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بوفيه غذاء مفتوح

SHISH KABOB

Break-up of the Middle East: Will We See a New Regional Order?



An Iraqi refugee, who fled from Mosul, carries his child as he walks around in a camp in al-Hol, located some 14 kilometers from the Iraqi border in Syria's northeastern Hassakeh

By adopting a novel approach to fragmentation in the Middle East and North Africa, regional players may see the collapse of state unity as an opportunity for a new interconnected order

It is now a cliché to say that the Middle East and North Africa are deeply fragmented. Indeed they are. But this claim shouldn't obscure the fact that the region has not been so interconnected at any time since World War I, the conflict which more or less shaped regional geopolitics ever since.

Despite all the talk of breakups, Middle Eastern borders have proven to be tenacious. They have resisted the pressure of regional disorder.

And yet order in the nation-states underpinning these borders is crumbling. New forms of political authority and autonomous regional entities are emerging across the region.

The Roots of Fragmentation

The idea and nature of sovereignty is rapidly changing. No longer are central governments or well-entrenched regimes the sole contenders for sovereignty. Though post-colonial borders remain in place, sovereignty within nation states in the region has been shared and challenged at three levels.

At the national level, there are various groups that assert their sovereignty over certain territories. Take Syria: the regime, the opposition, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and Islamic State (IS) all have territorial enclaves of their own, where they exert sovereignty. Likewise, both Libya and Yemen have been effectively turned into regionalised states.

Though the external borders of these states remain intact, there are internal borders that delineate the sharing of sovereignty among these actors, leading to the atomisation of sovereignty.

This trend creates new domains within each national context throughout the region, from Libya to Yemen and from Iraq to Syria. And while the emergence of new independent states is unlikely, previously centralised states are reconfiguring their political power structures, as seen with emergence of sub-national territorial entities.

At a regional level, both Iran and Turkey are using their foreign policies to directly limit the sovereignty of Syria. Iran exerts major influence over Syrian sovereignty both through its affiliate militia groups and deep influence over the Syrian security apparatus, if not the state structure as a whole. Likewise, Turkey now has an enclave of its own in Syria as a result of its Operation Euphrates Shield. Likewise, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates have violated the sovereignty of Libya, while Saudi Arabia, UAE and other allied powers are doing the same in Yemen.

It is more appropriate to call Syria, Yemen and Libya fractured states, or even proto-states, rather than sovereign states

The border sovereignty of these countries may remain intact from the perspective of UN or international law - but the policies of these international powers make a mockery of the concept.

Both Russia and the United States have infringed on the very idea of sovereignty in Syria, despite the fact that Moscow claims that its activities are undertaken with the full permission of Damascus.

It is more appropriate, therefore, to call Syria, Yemen and Libya fractured states, even proto-states, rather than sovereign states. They may be territorial entities with clear-cut borders, but are unable to exert full sovereignty over these territories, at least not to their full extent nor not on their own.

This national disorder is taking place within the larger framework of regional disorder. Since the start of the Arab uprisings, the region's authoritarian status quo has been shaken to its core, but a new regional order has yet to emerge.

The region is passing through a geopolitical vacuum, leading to deadly rivalries among the major regional powers - particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran - and causing the intensification of damaging proxy wars, which are destroying the fabric of Middle Eastern societies, weakening state structures and poisoning inter-state relations.

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How the U.S. Promotes Extremism in the Name of Religious Freedom

By S. Frederick Starr, Brenda Shaffer, and Svante Cornell

On July 26, U.S. President Donald Trump announced his nomination of Kansas Governor Sam Brownback as U.S. ambassador at large for international religious freedom. The position was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, which also established the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), with whom the ambassador's office closely cooperates. President Trump and members of Congress will appoint new commissioners to the USCIRF in 2018. The commission reports on global violations of religious freedom and makes recommendations to the president and the State Department for action, including sanctions.

Despite Congress' best intentions, the USCIRF has strayed far from its mandate. In its 2017 report, the commission effectively supports the right of Islamist extremists to operate in several Muslim-majority countries, Iranian mullahs to spread radicalism abroad, and hardline Islamist organizations to receive foreign funding. It also castigates policies that promote secularism, such as bans on headscarves for girls in public schools. In its quest to protect freedom of religion, the USCIRF is championing the rights of groups that aspire to impose religious coercion on others.

CHURCH AND STATE

Although it operates around the world, in recent years the USCIRF has been particularly harsh in its condemnation of the Muslim-majority, ex-Soviet states of the Caucasus and Central Asia—Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The committee has criticized them for excessive restrictions on religious freedom and repression of non-traditional religious groups. All these countries observe strict separation of church and state, have refused to designate Islam as a formal state religion, and maintain secular laws and courts. And in sharp contrast to their treatment in most of the Middle East, non-Muslims in these countries can live as equal citizens.

These states, with their Soviet heritage, have at times been heavy-handed in their handling of religious issues; for instance, authorities in Tajikistan forcibly shave men's beards and instruct women to wear their headgear only in the traditional Tajik way. It is no secret, moreover, that none of the countries in question are smoothly functioning democracies. But it must also be acknowledged that their rules help protect secular Muslims, women, and minorities, from religious coercion. Islamists who would like to overturn this secular order and enforce a religious state are not allowed to do so. Yet the USCIRF pays no attention

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Does Trump Intend to Thwart Iran's Ambitions in Syria?

By John Hannah

If President Donald Trump is not careful, the president risks going down in history as the man who defeated the Islamic State only to make the Middle East safe for Iranian hegemony.

There's not much doubt about what the Iranians are up to. As the U.S.-backed coalition drives the Islamic State from its remaining strongholds, forces led by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and backed by Russian air power the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Hezbollah, and Shiite militias are racing to fill the void, securing strategic terrain along the Iraq-Syria border and a land bridge stretching from Iran to the Mediterranean. From there, the IRGC will seek over time to establish a series of ground, air, and naval bases across the Middle East's northern tier, dramatically escalating its ability to threaten key U.S. allies in the Persian Gulf, Jordan, and especially Israel.

Does the Trump administration intend to thwart Iran's dangerous ambitions? The short answer is: We just don't know. Its messages are decidedly mixed. At a general level, administration officials regularly express determination to combat Iranian aggression. More specifically, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has said that the IRGC and its foreign proxies "must leave and go home" as part of any eventual resolution of the Syrian conflict. And on the handful of occasions this summer when Iran and its proxies have sought to challenge U.S.-backed positions in Syria (near the Islamic State's capital in Raqqa and on the Jordanian border), they've been met with a swift and forceful response including the shoot-down of two Iranian drones as well as a Syrian Su-22 bomber.

All well and good, as far as it goes. But on the other hand: The U.S. military has been at pains to stress that it will only confront pro-Assad elements for narrow force-protection purposes, with no mention of preventing Iran's strategic land grab.



After taking out the Su-22, the U.S.-led anti-Islamic State coalition issued a statement underscoring that "The Coalition's mission is to defeat ISIS in Iraq and Syria. The Coalition does not seek to fight Syrian regime, Russian, or pro-regime forces partnered with them, but will not hesitate to defend Coalition or partner forces from any threat." Days later, it got decidedly worse. The U.S. spokesman for the coalition, Colonel Ryan Dillon, went even further, effectively welcoming a concerted push by IRGC-allied forces to seize oil-rich Islamic State strongholds in the all-important Iraq-Syria border region of Deir Ezzour precisely the terrain necessary to complete the Iranian land bridge.

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