The Legacy of Colonialism in the Middle East: Reshaping Syria's National Boundaries

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Syrian Apportionment

In almost any field, a process or tool ideal a century ago may not be the best available today. Across much of the world, current state borders were drawn during the early twentieth century. While these borders generally remained fairly stationary, history shows that changing borders were not uncommon as different states sought to expand their respective territories. The Middle East, site of some of the earliest and most successful early civilizations, has been plagued by its own geography. Conquering warlords traveling from Europe to Asia and vice versa traversed this open landscape. The flow of human traffic laid down layers of culture and identities like layers of soil stacked atop one another. At different points, various deposits, thriving cultural centers with their own unique qualities, would remain. Perhaps Kaplan describes the region best (258):

> The Greater Middle East is an easily definable zone existing between Greece, China, and India, distinctly separate from all three, even as it has had pivotal influence on each of them, so that the relationships are extremely organic; and that whereas the Greater Middle East is united by Islam and the legacies of horse and camel nomadism – as opposed to the crop agriculture of China and India – it is also deeply divided by rivers, oases, and highlands, with great ramifications for political organization to this day.

A region that had been the jewel of empires since Achaemenid times proved difficult to tame. Only once the Ottoman Empire fell at the end of World War One (WWI) did Europeans look to the Treaty of Versailles as a means to establish a state system in the hopes of creating a more stable, long-term environment.

Policy-makers in Europe sought to establish states, like Syria, based upon natural geographic borders, ethnic and resource considerations, and key regional stakeholders' political whims. "It was the aggregate outcome of intense pushing shoving by a multitude of regional and international bidders for the Ottoman war spoils" (Karsh 195). In practice, many post-colonial states were compilations of various ethnic groups with little historical engagement and cooperation. The result has been the emergence of volatile political systems featuring both intra and interstate conflict. It is therefore reasonable to expect that as new considerations emerge, alterations to the existing framework in the region should be on the table. In the case of Syria, a four state solution must be discussed in light of the growing cultural divides being wrought on the state by a protracted and violent civil war.

Current State of the Civil War

A series of peaceful political demonstrations has devolved into a bloody, multi-faceted civil war. Since the establishment of present-day Syria's borders, the nation has always maintained a tenuous balance among various unique ethnic groups. For the last forty years, a ruthless authoritative regime has controlled the Sunni Arabs, Shi'a Muslims, Alawites, Kurds, various Christian minorities. Further complicating Syria's political situation has been the regime's willingness to partner with the Shi'a minority: a domestic and regional mechanism intended to offset the Sunni Arab majority as well as the Sunni states that surround Syria. King Faisal of Saudi Arabia unintentionally epitomized the challenge the Assad family has faced when he

discussed the upcoming 1973 Yom Kippur War with President Anwar Sadat of Egypt: "'Mr. President,' he said, 'this Hafiz al-Assad is first of all a Ba'thist and second an Alawite. How can you enter with him upon war and feel secure?'" (Karsh 174). The Assad regime has always been forced to look upon Sunni Arab unrest as both an internal and external issue, so one might expect that Syria quickly became polarized as demonstrations increased. Assad's family, once having been able to manage and suppress various challenges to its right to rule, could no longer do so with the same degree of efficiency. As protests became increasingly violent, bloodletting became inevitable.

Once violence erupted, ethnic and sectarian divisions crystalized. For the most part, a diagonal line from northeast to southwest demarcated key parties. In the country's northwest half, Alawites and Shi'a Muslims controlled vast tracts of territory. In the southeast half, Sunni Arabs, Kurds, and other minority groups opposed the Al-Assad regime. Making matters worse, enclaves of various groups resided in areas surrounded by potential adversaries. Furthermore, the stratification of Syria allowed opponents of the Bashar al-Assad regime to establish their own governmental organizations and processes so that "The decision by the regime to launch a swift military and security crackdown on the opposition and the marches was based on their own assessment of the strength of the uprising" (Phares 66).

Despite Syria's territorial divisions, the opposition has been unable to rally around one leader or group. Fracturing amongst the elements fighting Assad's regime has come to plague the opposition movement thus far. The disjointed coalition divides roughly into three parties: First, exiled Syrians who fled the country previously and now wish to exert influence in the hopes of one day returning; second, domestic anti-government moderates, largely reformers, minority group leaders, and former government employees desiring a revamped Syrian government; and third, Muslim fundamentalists—many from abroad—who are fighting for a Syrian-based Islamic theocracy. Islamist forces have gained momentum with an influx of "cash and weapons . . . from Turkey and Qatar" (Phares 69). These three disparate groups represent, in broad brush, the most significant factions in the opposition today.

The problem with the dissenting parties is that diverse equities and objectives make unification nearly impossible. As a result, when it comes to strategy on the battlefield, policy in government, or objectives in negotiations, the opposition has consistently failed to mobilize in one direction. Rather, Bashar al-Assad has had the luxury of facing a decentralized enemy. "With rebels suffering setbacks as well as continued infighting, government efforts to keep up a cheery narrative have lately appeared less absurd. In recent weeks Mr. Assad's forces have regained the initiative on the most crucial of the country's multiple battlefronts, the region around the capital, Damascus" ("Back and Forth" 1). It should therefore come as no surprise that the civil war has stagnated.

Recently, the rebels' position appears to be changing. While they have shifted territorial control with respect to Assad's forces, they have done a great deal internally. Fortunately, "the mainstream rebel forces appear to have contained, or at least diminished, what had been a looming threat from the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS)" ("The Ebb and Flow" 6). The hope is that intra-rebel conflict will lead to a more unified position. Once more moderate opposition forces regain

control of the situation, they will be able to attract support both domestically and abroad. Removing Islamist forces from the anti-Assad contingent will be critical to long-term success.

Although much has been made of the disputes between opposition groups, all is not necessarily well with the government forces either. "Mr. Assad . . . lacks the manpower to extend any of his gains very far. Syria remains in effect partitioned into zones held by the government and a patchwork of opponents" ("The Ebb and Flow" 2). The regime's challenge lies in finding new ways to reduce the numerical parity on the ground. To change the numbers game in Assad's favor, the Syrian regime must move beyond domestic recruiting and conscription to find manpower via increasingly desperate and dangerous actions.

To tip the numerical scales, the Assad regime has attempted to recruit militia forces from certain ethnic groups inside Syria and from external groups. After a Syrian government military victory at Yabroud, the *Economist* described the national forces ("Back and Forth" 1):

> Crucial to the final assault . . . [were] hundreds of well-trained and -equipped fighters from Hizbullah, the Iran-backed Lebanese Shia militia. Its forces make up the bulk of an estimated 8,000 foreign Shia soldiers, including volunteers from Iraq, who now bolster Mr. Assad. A growing reliance on these fighters suggests that the government, despite its superior firepower, still lacks the men to retake and then hold the swathes of territory still in opposition hands.

The danger in relying on these militias comes down to a question of authority. Will Bashar al-Assad be able to depend on the loyalty of men armed and paid for by Iran? The Syrian army's cosmopolitan nature undoubtedly contributed to a spate of defections throughout the conflict and forced the government to use paramilitaries to augment the force. While the rebel forces are not the ideal freedom fighters the international community might want, great danger lies in what might happen in Syria if Assad wins. His reliance on Shi'a militias and the upsurge in credibility and legitimacy this dependency has given these groups threaten the government's ability to govern these men when the war ends. At the very least, Shi'a militias will have more influence in government if Assad is the victor. At the worst, these Iranian-backed forces will divide the nation once more and cause a second civil war.

Even with the opposition's divisions, in the summer of 2013 al-Assad was so concerned over their activities that he used chemical weapons against them to compel the opposition to surrender out of fear. "When the Assad regime used chemical weapons in limited attacks against opposition areas, killing up to a thousand civilians" (Phares 196), he risked everything. The attacks on his own people made Bashar al-Assad a temporary international pariah. Sadly though, the international community sought Assad's accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) instead of his deposition. Along an agreement on CWC membership, Russia and the US brokered a temporary cease fire, which actually provided the Assad regime breathing space to reorganize. Unfortunately, the situation has become deadlocked.

Politically, many of the parties involved have become bogged down in bitter negotiations. In recent months the international community has made a concerted effort to encourage dialogue among the major equities. Unfortunately, the bloodletting over the last two years has deepened previously-existing animosities. Neither side trusts the other; presumably both fear reprisals after hostilities cease. The endemic nature of the mistrust in Syria resembles that in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990's. Equally problematic is the negotiating position of the parties, particularly Assad's. "The Geneva gathering cannot drain such an ocean of suffering and wrongdoing. It is built on the premise that Mr. Assad will relinquish power through a transitional government. But why should he? He believes he is winning. He is holding his own against rebel attacks or even gaining territory" ("Desperate Times" 1). Given such hurdles, it should be no surprise that neither side views much benefit in talking at this juncture.

Perhaps comparing Syria to Afghanistan in the 1980's rather than Yugoslavia in the 1990's creates the potential for other international relations issues to drive policy in the region. "Recent diplomatic successes by Mr. Assad's allies, Russia and Iran, had lately also boosted the Syrian leader's confidence. But as Western attitudes to the Kremlin harden in the wake of events in Ukraine, Syria may seem an appealing venue for a show of Western grit" ("Back and Forth" 1). The potential for wealthy Sunni Arabs to begin funding Syrian rebels echoes Afghan history. Beyond parallels, though, the Saudis in particular are clearly quite concerned over the spread of Shi'a Persian influence regionally. "Barack Obama is due to visit Saudi Arabia in the next few weeks. The Saudis hope he may be persuaded, at long last, to give the go-ahead for a large increase of military aid to Syria's rebels, including the anti-aircraft missiles they have long pleaded for" ("Back and Forth" 1). Likely, only with major international political influences will the course of the civil war change.

Redrawing Syria's Borders

Syria has fractured beyond repair. "President Bashar Assad controls only chunks of a ravaged country now entering the fourth year of a civil war that has left 40% of its 23 million people homeless, sent 3 million abroad as refugees, and killed at least 150,000" ("Back and Forth" 1). In this environment can anyone expect reconciliation? "The rebel-held areas, covering swathes of the country, are less densely populated but encompass at least a quarter of the people" ("An Election in Syria" 4). Without international intervention, further bloodletting is liable to occur. The parties with greatest equities in the conflict must cooperate to develop a bold way forward.

Post-WWI Syria is no longer viable. Obviously the Assad family and its patrons, both domestic and foreign, will oppose redefining Syria's territorial jurisdiction. However, continuing the civil war injures the Syrians and the international community. If peace requires fundamentally restructuring modern Syria and finding Assad and his supporters a refuge that is a small price to pay to save the lives of hundreds of thousands – if not millions. The most likely scenario will be to identify a second state capable of offering Assad asylum. Given Assad's international isolation, finding a suitable home will be difficult, but North Korea might be an option, albeit an unusual one, since Assad bought "$500 million in Scud-C missiles in 1990, and has continued to collaborate with North Korea in more advanced Scud designs over the years" (Cha 229). Other individuals fleeing the country will require world-wide

political asylum to avoid the reprisals that occurred in other countries in a similar situation. The healing process can only begin once Assad and his supporters are removed from the scene and the people left behind start to rebuild.

An en masse evacuation will require cooperation from all parties involved but is possible. Creating general buy-in for granting Assad and his followers asylum elsewhere will save some of the political paralysis that plagued revolutionary Iran where "Khomeini and his retinue were convinced that only the death of the Shah would free Iran from its corrupt past" (Fisk 109). Avoiding this sort of narrow-minded vision in Syria is critical for the follow-on states to survive. Consequently, those states, and the international community, must agree that al-Assad and his supporters will not be charged with war crimes once they depart. Only by assuring the Assad family's safety can the civil war be brought to an end.

Once Bashar al-Assad is gone, follow-on states can pick up the pieces. Present-day Syria should produce four new states. First, the Alawites and various other minorities in the northwest should form their own state (hereafter referred to as "state A"). Second, the Sunni Arabs should form a new state in the central and eastern portions of what was once Syria ("state B"). Third, the Christians and other minorities in the extreme south should form their own state ("state C"). Fourth, in the northeast corner the Kurds should form a state ("state D"). These four states can be self-sufficient entities, far more capable of addressing the concerns of their people than Syria ever could.

Northwestern State

The Assad regime has in many ways tarnished the reputation of their Alawi kin. "The Alawis, a mountain people whose history and temperament and doctrine are at great variance with Shiism, were the product to the military seizure of power in Syria in the 1960s. Their sons had gone into military because they were poor and without opportunities. In a country of traders and family firms, the gates were shut before the Alawis" (Ajami 40). Historically, these people were not bent on the dominion of others—an important context. The newly founded state A would function as a cosmopolitan entity with valuable access to the Mediterranean. While it would lack the east-west depth of most states, it would hold a critical monopoly over access to the Sea. Equally important, while the Alawi would likely hold a majority, the political dynamics of the region would be far different than what exists today. Groups like the Levantines and the Druze would have greater representation because their populations would comprise a greater percentage of the whole. More importantly for the Alawi, the sort of pressures that once brought the Alawi community together would erode and lead to a more diverse electorate. This, in effect, would create greater trade space for the ethnic minorities. From a political standpoint, state A in today's northwestern Syria would be far more pluralistic than now.

In regard to foreign policy, state A would resemble Lebanon as it would not be a traditional Arabic Muslim state. Rather, it would look much more like a cosmopolitan enclave with similar access to the Mediterranean. "In Beirut, members of Lebanon's eighteen recognized sects work and often live cheek to jowl" (Norton 52). The same sort of harmonious relationship is attainable in this proposed state. For security, the Alawi could potentially leverage their historical ties to both Iran and

Russia. However the community could reorient itself towards Europe to avoid some of the endemic conflicts between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. With that shift, state A could actively seek cooperative engagements with Lebanon, Turkey, Egypt, and others in the region to further steer clear of ongoing tensions to its east. Fortunately, without the specter of an authoritarian regime hanging over it, the more pluralistic democracy state A could actively seek improved ties with European partners that share the Mediterranean. Given its geographical position, state A in what once was Syria's northwest would have an opportunity to reshape its foreign policy and engage with partners that Damascus could not.

The newly proposed state would also be an economic boon. In the short term, the decrease in violence would allow the fledgling government breathing space to leverage ports at both Latakia and Tartus. Access to the Mediterranean has the potential to make the new state a regional hub for trade. "[D]ata shows that most of Turkey's trade has been done with the European Union (EU). Especially, this amount reaches to 48% in 2008, to 46% in 2009, and to 46.3% in 2010" (Ertekin 38); with similar assets, state A has the potential, particularly given political instability in Turkey and Russia, to cut into some of that Eurasian trade. Without having the same concerns over Sunni Arab prosperity and political strength, the Alawis could work with the other domestic ethnic groups to form a more vibrant economy for the betterment of all. Over the long term, the government could invest that trade revenue in both human and physical capital. Focusing on these areas would have a duplicative effect and do wonders to improving the new state's long-term economic prospects. Without the same authoritarian constraints or the civil war, what was once northwestern Syria would have a far better chance at economic prosperity.

Central and Eastern State

Sunni Arabs in Syria need to attain political representation. For forty years, the Assad family endgame has always been "Alawi hegemony at the expense of the Sunni majority" (Hussein 55) whatever the costs. Now apportioning today's Syria offers that opportunity for change. In practice, carving state B out of the central and eastern portions of the nation will make it the largest of the follow-on nations. With Damascus potentially assuming the mantle of the capital, the new government will be responsible for conducting a peaceful transition. The most important elements of this new state's emergence will be ensuring political representation of ethnic minorities such as the Druze and Armenians and, in turn, gaining the legitimacy of not only its Sunni Arab neighbors but also the international community, particularly Europe and the United States. At the end of the day, the new state coalescing in central and eastern Syria will be judged by its treatment of minority groups as it comes out of the Syrian civil war.

The Saudis in particular would greatly benefit from state B formed in central and eastern Syria. "The kingdom has been unable to match the determination, diplomatic skill or even financial investment that Iran has wielded to bolster its proxies in [Syria]" ("No Satisfaction" 8). Yet, Riyadh may back its way into an opportunity. As a predominately Sunni Arab nation, state B would more than likely orientate itself toward the Arabian Peninsula—a strategic shift in the region as a state centered in Damascus, albeit a watered-down one, would refocus from Tehran to Riyadh. In the broader international context, this new state should work with the Arab and European

communities as well as the US to develop its credibility abroad. Demonstrating both capability and responsibility through engagement will be vital in attracting overseas development assistance (ODA) to help rebuild after the civil war and message multinational corporations (MNC) that foreign direct investment (FDI) in the young state is a safe bet. As state B forms in the heart of what was once Syria, it must align itself with both the east and west in an effort to demonstrate its understanding of both the regional and international political climate.

With political legitimacy will come economic opportunities to ensure the survival of the proposed state. As cooperation improves with the Sunni Arab countries, economic partnerships will follow. Countries like Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates have money to spend abroad. For instance, Qatar's "GDP grew sixfold to $200 billion, making its 2m-odd people the richest per person on Earth" ("Too Rich" 1). What makes the other Arabic countries valuable for the proposed state are potential trade routes. Moving goods out of central and eastern state B, a landlocked country, will require good relations with neighbor states. Also, the proposed state could serve as a major east-west and north-south trade route for the Middle East. While the country would have limited oil supplies, it would also be heavily dependent on service careers emanating from Damascus. As such, this state will need to heavily invest in human and physical capital. Doing so will improve long-term growth prospects and bring the proposed state into the twenty-first century economy. Only by cooperating with its regional partners could the state carved out of central and eastern Syria make itself viable over the long-term.

Southern State

The minority groups in southern Syria are due to achieve independence. The territory in and around Dar'a and Suwelda is unique to the region given its Druze and Chaldean enclaves. These groups and many others have lived under Arabic, and more recently Alawi, control for centuries. For instance, "the Druze are an ancient sect within Islam. The Golan ones are part of a Syrian Druze community that numbers 700,000. Another 250,000 live in Lebanon and about 100,000 in Israel proper, where, unlike other Muslim and Christian Arabs, they serve in the army" ("Golan Heights" 6). Providing them with their own state will give political empowerment to a whole range of peoples long accustomed to compromise and minority status. In many ways, this is the perfect opportunity to introduce democratic institutions into the area. With no one group holding an overwhelming majority, promoting representative government will encourage the various groups in the region to cooperate. Establishing a small territory, state C, the former southern Syria would permit disenfranchised minorities to finally stand up for themselves.

Particularly in this initial phase the fledgling state will have serious foreign policy challenges worth addressing. Given its small size and its lack of previous democratic practices, it might find other regional states meddling in its internal affairs. In particular, ensuring that both Jordan and Israel recognize the small nation's sovereignty is key. However, there is hope given some of the locals' pre-existing practices including "20,000 Druze of the Golan naturally seeking out interests that are common to [Israel and Syria] as a way of improving their own precarious situation" ("Golan Heights" 1) by sending apples from Israeli controlled territory to Syria. As

bilateral relations with between state C and it neighbors improve, the chances this southern state has of success will only increase.

Several parties could impact state C. Riyadh's access to Red Sea port facilities and access to Europe through the Red and Mediterranean Seas are crucial to ensuring the proposed state's viability. Beyond regional partners, the US and Europe Union (EU) are valuable entities in promoting the nation's security and economic growth across the international spectrum. "More than half of all money spent on helping poor countries comes from the EU and its member countries, making it the world's biggest aid donor" ("Development and Cooperation" 1). So, state C just has to try and access available monies. Trade agreements with these parties offer greater legitimacy and decrease the likelihood of domestic or regional violence. For the proposed state in southern Syria, establishing strong relationships with potential partners is significant for ensuring long-time viability and territorial integrity.

Economically state C in southern Syria will need to focus on developing high-technology industries and other niche fields that it can compete in, investing in both human and physical capital to develop the nation's research and design capacity and attract future business interests. Also, given its size and newly formed government, it would be useful to invite foreign technical experts that could advise on structural designs for both the government and the economy. The same personnel would also be ideally suited to advocate for ODA. This support would serve to jumpstart state C's prospects for success. Moving forward C would want to create economic ties with a number of its regional neighbors, Europe, and the US. These partnerships, in particular Jordan, Israel, and Saudi Arabia will be critical for moving goods and services in and out of the proposed state. In Jordan specifically "fiscal reforms, which the IMF demanded in exchange for a loan in 2012, are as slow to emerge as the political ones. Despite promises to reduce the public debt by cutting salaries and subsidies, Jordan's debt has climbed to $27 billion, some 80% of GDP" ("Wither Change" 7) as of early 2014. An influx of trade from the north would greatly help Amman's struggling economy. Developing a high technology economy would allow state C nation to avoid tying its success to agriculture, energy, or minerals which are largely dependent on territorial holdings.

Northeastern State

In many ways. state D in today's northeastern Syria is the best structured for domestic governance. Already the heavily Kurdish region of northeastern Syria is controlled by "the Democratic Unity Party (PYD), the Syrian Kurdish group that runs the de-facto autonomous Kurdish enclave" ("Syrian Kurds" 3). Transitioning that architecture toward a full-fledged national framework will require some learning experiences and improvements in accountability, effectiveness, efficiency, and other areas. However, the positive for state D in Syria's northeast is that it already has some of the structural and functional requirements. Addressing minority rights and other, smaller issues will still be issues, but a democracy most certainly has the opportunity to emerge.

With such a large Kurdish population, state D will have significant import for others across the region. Iran, Iraq, and Turkey will likely look at this state's establishment as a threat to their domestic stability. In the last thirty years, Kurds and the national governments in each of these three states have been in conflict. For example, "Turkey is clearly rattled by the prospect of a quasi-independent Syrian-Kurdish entity emerging beside the Iraqi-Kurdish statelet in northern Iraq" ("Turkey, Syria" 4). It is important to differentiate between Kurds in Iran, Kurds in Turkey, and Kurds in Syria. For instance, "Mr. Barzani, the leader of the Kurdish regional government in northern Iraq, who makes no secret of his distaste for the PYD says they are hogging power, and has kept his side of the border with Syria partially sealed ("Syrian Kurds" 8). As on the Korean Peninsula, the divisions existing among these states have caused the Kurds living within each nation to disconnect from one another. As a result, to prevent outside forces from attempting to destabilize the proposed state D, it must establish relations with Europe and the US. While other regional state parties may entertain strong political ties, the most important ties may be with the EU and US. These two entities would be most important for guaranteeing state D's security and also providing technical assistance. Sending economic and government experts to the region could help identify special programs in need of ODA. These investments would then improve the credibility of the domestic government and lead to more FDI. Aligning with the US and EU is critical toward ensuring the state's survival.

The economy of the proposed state in northeast Syria will need to rely on a mixture of high technology and oil. Using ODA and FDI for investing in long-term human and physical growth will place the state on track to overcome the limited amount of land and resources in the area and to achieve a modern economy. However, where the proposed state will be in a strong position is in the availability of oil. Drilling will provide an easy mechanism for generating quick profits to help fund other need areas. The PYD has already begun "setting up Kurdish-language schools and Kurdish outfits capable of improving the indigenous talent pool" ("Turkey, Syria" 3). By addressing both short-term imperatives, such as oil exploitation, and long-term needs, particularly human and physical capital growth, the proposed state in Syria's northeast will have the chance to develop into a viable entity.

Conclusion

Fixing the long-term problems that led to Syria's civil war is not simply a matter of changing leadership. The ethnic challenges so obvious in recent years must be addressed through a comprehensive solution. Apportioning Syria into four states is the best possible outcome for a nation that has been torn apart through civil war. The greatest obstacle to apportionment will not be the Syrian people but rather stakeholders across the international system. In this environment Washington policy-makers must work with their global partners to increase support for the opposition and provide the follow-on states with a greater opportunity for success. Only by apportioning Syria can hope return to the people of that war-torn land.

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