up of 14 members of each ethnicity) and a House of the Peoples (whose 15 members are likewise divided). The parliament also helps shape foreign policy, and, with the president, has authority over the country's national budget. The country's nine-member Supreme Court has six Bosnian nationals (with two seats allotted to each group) as well as three foreign citizens appointed by the president of the European Court of Human Rights. Below the level of the national government, both entities, the federation and RS, each have their parliamentary bodies, which manage health care, education, agriculture, culture, and policing.

Three additional features about this system deserve mention. First, voting is conducted by ethnicity rather than territory, so that Bosniaks living in RS, for example, can vote for the Bosnian co-president as well as Bosniak parliamentarians. Second, the parliamentary system is set up so that each ethnic bloc can wield a veto, overriding the majority even on issues where parliamentarians from the other two blocs are in agreement. Finally, the Dayton Accords created an Office of the High Representative (OHR), which, acting on behalf of the accord's signatories (the Peace Implementation Council), exercises considerable power over the country's elected government. The role of the OHR, after being expanded in 1997, includes the authority to "issue decrees, impose laws and remove elected and appointed officials who he thinks are obstructing the Dayton accords." These "Bonn Powers"—after the city in which the international community decided to assume them—frequently play a greater role in the politics of BiH than the specific authority allotted to other bodies through the constitution.

## FEDERALISM IN ACTION: BIH SINCE 1995

The political evolution of BiH over the last two decades shows why almost every aspect of the political and territorial arrangement prescribed by Dayton has been controversial. The new country's accomplishments have been real. Despite early and recurring concerns, it has not relapsed into fighting. Refugees have returned home, in some cases even when those homes are located in territory now controlled by other ethnic groups. In time, the central government has demonstrated its ability to handle a bare minimum of its domestic and international obligations, and even expanded, to a slight extent, the writ of its authority. Yet set against all this is the failure of Dayton, and the state it created, to achieve the more ambitious goals that were quickly attributed to it.

From early on, the phrase "from Dayton to Brussels" encapsulated the optimistic trajectory imagined for the nascent BiH.<sup>96,97,98</sup> That is, from civil war to full European Union membership, and with it, perhaps, a full European identity, with everything that implied. Set against this standard, BiH's subsequent political development continues to be viewed as a failure. Bosnia was only accepted as a "potential candidate country" in 2003, and only formally applied for EU membership in 2016. The nation's governing structures are widely viewed, both inside and outside the country, as dysfunctional and were blamed for blocking BiH's cultural, economic, and political Europeanization.

Interethnic tensions have remained strong just below, indeed even on, the surface of bicomunal relations. After the war, RS leaders continued to press for independence and refused to cooperate in the capture and prosecution of Serbian war criminals. Bosnian leaders, for their part, expressed frustration with RS's de-facto autonomy, leading to fears that, with the benefit of considerable international military training, they might even resort to force in an effort to consolidate their hold on the country or expand their territory at the expense of the RS. Separatist sentiment continued among Croat leaders as well, and even the federation, with its complex cantonal layout, was seldom able to function as a coherent political entity.

Even as these initial concerns began to fade away in the early 2000s, their legacy remained. On top of the legacy of failed socialist development inherited from Yugoslavia, the government's divisions have constantly undermined BiH's economic development. Alongside traditional economic concerns like high inflation and unemployment, this has also perpetuated an entrenched culture of corruption, to the exasperation of EU officials and Bosnian citizens. Similarly, alongside Kosovo, Albania, and to a lesser extent other post-Yugoslav territories, Bosnia continues to maintain a prominent role in continent-wide organized crime, furthering the impression that it exists beyond the pale of Europe's cultural borders.

A deeper irony is that corruption and organized crime sometimes appear to be the only realms in which the Bosnian system seems capable of fostering vibrant interethnic cooperation. In the country's other affairs, ranging from the highest level of the central government to everyday interactions in towns and cities, cultural divisions appear to have become institutionalized. Where citizens have returned to homes in regions governed by other ethnicities, they have only done so in villages where they form a local minority. If the international community never articulated an expectation of full postwar reconciliation, the undeniable hope of a more functional form of coexistence has proved unfounded.

## THE LOGIC OF DYSFUNCTION: CONTROVERSIES AND CAUSES

Both implicitly and explicitly, the failures of post-Dayton Bosnia have been attributed to the accord itself, the political structures it created, and the international community's enforcement of it. This is fair up to a point, but it ignores the extent to which the problems that emerged from Dayton were, in a deeper sense, problems that emerged from the civil war itself. Seen in context, Dayton's failures were the result of compromises that proved necessary to make peace in the first place.<sup>99</sup> At every stage, these compromises, and the consequences they created, appeared preferable to the alternative of continued or renewed violence. Amid frequent discussions of the need to revise the Dayton framework to create something more workable, the risk that the Dayton Accords' fragile success could break down always loomed large. Without excusing the international community's mistakes, one lesson to draw from post-Dayton Bosnia is the need for realistic expectations and the need to recognize the limits of what the international community can accomplish even in the best circumstances.

The Dayton Accords came about as a result of American and European military intervention on behalf of Bosnian and Croat forces against their Serbian and Bosnian-Serb opponents.<sup>100,101</sup> This intervention came in the form of Western training and arming of Bosniak-Croat forces, as well as airstrikes against Serbian forces in Bosnia that intensified dramatically in 1995. Over the course of the Bosnian civil war, public support for intervention had increased in both Europe and the United States, but President Bill Clinton, as well as his British, French, and German counterparts, still faced considerable limits to the degree of intervention their publics would support. Thus while the threat that Western countries would extend their bombing campaign to Serbia proper, or would commit combat troops to take on Serb forces directly, played a role in bringing Serbian leaders to the table, this was also a threat that Western leaders were eager to avoid having to make good on.

The result is that when negotiations began, the Serbs were under heavy pressure to reach an accommodation, but they were not without bargaining power. The most controversial elements of the Dayton Accords emerged from the most deeply held demands of both sides in the negotiations that led up to them. Giving institutional legitimacy to the RS as a constituent part of the new Bosnian state and giving it control of almost exactly half the country's territory (49 percent) have subsequently been presented as rewarding the genocidal Serbian leadership that waged war on behalf of carving out a Serbian state from Bosnian territory. Yet to the extent both of these aspects of Dayton were a concession to Bosnian-Serb demands and ambitions, they were also the concessions the Bosnian-Serb leadership, and their backers in Belgrade, demanded in return for making peace. The RS leadership agreed to give up some of the territory they had seized in the war and agreed to forgo their ambition of independence or union with Serbia, but only up to a point. Even in the face of international pressure, they appeared willing to go back to war in order to avoid further territorial concessions, much less accepting meaningful Bosnian authority over "their" territory.

Similarly, the veto power wielded by all three constituent parts of BiH, which has bedeviled the smooth functioning of the government since Dayton, was also the result of seemingly nonnegotiable demands made by each group. Given the degree of mutual suspicion and existential fear generated by the conflict itself, neither Bosniaks, Croats, nor Serbs felt safe living in a state in which they would be subject to the power of either or both of the other groups. Not surprisingly, then, while all sides bemoan the cumulative impact of the veto system in the abstract, no one group is willing to abandon it for fear of losing the guarantee that their own veto power brings.

In contrast to critics who have blamed the failure of Dayton on the degree of decentralization and autonomy it institutionalized, another set of critics have argued that the project of trying to create a single, unified state from a war-torn population was doomed to failure and thus formal partition would have been a better approach.<sup>102</sup> According to this approach, the failure of Dayton stemmed from the international community's ideological commitment to force Bosnia's three ethnicities to live together whether they wanted to or not. Where some saw the creation of a semiautonomous RS as a concession to genocidaires, others saw the principled refusal to reward genocidaires by creating an independent Bosnian-Serb republic as the root of the problem.



The trade-offs involved in recognizing new countries will be discussed in greater detail below, specifically with reference to Kosovo, but these debates should first be contextualized. Specifically, they should begin with the recognition that an abstract commitment to the principle of not recognizing new states was far from the only concern that led the international community to create a unified Bosnia. The decision to preserve Bosnia as a single, if not unitary, state reflected concerns that its constituent parts would be too small and divided to function on their own, but also, as important, were the demands of the Bosniak leadership. The Bosnian civil war had begun with the Bosnian government's 1991 decision to declare independence in the face of a widely anticipated Serb secessionist movement. Though Bosniak forces had been on the defensive throughout the majority of the conflict, they remained committed to the goal of maintaining their sovereignty over the entire Bosnian territory. With the conflict shifting back in their favor in 1995, this commitment remained, having been if anything strengthened by the violence and Bosniak suffering of the previous four years. For this reason, any international proposal to create a formally independent Serbian state would have met with resistance first and foremost from the Bosniak leadership, and it would have created an irredentist legacy that would have poisoned relations between the emerging states.



Source: Map of former Yugoslavia, published by The Cartographic Section of the United Nations, March 2007, Wikimedia.

A look at the map also emphasizes the practical, geographic challenges that made the creation of independent states appear to be a nonstarter. Even the seeming coherence of Serbian-held territory was interrupted by the presence of majority-Bosniak cities such as Banja Luka, Tuzla, and Gorazde. Indeed, control of these cities had inspired some of the war's most intense fighting and brutal atrocities. Coming up with mutually acceptable solutions for these cities was difficult enough under the federated Dayton framework, and could have been impossible in a higher-stakes territorial division. Moreover, granting independence to Serb-held territories would have increased the demands for a similar arrangement from the Croats. And whatever territorial coherence RS came to enjoy, the situation between Croats and Bosniaks was far more complicated. The cantonal system through which it was, however imperfectly, resolved could never have been translated into international borders that would have had any plausible legal or practical future.

In other words, all of Dayton's failures as a political blueprint for BiH are the reasons for its success as a peace treaty. With multiple parties fighting for irreconcilable demands, Dayton obtained the crucial concessions from each in order to bring the fighting to an end. A different treaty might have been possible if members of the international community had been more eager to deploy their own troops in a combat role; although conversely it was only because of the international community's willingness to use military force that Dayton was possible.

## CODDLE OR COERCE: THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY'S DILEMMA

A further, and fundamental, complication emerging from the manner in which the Dayton Accords came into being was that the constituent governments of the new BiH state were all ruled by the same political figures who had led each community during the civil war.<sup>103</sup> In the case of RS, the most controversial leaders—Ratko Mladić and Radovan Karadžić—went into hiding to avoid war-crimes prosecution, but the leadership that replaced them included their former comrades in arms, men who came from their political party and worked to help shield them from international authorities. If the Bosniak and Croat leaders lacked the notoriety of their Serbian counterparts, they were still committed nationalists whose goals were often profoundly at odds with those of the international community and, indeed, the Dayton project.<sup>104</sup>

This set the stage for an antagonistic relationship between the international community, whose political representatives and military forces were responsible for implementing the Dayton Accords, and the local politicians who had just grudgingly agreed to it and were now supposed to bring the new Bosnian government into being. Set against this dynamic, the central debate surrounding the international community's role in Bosnia revolved around how heavy-handed it should be in its dealings with local politicians.

In the years immediately following the signing of the Dayton Accords in 1995, the endurance of Bosnia's fragile peace appeared distinctly uncertain. Despite the initial presence of 60,000 NATO stabilization forces troops, paramilitary forces connected with all three wartime parties remained mobilized, often blocking the return of refugees and giving their affiliated politicians the power to ignore the terms of the accords and credibly threaten their complete breakdown. In response to this, the international community not only took more robust steps to impose order in the security realm, but also acted unilaterally to enhance the powers of the OHR. In 1997, the Peace Implementation Council, a body comprising representatives of Dayton's European and American signatories and the international community, gave itself, by means of the OHR, the authority to close media outlets that were inciting violence. As a result, peacekeepers raided the headquarters of a Serbian radio broadcaster, physically shutting down transmission and forcing the resignation of the broadcaster's board.

The “surprising success” of this operation, even in the eyes of some of the OHR's subsequent critics, opened the way for more frequent exercises of power whose merits are still being debated. OHR intervention is widely credited with enabling the return of refugees. In 1999, for example, the OHR removed almost two dozen local officials who had been blocking this process, while also intervening in the country's legislative process to facilitate the return of properties to their original owners.<sup>105</sup> Yet beyond such specific interventions, the OHR's efforts to shape the country's political climate more broadly proved less effective. Promoting less nationalistic alternatives to the country's dominant political parties, for example, backfired when such parties proved unable to sustain public support but also, even when successful, failed to behave the way the international community had hoped.<sup>106</sup> The OHR's legal interventions to forcibly implement legislation also created a dangerous precedent; elected politicians often subsequently found it easier to let the international community take responsibility for enacting vital reforms rather than shoulder responsibility for unpopular legislation themselves.

As a result, by the early 2000s, opposition to the heavy-handed role of the international community began to grow.<sup>107,108</sup> In 2002, nationalist parties experienced a resurgence across Bosnia's ethnic divides, revealing frustration with the progress of postwar politics.<sup>109</sup> In 2004, the OHR removed 60 elected politicians from office, the vast majority of whom were nationalist Serbs accused of protecting wartime criminals.<sup>110</sup> Though there was little sympathy for the politicians themselves, their lack of legal recourse in the face of the OHR's unilateral decision struck many international observers as hard to reconcile with the democratic norms they were supposed to be instilling. With one prominent think tank likening the OHR to the British Raj, and even the Council of Europe suggesting its powers were “reminiscent of a totalitarian regime,” a change in international approach seemed imminent.<sup>111</sup> At the same time, a growing sense of stability, even if punctuated by continued violent incidents, allowed for a draw-down of the international military presence, which went from roughly 60,000 troops to just over 20,000. In 2003, Bosnia was named a “potential candidate country” for inclusion in the European Union. Though OHR legal intervention had been necessary to make this moment possible, to many it appeared the country's training wheels were finally coming off.

Bosnia's subsequent record, however, has generated a sense of resignation, bordering on despair, among both advocates and opponents of a strong international role. Despite moments of alarm and moments of optimism, many in Europe appear to have tacitly concluded that the country will now remain permanently stuck in a no man's land between Dayton and Brussels. If few are seriously concerned about the risk of both sides slipping back into conflict, no one imagines them coming together to form a more functional country, either. Bosnians continue to firmly reject Serbian demands



for greater independence for RS, while Serbs continue to reject demands for integrating the “republic” into the rest of the country. The result is that despite some real progress in the central government’s ability to manage the country’s economic and legal affairs, the country will struggle to escape from political stasis in the near future.

Though citizens of BiH, looking toward Brussels, have understandably seen this situation as a profound form of failure, it is particularly grim to realize that it is a far better outcome than what Syria, or many other divided countries, can realistically hope for. Among other things, Bosnia’s size and location gave international intervention and state-building projects a uniquely promising foundation. To maintain the same ratio of citizens to international peacekeeping forces in Syria, for example, would require roughly 240,000 troops, more than the maximum number deployed to Iraq at any one time. Similarly, Bosnia benefited from the fact that the regional states most likely to interfere in its development, namely Serbia and Croatia, were both eagerly aspiring to EU membership themselves. Thus, while it required military force to initially bring the Serbian government to the negotiating table, the international community was subsequently able to encourage Serbia to play a more cooperative role through less coercive methods, particularly after Slobodan Milošević’s fall from power in 2000.

Indeed, the unpalatable but potentially important conclusion is that, setting aside any number of specific mistakes, the overall outcome achieved in Bosnia might have been the best one possible.<sup>112</sup> While the decision to maintain Bosnia as a single state reflected concrete political concerns and the desires of the Bosnian leadership, the expectation that this project could succeed reflected the international community’s deeper ideological commitment to the ideals of diversity, tolerance, and multiculturalism. Whether seeing pre-war Bosnia as a historical exemplar of these ideals, or simply believing in their universal applicability, many in the international community saw unified Bosnia’s postwar success as a rebuke of the violent nationalism that characterized the war.<sup>113</sup> More broadly, a successful multiethnic state would have been a refutation of all those accounts that presented the war itself as the inevitable outgrowth of “timeless ethnic hatred.”

Yet to say as an abstract historical or ideological principle that people of diverse cultures and faiths are able to live together is not to say that they will be able to in the aftermath of a violent and prolonged conflict. If even in the most favorable regional and geopolitical circumstances the members of Bosnia’s different communities have thus far refused, or been unable, to form an integrated, centralized state, this should be treated not as the abject failure of multicultural ideals, but rather a note of caution for the international community in setting its expectations for future post-conflict situations.

## THE KOSOVO ALTERNATIVE

The war in Kosovo concluded a decade of intense ethnic conflict that began in Bosnia but was far from settled. In fact, even following international intervention in Bosnia, the fighting in Kosovo illustrated the depths of the challenge that the international community faced in finding sustainable solutions to ethnic conflict.

The Kosovo crisis had its origins in conflicts over the relationship between ethnicity and state structure that predated the breakup of Yugoslavia. The 1970 Yugoslav constitution granted increased autonomy to the territory of Kosovo, limiting the influence of Serbia in the region. Subsequently, ethnic Albanians demanded a republic of their own, prompting major protests in 1981 that were quickly crushed by the Yugoslavian government.<sup>114</sup> Tensions continued throughout the decade and eventually grew in 1989 when then-President Milošević initiated the “anti-bureaucratic revolution,” a series of constitutional amendments and reforms that drastically curtailed the autonomy of Kosovo and led to the imposition of cultural oppression on the ethnic Albanians.<sup>115</sup>

Following the consolidation of Serbian power, Albanian delegates to the Kosovo assembly voted to become an independent state. However, the vote for independence did little to change the situation, and after witnessing the result of the conflict in Bosnia, some Kosovars came to believe only an armed uprising could secure independence. In April 1996, four separate attacks were carried out against Serbian personnel by the Kosovo Liberation Army. It wasn’t until 1998, however, that the conflict escalated to the point that it received major international attention. Continued fighting and the Račak massacre in 1999 led to NATO airstrikes beginning on March 23, 1999. The airstrikes were designed to accomplish three major goals: force the removal of Yugoslav forces, allow for the thousands of Albanian refugees to reenter the country, and provide an environment to safely insert U.N. peacekeeping forces.

When Milošević subsequently accepted the terms of the international community, U.N. peacekeepers entered the territory and the U.N. Security Council adopted Resolution 1244, which placed Kosovo under transitional control by the U.N. Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK).<sup>116</sup> UNMIK then demanded the removal of all Serbian troops, the right of return for all refugees to Kosovo, and the demilitarization of the Kosovo Liberation Army and all other militant Albanian organizations. In the coming decade, the UNMIK played the primary role of mediator and arbiter in the deliberations and peace negotiations between Kosovo, Serbia, and Albania.

The UNMIK failed to achieve many of its stated objectives, which brought international criticism upon the force and led to a discussion of the effectiveness of the United Nations in resolving and governing contested states and territories. While UNMIK helped facilitate Kosovo's 2008 independence referendum and post-independence constitutional framework, it failed to mitigate the country's postwar ethnic tensions in any meaningful way. As a result, refugees, both Serbs and Albanians, still do not feel safe returning to their homes, and in response, thousands of internally displaced persons continue to require international protection and resources, draining the already fragile economic system. Corruption within the UNMIK and Kosovo exists at extreme levels, and since the introduction of the UN peacekeepers, Kosovo has become a global center for smuggling and sex trafficking.

Kosovo is now a semiautonomous, partially recognized state that, after the 2013 Brussels Agreement, divides governing authority over parts of its territory with Serbia. The 15-point plan that constitutes the agreement merged four Serbian municipalities in the northern part of the territory. Within this district, Serbia would have the authority over economic development, education, health care, and town planning. The rest of the territory is governed by the Kosovo government with the support from the United Nations. This has yet to produce a solution to the still-tense issue of border crossings and the existence of active paramilitary forces on both sides of the border.

Kosovo embodies many of the contradictions of the international community's approach to borders and state-building. Kosovo's independence from Serbia was recognized. But the Serbian community in Kosovo was left in an odd limbo. Its members were not allowed to formally split from Kosovo and rejoin Serbia. But they were also not incorporated into a federated state the way the RS was in BiH. The result is an uncomfortable compromise, one that seeks to prevent creating a precedent for Serbian irredentism (by letting the Serbian region join Serbia) but also reflects the reality of the Serbs' refusal to be incorporated into the Kosovar state. Not surprisingly, now Kosovo endures in a limbo that has seldom been fully acknowledged, much less proposed as a model for anywhere else.

# Conclusions: Synchronized Stabilization

In exploring three major approaches for stabilizing the Middle East, this paper has noted that each one proceeds from a similar diagnosis: that the presence of ethno-sectarian differences either within or across Middle Eastern states prevents them from attaining political stability. From this assumption, they each propose a mechanism for rectifying the specific identity-driven shortcoming they highlight. BPC's conclusion is that each of these three approaches contains a crucial insight about the nature of political stability, and yet each also contains important limitations. Thus, creating the conditions for stability in the Middle East requires incorporating elements from each of these approaches while also looking beyond them. Policymakers must address the factors destabilizing the region today—weak nation-states, regional conflict, and bad governance all inflaming ethno-sectarian differences—without exacerbating the forces that created them or laying the groundwork for new conflicts in the future. The risk, by contrast, is that attempting to address regional and civil conflicts by focusing on one of these factors alone risks exacerbating the others, thereby making stability even more difficult to achieve.

What the case of the Balkans reveals, by contrast, is that when facing a similar set of challenges in another ethnically and religiously diverse post-Ottoman region, the international community largely approached the challenge in a much more ad-hoc manner. Models and assumptions gave way to pragmatic compromise and desperate innovation. What appears evident is that, while the theoretical models for creating stability have important limitations, the pragmatic approaches fall far short of what is expected of them, even when they may in fact have been the best option available.

Our conclusion offers a theoretical model for balancing the three factors needed to stabilize the Middle East, coupled with guidelines for applying this model to the Middle East today by countering Iranian influence and Sunni extremism.

As highlighted in this paper, the challenges of building legitimate nation-states, creating a regional and sectarian balance of power, and providing good governance are all fundamentally interconnected. Historically, a mismatch between states and identities has been both a cause and consequence of both bad governance and regional sectarian conflict. The consequences can be seen all too clearly in Iraq and Syria today. Weak states held together by brutal authoritarian leaders created the groundwork for sectarianism, but regional geopolitical tensions also fueled the conflicts that tore these states apart, exacerbating their sectarian character and making the challenge of reconstructing and governing the region even more formidable. Reversing this process requires a simultaneous effort to achieve a bare minimum of state-identity symbiosis, regional power balance, and good governance, all without sowing the seeds for future conflicts.

The history of the Middle East over the past century shows both the malleability of identities and institutions over time but also the limits of trying to reshape them at will. National identities in countries were able to incorporate a surprising degree of diversity, but only up to a point. In the Ottoman Empire, for example, religious fissures ultimately proved insurmountable while cultural differences among the empire's Muslims were eventually subsumed, albeit imperfectly, under a shared Turkish identity. Similarly, in Syria and Iraq, new states with new borders succeeded in creating shared political identities that proved more resilient than critics sometimes imagine, just as colonial political structures, in the hands of postcolonial leaders, proved more resilient than many had hoped. At the same time, broader identities, such as Islamism and pan-Arabism, exerted an undeniable pull on citizens of the region even as they proved incapable of transforming existing political structures.

Most strikingly, sectarian divisions between Sunni and Shiite Muslims, which were not a defining feature of regional politics a century ago, have taken on an undeniable importance over the past two decades. Just as it would be a mistake to see multiethnic states as doomed to failure, it would be a mistake to see the Sunni-Shiite divide as an insurmountable 13-century-old geopolitical rift. Yet, recognizing that these fault lines are not eternal nor inevitable does not make them unimportant. Nor does it minimize the risk that they could become even more important if misguided policies exacerbate them. Ottoman rule over a religiously diverse region proved robust and resilient for centuries, and yet this history did not prevent religion from serving as the fault line on which the empire was divided. The speed with which intra-Islamic sectarian divisions spread—first emerging as a feature in the Iran-Iraq War, then becoming an internal fault line within Iraq and ultimately Syria—is, if anything, more alarming when viewed as a modern rather than age-old phenomenon.

This, in turn, highlights the paradox of federalism, as seen most dramatically in Bosnia. Once divisions, be they religious or ethnic, are hardened by violence, it is impossible to ignore them. Incorporating them into the political system then appears to be the most obvious way to address them and

resolve conflicts in the short-term. But the popularity of federal political institutions as a solution to societies riven across national, ethnic, or religious differences is a relatively recent innovation. In both theory and practice, including in the Middle East, federalism was seen as a way to manage the union between distinct but extant political entities—such as the dreams of uniting Egypt and Syria in a UAR—not to divide and weaken states.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, the attempts to implement federalism as a divisive mechanism often have the effect of reifying those divisions and ensconcing them as permanent features of political life. Expecting federalism to serve as a remedy for sectarian divisions within Syria or Iraq risks doubling down on these divisions. At worst, this would create the potential for renewed ethnic cleansing in Syria, where integrated regions remain common in government-held territory and would undermine the renewed sense of national unity in Iraq that has emerged following the defeat of ISIS.

In much the same way, expecting a regional balance of power built on sectarian tension to serve as a stabilizing force risks exacerbating these tensions. Just as the Cold War reordered conflicts across the globe along a new ideological axis, searching for a regional balance of power on purely sectarian lines risks spreading sectarian divisions to new regions, as has happened most recently in Yemen. Complicating the situation, however, is the fact that ongoing imbalance brings risks of its own, many of which are quite similar. If the United States steps back and lets the current Iran-Saudi conflict continue unabated, both sides will continue to fall back on sectarian proxies to advance their interests.

Overcoming this paradox, then, at both the local and regional level, requires an ongoing awareness of malleability and endurance of political identities, as well as the possibility that they can overlap. It requires creating a balance of power that acknowledges sectarian divisions where they exist while incorporating cross-cutting identities that reduce their salience. At a local level, it requires preserving political entities that have preexisting purchase with local populations while at the same time creating new coexisting entities that can arbitrate emerging rifts.

The resulting model might be thought of as synchronized stabilization. Its goal would be to recognize and resolve existing conflicts without reifying the institutions and identities that sustain them. Applying the idea of synchronized stabilization to U.S. policy and the Middle East today calls for lowered expectations for how much stability the United States can achieve, coupled with greater attention to the most concrete and dangerous destabilizing forces. This approach will not lead to quick or easy solutions to the Middle East's ongoing crises. But by addressing questions of borders, balance of power, and division of power in the context of the threats that the United States currently faces, Washington can begin laying the foundation for a more stable region.

## TWIN THREATS

In the Middle East today, the Iranian government and Sunni terrorists represent the two most immediate and concrete threats to U.S. interests. Iran, an aggressive, near-nuclear-threshold state actor bent on expanding its regional influence at the expense of pro-U.S. regimes, is the greater threat and the more difficult to manage. It represents a near-term threat to neighboring Sunni regimes and Israel, as well as a long-term threat to the West and the U.S. homeland. Its primary weapon is demographic—Shiite populations and other sympathizers around the region who are willing to do its bidding. Radical terrorism of the Sunni variety, however, looms larger than Iran in the popular Western imagination, thanks to its ability to provoke deep, lifestyle-altering fear. It thus represents an immediate and ongoing threat to the United States and its regional friends; Sunni extremists have proven capable of sowing violence in the United States and other Western societies and are already wreaking considerable damage in weak states of the region.

Sunni terrorism and Iranian expansionism are both symptoms and drivers of the Middle East's instability. But what makes them particularly pernicious is the relationship between the two. That Iran and its Shiite proxies have at times joined the fight against Sunni extremist groups such as ISIS disguises the extent to which both feed off each other: Iranian expansion fuels Sunni extremism, and Sunni extremism facilitates Iranian expansion. This does not necessarily mean that a victory against one foe will suddenly eliminate the threat from the other, but rather that significantly limiting the threat posed by one will be difficult without likewise curtailing the strength and prevalence of the other. Dealing with these dual threats in a synchronized manner therefore represents the best hope for checking the dangerous dynamic currently at work.

Not only have Tehran and Sunni extremists both exploited sectarian resentments and state weaknesses, but they also share another trait in common: Both are interested in fundamentally subverting and revising the U.S.-led, nation-state-based regional order that has characterized the Middle East



for the last 70 years. Moreover, while they have very different long-term goals for remaking the regional order, in the short term they both also benefit from weakening what order exists. Were the current regional order stronger, the risks of revisionism, from state or nonstate actors, would be far less severe. As it stands now, however, Tehran has both created and capitalized on regional disorder to reorient the region toward a new, Iranian-led balance of power, while radical Islamist groups have used the same tactics to advance their goal of replacing the region's current state system with an Islamic caliphate. To preserve its key interests, the United States must help rebuild an order that is capable of resisting these interrelated assaults.

Victory in the Middle East, such as it is, will come through maintaining a sustainable order capable of resisting key threats at a sustainable political, military, and financial cost. Vanquishing the twin threats of Iranian expansionism and Sunni extremism outright is an unattainable objective. The former is driven by the revolutionary, autocratic, and fundamentalist regime of the Islamic Republic, the latter springs from the ideological perversion of Islamism. Neither of these can be fundamentally defeated by the United States, yet neither of them can be allowed to grow any more powerful than they are. This in turn leads to the key challenge of synchronized stabilization.

In Iraq and Syria, both Iran and Sunni extremist groups have made dangerous gains in the past decade that will pose an unacceptable risk to U.S. interests if not confronted directly. The sectarian violence and instability spreading from these two countries today undermine the stability of the entire Middle East. This, in turn, creates a fertile ground for the proliferation of terrorist groups elsewhere and provides further opportunity for Iranian (and Russian) expansion. U.S. adversaries have recognized Iraq and Syria as the crucial theater in which to advance their regional ambitions, and so it is here that the United States and its allies will have to confront them both simultaneously.

To reverse the damage that the collapse of Iraq and Syria has done to regional stability, Washington must disrupt the destabilizing dynamic between Iran and its Sunni rivals. If the United States tries to confront either ISIS or Iran alone, it will only empower the other. As long as Iranian proxies continue to oppress Sunni populations, Sunni extremism will thrive. And as long as Sunni extremists threaten the region, Iran will find willing partners in its efforts to dominate the region. Because of the interrelated nature of the Iranian and Sunni extremist threat, Washington must fight ISIS with an awareness that its strategy for doing so will help determine Iran's role in Syria and Iraq for the foreseeable future.

Already, these conflicts have advanced Iran's longstanding desire to expand and deepen its power in two of the region's most strategically important states. By maintaining and strengthening pro-Iranian regimes in both Iraq and Syria, Iran has enhanced its strategic position enormously in ways that threaten vital U.S. interests around the region. Thus, forcefully pushing back against Iran in Syria is necessary to create a minimum regional balance in which stabilization can occur.

Tehran has used the current conflicts to nearly achieve its dream of consolidating and expanding the Islamic revolution by building a Shiite crescent stretching from its own territory to the shores of the Mediterranean. Its influence in Iraq gives it control over an important sector of the global oil market as well as over Shiite extremists that have already threatened the Saudi government. Its position in Syria also enables Iran to increase its support for Hezbollah and directly threaten Israel across the Golan Heights. Iran has already established a direct air link to its proxies in the Levant and is on the verge of establishing a land route to move matériel to them as well. Its expanded geographic reach gives it further leverage against U.S. partners, such as Jordan and Turkey, while its expanded influence across the Shiite world gives it added leverage in appealing to Shiite populations in Sunni-dominated states, like those in the Persian Gulf.

It would be naïve to allow Iran to consolidate these gains in the hopes that they could be offset by pushing back in secondary theaters like Yemen. More than any other ancillary conflicts, Iran's victories in the heart of the Middle East give it a dangerous edge in its struggle for control of the entire region. Preventing Iranian expansion into Yemen and resisting its efforts to deny U.S. forces access to the Persian Gulf remain important objectives, but they will not protect against the most important threats the United States faces. If Iran can cut off access to Iraqi oil at the source, for example, keeping the Straits of Hormuz open will be of limited value.

Thwarting Iran's ambition to upend the regional order can only be done by first blocking it from creating a chain of revolutionary Shiite-led states and militias across the Middle East's heartland. But the objective of preventing Iran from expanding or even consolidating the gains it has made in Syria and Iraq should not be confused with the attempt to eradicate Iranian influence entirely from these two countries, which have longstanding political and religious ties to Tehran. A stable Iraq and Syria are not possible so long as Iran arms Shiite proxies to massacre Sunnis. But an orderly Middle East can tolerate Iran's presence on the regional stage, so long as its influence is blunted and subdued.

## PRINCIPLES FOR PROGRESS

Moving the region toward a self-sustaining order that can contain the rising power of a regional adversary as well as restrain dangerous nonstate actors will fundamentally require bolstering the region's political entities.

It is important that the mere cessation of violence not be misconstrued as an end to conflict or the start of stability. For the United States, whether its national security interests in the Middle East are defined as maintaining a peaceful, rules-based international order or simply avoiding further military entanglements, an end to hostilities that simply perpetuates the region's pathologies and promises future violence should not be an acceptable outcome. No matter what sort of political arrangements might be proposed for Iraq and Syria, neither Iranian domination of Iraqi politics nor Assad's seemingly inevitable victory over the Syrian opposition can yield a sustainable stability.



*For the United States, whether its national security interests in the Middle East are defined as maintaining a peaceful, rules-based international order or simply avoiding further military entanglements, an end to hostilities that simply perpetuates the region's pathologies and promises future violence should not be an acceptable outcome.*

Therefore, policymakers' short-term focus must be on creating better and more inclusive governance in Iraq and Syria, at whatever level it can be found and created, while preventing the further erosion of an already unstable situation within allied states. This could take the form of applying partition, federalism, or balance-of-power solutions in different parts of the region, but it should always be guided by the objective of building political institutions on the basis of representing the interests of diverse societies, not merely institutionalizing those differences.

As Washington has painfully discovered over the past several decades, neither blind support for authoritarian leaders nor rapid democratization guarantees political stability. But what does appear to guarantee instability, the one vulnerability that both Iran and Sunni radicals have exploited to upset the regional order, is exclusive governance in divided societies. Where one group has amassed power and bestows favors principally on its own, regardless of whether it is a majority or a minority, resentment grows among those being excluded, discriminated against, or oppressed. And where this resentment gains force, Sunni radicalization and Iranian exploitation follow. Whether it is Iraqi Sunnis who rose up against their Iranian-allied government, Syria's pro-Iranian, Alawite regime that preferred to start a civil war rather than make political concessions, or Yemen's Houthis who sought Iranian support against a Western-supported but imperfect government, exclusionary rule has been the necessary condition of all of the region's conflicts.

To prevent this, Washington must promote credible and accountable, if not always democratic, forms of governance at the state and sub-state level. This can involve power-sharing arrangements between representatives of rival factions or the devolution of power to local bodies as the situation requires. In Iraq, Iraqi Kurdistan, and even Turkey, where elections belie deeply entrenched illiberal power structures, securing a basic level of power-sharing can play a crucial role in maintaining stability. Pushing Erdoğan toward negotiations with the Kurdistan Workers' Party or pushing for a resolution to the current impasse between the KDP and PUK in northern Iraq represent necessary steps toward rebuilding functioning political institutions that can address otherwise dangerous fissures within the region.

Policymakers must couple any promotion of power-sharing with an awareness that in some cases it might prove impossible within the region's current cartography. In these situations, the U.S. government should no longer regard questioning of national borders as a strict taboo.

Syria will not again be a unitary nation-state for a long time to come, if ever, while Iraq has already had elements of federalism injected into its governing arrangements. Reflexively maintaining the legal fiction that these states remain completely sovereign may prevent rebuilding a more robust order. As in the former Yugoslavia, Washington should be open to the possibility that in some cases, preexisting states cannot be put back together, and communities that have endured excessive violence at one another's hands may coexist better in separate political units. This recognition could lead to support for formally changing borders, or alternatively for promoting federalist structures or securing international support for temporary or permanent enclaves within existing states.



At the same time, proposed changes in national borders should not be approached lightly or treated as a panacea. Any attempt to redraw boundaries to account for ethnic, sectarian, or other communal differences ought to be subjected to extremely tough standards to ensure that the changes will contribute to greater peace and stability as opposed to revanchism and violence. Bosnia provides a dramatic example of how, when taken precipitously, the recognition of a new state can provoke a violent reaction from those who do not want to be a part of it. Policymakers must also avoid the risks of romanticizing the idea of national self-determination or ignoring its ability to produce infinitely regressive claims by newly empowered sub-groups and factions.

Most importantly, American policymakers should ensure that any changes come in response to the demands of the concerned populations. Borders imposed from the outside will generate resentment even when drawn with the best of intentions. To the extent it is feasible, boundary changes should be made with the agreement of all existing political entities involved and should be preceded by robust negotiations between them.

The battle against Sunni extremism must also be fought and won in Iraq and Syria—specifically in the wide swath of territory between them where 20 million Sunnis currently live without any foreseeable prospects for coherent self-rule. As long as this population suffers from continued persecution, taking back all of ISIS's territory will not address the structural drivers of Sunni radicalization. Without a sustainable political solution for governing the Sunnis living between Damascus and Baghdad, ISIS will inevitably be followed by a successor that will capitalize on the same opportunities and grievances. And, as hard as it is to imagine, ISIS 2.0 could be even worse. This, in turn, requires creating a minimum level of good governance, with both a regional- and state-level component.

This reality should shape the manner in which the United States plans for a post-ISIS future. Any approach that hands over or even gives Tehran a say in what ultimately happens to currently ISIS-held territory will end badly. If the United States were to completely withdraw from Syria, Iran would quickly seek to expand and take over—by force or negotiation—the territory taken from ISIS by the Syrian Democratic Forces. Were Iran to succeed, this would drive further Sunni resentment and lay the groundwork for ISIS's next incarnation.

To prevent the renewed threat of post-ISIS terrorism and to prevent Iran from further expanding its control over Iraqi and Syrian territory, Washington must find and support sustainable solutions for governing the region's predominantly Sunni territories. After successfully liberating Mosul and Raqqa, Washington's long-term plans for rebuilding the region remain dangerously uncertain. Ultimately, Washington will have to help craft some form of local Sunni-Arab governance that can replace ISIS in both of these regions without alienating either Baghdad or Damascus. To this end, the United States will have to remain on the ground in Syria and Iraq in a diplomatic and military capacity after defeating ISIS in order to rebuild, maintain the anti-ISIS coalition, and engage with Moscow, Tehran, and Damascus.

## A REGION REMADE?

A policy of synchronized stabilization does not call for radical changes, whether it is rapid rebalancing or remaking states. Rather it calls for a series of sustainable and sustained interventions aimed at forestalling the most serious threats to regional stability and preventing the emergence of new ones. If implemented systematically and effectively, what might the recommendations laid out in this paper mean for the region?

In Syria, it would mean using U.S. leverage to negotiate an end to hostilities in which Assad maintained control over much of the country—all while remaining cognizant that the region northeast of the Euphrates gained a measure of autonomy under the Syrian Democratic Forces and that the regions of Idlib, Afrin, and Jarablus secured a similar measure of autonomy but under the rule of Turkish-backed Sunni forces. New Syrian-Russian-Iranian assaults on Sunni-dominated enclaves could set the stage for renewed cycles of Shiite repression and Sunni revolt. However dangerous the radical elements of the Syrian-Sunni opposition might be, the forceful subjugation of the areas they inhabit by Iranian-backed forces is the most counterproductive way to defuse the threat.

Whatever battle lines a peace is negotiated around, however, the final disposition of Syrian territory—partition or reintegration—should not be predetermined. The departure of Assad, the creation of new Syrian political entities, and the withdrawal of Iranian regular and proxy forces could pave the way for the restoration of a territorially integral Syria. Absent that, given the threat that Iranian domination of the entirety of Syria poses to the region and to the United States, the international community should seek to build inclusive institutions and strong security partners in eastern and

northern Syria as an antidote to Iranian aggression.

In Iraq, this approach would have the United States work to rebuild a functioning relationship between Erbil and Baghdad. This would entail securing the autonomy the Kurdistan Regional Government had won before its ill-fated referendum while also capitalizing on the Iraqi nationalist consensus that emerged in response to it. Recognizing that Iran's continued influence in Baghdad is inescapable, the United States can still use a continued military, diplomatic, and economic influence in the country to bolster the forces that seek to balance Iran.

In a best-case scenario, by preventing Iran's complete takeover of Iraq and Syria, Washington would provide the minimal level of regional balance necessary to check the spread of the Sunni-Shiite conflict around the region and would contain the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran in the Persian Gulf. At the same time, within Iraq and Syria themselves, this approach would use a piecemeal approach to governance that would take advantage of some elements of federalism without reifying them through permanent systems or border changes. Where federalism has proved relatively workable, as in the case of the Kurdistan Regional Government, these gains would be preserved. In Syria, however, decentralized governance would serve as a temporary measure, both to prevent destabilizing abuses by the Assad regime and to maintain leverage against Damascus and its backers—leverage that could ultimately be used to reintegrate the country on more suitable terms in the future.

Taking Raqqa did not suffice to eradicate the threat of terrorism, just as imposing sanctions on Iran will not diffuse the danger that it poses to U.S. interests in the region. Synchronized stabilization requires acting against these twin threats by checking the unbalanced rise of Iranian power and by preventing the crisis of governance that helped engender ISIS. Doing both simultaneously will leave both Iraq and Syria in an uncertain state that does not coincide with the conceptual neatness of federal models or an idealized nation-state. And yet, given the limits of Washington's resources and political will, the complexity of the region's problems, and, above all, the contradictions of these models themselves, such a solution might be the best one available.



# Endnotes

- 1 Kyle Rempfer and Todd Smith. "The White House Has Revealed Massive Mission Creep in Syria. Here's Why." *Military Times*. September 25, 2018. Available at: <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-air-force/2018/09/25/the-white-house-just-revealed-massive-mission-creep-in-syria-heres-why/>.
- 2 Martin Chulov. "Iraqi Kurdistan President: Time Has Come to Redraw Middle East Boundaries." *The Guardian*. January 22, 2016. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/22/kurdish-independence-closer-than-ever-says-massoud-barzani>.
- 3 Roy Gutman. "Iraqi Kurdish Leader Calls for Redrawing Regional Borders—And Attacks Fellow Kurds." *The Nation*. May 18, 2016. Available at: <https://www.thenation.com/article/iraqi-kurdish-leader-calls-for-redrawing-regional-borders-and-attacks-fellow-kurds/>.
- 4 Tim Arango. "With Iraq Mired in Turmoil, Some Call for Partitioning the Country." *The New York Times*. April 28, 2016. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/29/world/middleeast/with-iraq-mired-in-turmoil-some-call-for-partitioning-the-country.html>.
- 5 John R. Bolton. "To Defeat ISIS, Create a Sunni State." *The New York Times*. November 24, 2015. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/25/opinion/john-bolton-to-defeat-isis-create-a-sunni-state.html>.
- 6 Bret Stephens. "The Only Syrian Solution." *The Wall Street Journal*. September 5, 2016. Available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-only-syrian-solution-1473116696>.
- 7 James Stavridis. "It's Time to Seriously Consider Partitioning Syria." *Foreign Policy*. March 9, 2016. Available at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/09/its-time-to-seriously-consider-partitioning-syria/>.
- 8 For a comprehensive survey of this process, see: Bernard Lewis. *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
- 9 See also: M. Sukru Hanioglu. *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).
- 10 On the historiographical debate surrounding it, see: Cemal Kafadar. "The Question of Ottoman Decline." *Harvard Middle Eastern and Islamic Review*. 4 (1997-8): 30-75.
- 11 Virginia Aksan. *Ottoman Wars, 1700-1870: An Empire Besieged* (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2007).
- 12 On Ottoman institutions and governance before the 19th century, as well as their subsequent transformation, see: Virginia Aksan and Daniel Goffman, eds. *The Early Modern Ottomans: Remapping the Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- 13 See also: Cemal Kafadar. *Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1996).
- 14 See also: Halil İnalçık and Donald Quataert, eds. *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, 1300-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
- 15 In many cases, 19th-century Balkan nationalist movements emerged in opposition not only to the sultan and the local Ottoman-Muslim pashas, but also to traditional Christian political and religious leaders who were a part of the Ottoman system of administration. When the Greek war for independence broke out in 1821, for example, the Orthodox patriarch opposed it. Similarly, in Mount Lebanon, the systematic outbreak of Christian-Muslim violence only occurred after the ties between the region's dominant Maronite family and the central government were severed by the invasion of Mehmet Ali.
- 16 Halil İnalçık. "Application of the Tanzimat and its Social Effects." *Archivum Ottomanicum*. 5: 97-128, 1973.
- 17 Rudolf Peters. "Religious Attitudes Towards Modernization in the Ottoman Empire." *Die Welt des Islams*. Band XXVI, 1986.
- 18 Selim Deringil. *The Well Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire, 1876-1909* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).
- 19 Kemal H. Karpat. *The Politicization of Islam: Reconstructing Identity, State, Faith, and Community in the Late Ottoman State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- 20 The Ottoman Empire claimed the title of caliph from 1517 onward after conquering Mamluke, Egypt, whose leader's own claim to caliphal authority, based on a distant descendant in the Abbasid dynasty, was itself somewhat spurious and seldom-emphasized. By way of comparison, the Ottoman Empire also claimed, and used, the title of "Caesar" after the conquest of Constantinople in 1453.
- 21 The typology between these three forms of identity was most famously laid out by Yusuf Akcura in his *üç tarz-ı siyase*. See: Yusuf Akcura. *üç tarz-ı siyase* (Ankara: Turk Tarih Kurumu Basimevi, 1974).
- 22 Feroz Ahmad. *The Young Turks: The Committee of Union and Progress in Turkish Politics, 1908-1914* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

- 23 Though a specific program of Ottoman federalism, either ethnically or geographically defined, was never proposed the way it was in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in the late-19th and early 20th centuries, the demands of many ethnic and religious minorities were not for complete independence, but rather more local self-government under Ottoman authority. Krikor Odian, for example, an Armenian who helped draft the first Ottoman constitution in 1876, also drafted the Armenian National Constitution, designed to formalize the status of the empire's Armenians and create an Armenian National Assembly as well. Subsequently, several leading Ottoman Albanian statesmen asked for the empire's three predominantly Albanian provinces to be recognized by Istanbul as constituting a distinctly Albanian semiautonomous region. Similarly, in the early part of the 20th century, some Arab nationalists made demands for increased autonomy in the Levant, which they believed would enable them to better advance their community's cultural development while still remaining under the ultimate authority of Istanbul.
- 24 Hasan Kayali. *Arabs and Young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism, and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908-1918* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1997).
- 25 For a comparative look at the fate of multiethnic empires during at the end of World War I, as well as the historiographical debate surrounding this process, see: Aviel Roshwald. *Ethnic Nationalism and the Fall of Empires: Central Europe, Russia and the Middle East, 1914-1923* (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2000).
- 26 Michael Provence. *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
- 27 Francine Hirsch. *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).
- 28 Sara Pursley. "'Lines Drawn on an Empty Map': Iraq's Borders and the Legend of the Artificial State (Part 1)." *Jadaliyya*. June 2, 2015. Available at: <http://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/32140/%60Lines-Drawn-on-an-Empty-Map%60-Iraq%E2%80%99s-Borders-and-the-Legend-of-the-Artificial-State-Part-1>.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Michael Provence. *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
- 31 As well as an autonomous zone in the former Ottoman province of Alexandretta, in which Turkish citizens would have separate rights, although this was at the behest of the Turkish government, which saw it as a prelude to eventual annexation.
- 32 Michael Provence. *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005).
- 33 Andrew Patrick. *America's Forgotten Middle East Initiative: The King-Crane Commission of 1919* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015).
- 34 H.C. King and C.R. Crane. *The King-Crane Commission Report*. The World War I Document Archive. August 1919. Available at: [http://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/The\\_King-Crane\\_Report](http://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/The_King-Crane_Report).
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Ugur Umit Ungor. *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- 37 The exchange was, with negotiated exceptions for Muslims living in Western Thrace and Christians living in Istanbul, mandatory. As has often been noted, many of the Orthodox Christians living in the Anatolian region of Karaman spoke Turkish, not Greek, just as many Muslims in Crete spoke Greek rather than Turkish. Thus, while the exchange was rhetorically presented as a homecoming, many participants felt a sense of alienation—and faced discrimination—in their new homes.
- 38 Umut Ozsu. *Formalizing Displacement: International Law and Population Transfers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
- 39 Fuat Dundar. *Modern Türkiye'nin Şifresi: İttihat ve Terakki'nin Etnisite Muhendisligi (1913-1918)* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayıncılık, 2008).
- 40 Ugur Umit Ungor. *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- 41 Michael J. Koplow. "Jewish State Should Not Mean Exclusively Jewish." *International Policy Digest*. May 11, 2017. Available at: <https://intpolicydigest.org/2017/05/11/jewish-state-should-not-mean-exclusively-jewish/>.
- 42 For an overview of this period, see: James L. Gelvin. *The Modern Middle East: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
- 43 James L. Gelvin. *Divided Loyalties: Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of Empire* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1999).
- 44 Steven Heydemann. *Authoritarianism in Syria: Institutions and Social Conflict, 1946-1970*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999.
- 45 Toby Dodge. *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).
- 46 Charles Tripp. *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 3rd ed., 2007).
- 47 It is often noted that the Middle East's monarchies appear significantly more stable than its republics. As Scott Anderson writes, countries like Libya, Iraq, and Syria, where new regimes have "supplanted the traditional organizing principle of society" proved "especially vulnerable when the storms of change descended." But of course Libya and Iraq, along with Iran, Egypt, and Turkey, were all monarchies as well, at least until the storms of change descended on them. It might be more accurate to say that the only countries in the region that remain monarchies are those that up until now have been blessed with unusual stability.



- 48 James Jankowski. *Nasser's Egypt, Arab Nationalism, and the United Arab Republic* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2001).
- 49 On the foreign policy implications, see Salim Yaqub. *Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).
- 50 Cemil Aydin. *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).
- 51 Nick Danforth. "The Myth of the Caliphate: The Political History of an Idea." *Foreign Affairs*. November 19, 2014. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2014-11-19/myth-caliphate>.
- 52 Jeffrey Goldberg. "The Obama Doctrine: The U.S. president talks through his hardest decisions about America's role in the world." *The Atlantic*. April 2016. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.
- 53 David Remnick. "Going the Distance: On and off the road with Barack Obama." *The New Yorker*. January 27, 2014. Available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/27/going-the-distance-david-remnick>.
- 54 Mark Lynch. "Obama and the Middle East: Rightsizing the U.S. Role." *Foreign Affairs*. September-October, 2015. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/obama-and-middle-east>.
- 55 On the "notoriously slippery, murky, and protean" nature of the term "balance of power," see: Randall L. Schweller. "The Balance of Power in World Politics." In: *Oxford Research Encyclopedia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
- 56 For further reading, see: Michael Sheehan. *The Balance of Power: History and Theory* (London: Routledge, 1995).
- 57 See also: T.V. Paul, Michel Fortman, and James J. Wirtz. *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).
- 58 Henry Kissinger. *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace, 1812-22* (Brattleboro: Echo Points Books & Media, 2013).
- 59 George Kennan. *The Decline of Bismarck's European Order: Franco-Russian Relations, 1875-1890* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).
- 60 For an overview of how the rise of social Darwinism shaped European thinking in this period, see: Winfried Baumgart. *Imperialism: The Idea and Reality of British and French Colonial Expansion, 1880-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).
- 61 On its manifestations in European diplomacy, see: L.C.F. Turner. *Origins of the First World War* (New York: Norton, 1970).
- 62 Finally, for a particularly striking example of how these trends came violently together in the thinking of Ottoman statesmen at the outbreak of World War I, see: Mustafa Aksakal. *The Ottoman Road to War in 1914: The Ottoman Empire and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
- 63 Melvyn P. Leffler. *The Specter of Communism: The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1917-1953* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994).
- 64 Odd Arne Westad. *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- 65 Daniel Peterson. "Zaydiyya." In: *Oxford Bibliographies in Islamic Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Available at: <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195390155/obo-9780195390155-0153.xml>.
- 66 Otto Pflanze. *Bismarck and the Development of Germany. Volume 1, The Period of Unification, 1815-1871* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).
- 67 Robert J. Young. *France and the Origins of the Second World War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996).
- 68 Barack Obama. "Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony." The White House, Office of the Press Secretary. May 28, 2014. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/28/remarks-president-united-states-military-academy-commencement-ceremony>.
- 69 Gardiner Harris. "Deeper Mideast Aspirations Seen in Nuclear Deal with Iran." *The New York Times*. July 31, 2015. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/01/world/middleeast/deeper-mideast-aspirations-seen-in-nuclear-deal-with-iran.html>.
- 70 David Samuels. "The Aspiring Novelist Who Became Obama's Foreign-Policy Guru: How Ben Rhodes rewrote the rules of diplomacy for the digital age." *The New York Times Magazine*. May 5, 2016. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/08/magazine/the-aspiring-novelist-who-became-obamas-foreign-policy-guru.html>.
- 71 Uri Friedman. "What's the Saudi-Iran Feud Really About? The Sunni-Shiite divide doesn't explain it, according to one expert." *The Atlantic*. January 7, 2016. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/01/iran-saudi-sunni-shiite/422808/>.
- 72 Ian Fisher. "In Rise of ISIS, No Single Missed Key but Many Strands of Blame." *The New York Times*. November 18, 2015. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/19/world/middleeast/in-rise-of-isis-no-single-missed-key-but-many-strands-of-blame.html>.

- 73 *Al Jazeera*. “UN envoy Staffan de Mistura: ‘No plan B for Syria.’” March 12, 2106.  
Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/talktojazazeera/2016/03/envoy-staffan-de-mistura-plan-syria-160311091351758.html>.
- 74 Sirwan Kajjo. “Should Syria Decentralize?” *The National Interest*. August 13, 2013.  
Available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/commentary/should-syria-decentralize-8875>.
- 75 Michael E. O’Hanlon. “Deconstructing Syria: Towards a regionalized strategy for a confederal country.” Brookings Institution Paper. June 23, 2015.  
Available at: <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2015/06/23-syria-strategy-ohanlon>.
- 76 Michael Meyer-Resende. “Why Talk of Federalism Won’t Help Peace in Syria.” *Foreign Policy*. March 18, 2016.  
Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/18/why-talk-of-federalism-wont-help-peace-in-syria-assad/>.
- 77 Simon C. Smith. “Failure and Success in State Formation: British policy towards the Federation of South Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.” *Middle Eastern Studies*. 53(1): 84-97, November 22, 2016.
- 78 *Ibid.*
- 79 Monte Palmer. “The United Arab Republic: An Assessment of Its Failure.” *Middle East Journal*. 20(1): 50-67, 1966.
- 80 *Ibid.*
- 81 As quoted in: Simon C. Smith. “Failure and Success in State Formation: British policy towards the Federation of South Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.” *Middle Eastern Studies*. 53(1): 84-97, November 22, 2016.
- 82 Monte Palmer. “The United Arab Republic: An Assessment of Its Failure.” *Middle East Journal*. 20(1): 50-67, 1966.
- 83 Simon C. Smith. “Failure and Success in State Formation: British policy towards the Federation of South Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.” *Middle Eastern Studies*. 53(1): 84-97, November 22, 2016.
- 84 Eberhard Kienle. “Arab Unity Schemes Revisited: Interest, Identity, and Policy in Syria and Egypt.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. 27(1): 53-71, 1995.
- 85 Corri Zoli. “The Strategic Roots of Arab Federalism and Its Failure: Transnational Sovereign Power Issues, Military Rule, and Arab Identity.” In: *Defunct Federalisms: Critical Perspectives on Federal Failure* (London: Routledge, 2012).
- 86 Reeva S. Simon. “The Hashemite ‘Conspiracy’: Hashemite Unity Attempts, 1921-1958.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. 5(3): 314-327, June 1974.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743800034966>.
- 87 James Madison, Federalist No. 10, in *The Federalist Papers* (New York: A Mentor Book published by the New American Library, Inc., second printing, 1962), 79.
- 88 *Ibid.*, 83.
- 89 *Ibid.*, 83.
- 90 *Ibid.*, 82.
- 91 *Ibid.*, 83.
- 92 For example, see: Sumantra Bose. *Bosnia after Dayton: Nationalist Partition and International Intervention* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- 93 David Chandler. *Bosnia: Faking Democracy After Dayton* (London: Pluto Press, 2000).
- 94 “The General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina.” 1995. Available at: <https://www.osce.org/bih/126173?download=true>.
- 95 Dayton Peace Agreement. Annex 4: Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina. University of Minnesota, Human Rights Library. 1995.  
Available at: <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/icty/dayton/daytonannex4.html>.
- 96 Don Hays and Jason Crosby. “From Dayton to Brussels: Constitutional Preparations for Bosnia’s EU Accession.” United States Institute of Peace. October 1, 2006.  
Available at: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2006/10/dayton-brussels-constitutional-preparations-bosnias-eu-accession>.
- 97 Gülnur Aybet and Florian Bieber. “From Dayton to Brussels: The Impact of EU and NATO Conditionality on State Building in Bosnia & Hercegovina.” *Europe-Asia Studies*. 63(10): 1911-1937, December 2011.
- 98 Tim Judah. “From Dayton To Brussels.” *World Today*. November 1, 2005. Available at: [https://www.esiweb.org/pdf/esi\\_europeanraj\\_reactions\\_id\\_43.pdf](https://www.esiweb.org/pdf/esi_europeanraj_reactions_id_43.pdf).
- 99 Laura Silber and Allan Little. *Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation* (London: Penguin Books, 1997).



- <sup>100</sup> For an overview of the factors driving and limiting international intervention in Bosnia, as well as the negotiation of the Dayton accords, see: David Halberstam. *War in a Time of Peace: Bush, Clinton, and the Generals* (New York: Scribner, 2002).
- <sup>101</sup> Richard Holbrooke. *To End a War: The Conflict in Yugoslavia—America's Inside Story—Negotiating with Milosevic* (New York: Modern Library, 1999).
- <sup>102</sup> For a summary of the first view, if not necessarily a defense of a second, see: Robert M. Hayden. "'Democracy' without a Demos? The Bosnian Constitutional Experiment and the Intentional Construction of Nonfunctioning States." *East European Politics and Societies*. 19(2): 225-259, 2005.
- <sup>103</sup> Roberto Belloni. "Peacebuilding and Consociational Electoral Engineering in Bosnia and Herzegovina." *International Peacekeeping*. 11(334), 2004.
- <sup>104</sup> Gojko Vuckovic. "Promoting Peace and Democracy in the Aftermath of the Balkan Wars: Comparative Assessment of the Democratization and Institutional Building Processes in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Fr Yugoslavia." *World Affairs*. 162(1): 3-11, 1999.
- <sup>105</sup> Lilla Balazs. "Bosnia and Herzegovina: 'Transition Times Two.'" *L'Europe en Formation*. March 2008.  
Available at: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-l-europe-en-formation-2008-3-page-99.htm#no53>.
- <sup>106</sup> Carrie Manning. "Elections and Political Change in Post-War Bosnia and Herzegovina." *Democratization*. 11(60), 2004.
- <sup>107</sup> Ted Carpenter. "Jackboot Nation Building: The West Brings 'Democracy' to Bosnia." *Mediterranean Quarterly*. 11(2): 1-22, 2000.
- <sup>108</sup> Roberto Belloni. "Bosnia: The Limits of Neocolonial Rule." Belfer Center. August 5, 2004.  
Available at: <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/bosnia-limits-neocolonial-rule>.
- <sup>109</sup> Paddy Ashdown. "What I Learned in Bosnia." *The New York Times*. October 28, 2002.  
Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/10/28/opinion/what-i-learned-in-bosnia.html>.
- <sup>110</sup> Office of the High Representative Sarajevo. "List of Removed and Conditionally Removed Officials by the High Representative." June 30, 2004.  
Available at: <http://www.ohr.int/?p=45623>.
- <sup>111</sup> Gerald Knaus and Felix Martin. "Travails of the European Raj: Lessons from Bosnia and Herzegovina." European Stability Initiative. July 3, 2003.
- <sup>112</sup> Sumantra Bose. "The Bosnian State a decade after Dayton." *International Peacekeeping*. 12(322), 2005.
- <sup>113</sup> Robert M. Hayden. "'Democracy' without a Demos? The Bosnian Constitutional Experiment and the Intentional Construction of Nonfunctioning States." *East European Politics and Societies*. 19(2): 225-259, 2005.
- <sup>114</sup> *Constitutionnet*. "Constitutional History of Kosovo." Available at: <http://www.constitutionnet.org/country/constitutional-history-kosovo>.
- <sup>115</sup> Stephen Engelberg. "Carving out a Greater Serbia." *The New York Times Magazine*. September 1, 1991.  
Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/09/01/magazine/carving-out-a-greater-serbia.html>.
- <sup>116</sup> U.N. Security Council Resolution 1244. Available at: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N99/172/89/PDF/N9917289.pdf?OpenElement>.

# Notes





## BIPARTISAN POLICY CENTER

The Bipartisan Policy Center is a non-profit organization that combines the best ideas from both parties to promote health, security, and opportunity for all Americans. BPC drives principled and politically viable policy solutions through the power of rigorous analysis, painstaking negotiation, and aggressive advocacy.

**[bipartisanpolicy.org](http://bipartisanpolicy.org) | 202-204-2400**  
**1225 Eye Street NW, Suite 1000**  
**Washington, D.C. 20005**

 [@BPC\\_Bipartisan](https://twitter.com/BPC_Bipartisan)  
 [facebook.com/BipartisanPolicyCenter](https://facebook.com/BipartisanPolicyCenter)  
 [instagram.com/BPC\\_Bipartisan](https://instagram.com/BPC_Bipartisan)

## BPC POLICY AREAS

**Economy**

**Education**

**Energy**

**Evidence**

**Finance**

**Governance**

**Health**

**Housing**

**Immigration**

**Infrastructure**

**National Security**



**BIPARTISAN POLICY CENTER**

---

1225 Eye Street NW, Suite 1000 | Washington, D.C. 20005  
202-204-2400 | [bipartisanpolicy.org](http://bipartisanpolicy.org)