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Learning from Sykes-Picot

Marina Ottaway,
*Middle East Fellow,
Woodrow Wilson International
Center for Scholars*



The collapse of central authority in both Syria and Iraq, coupled with the rise of a growing number of non-state actors, has given rise to much speculation about the future of the Levant and the end of at least some of the states formed after World War I. The first of a long series of agreements that defined the post-Ottoman Levant was one reached by a British and a French diplomat, Mark Sykes and Francois Georges-Picot, in 1916. The “end of Sykes-

Picot” has become the short hand for speculation about a possible reconfiguration of the states of the Levant.

Very little of the Sykes-Picot agreement was implemented, and the borders that were eventually established bear almost no resemblance to the lines drawn—in exquisite imperial fashion—by the two diplomats whose main concern was to decide how Britain and France would divide among themselves the Arab parts of the Ottoman Empire. Paradoxically, it is the failure of the agreement that makes it relevant to understanding the forces currently threatening the disintegration of Levant states and possibly reconfiguring the region. If Britain and France had succeeded

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Director
Henri J. Barkey

Associate
Kendra Heideman

Assistant
Julia Craig Romano

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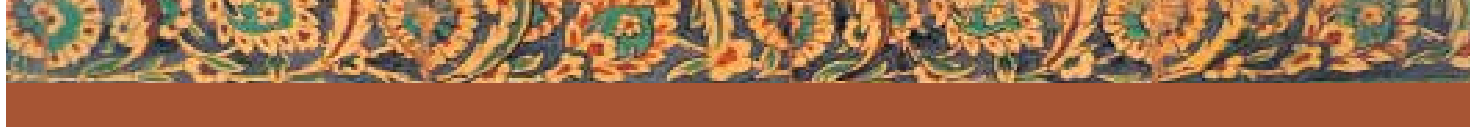
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in shaping the Levant as they liked, the agreement could be dismissed as the product of a bygone colonial era with little relevance to the present. But they were not. The actions of Arab and Turkish nationalists, the demands of minorities, the ambitions of politicians, the collapse of czarist Russia, and the bankruptcy of Britain and France in aftermaths of the war shaped a Levant quite different from the one the two diplomats had envisaged.

And that is the relevance of Sykes-Picot to the present. The United States, Russia, and to some extent the European Union—the new international powers who have replaced Britain and France in trying to shape the region—have their own ideas of how the region should evolve and have invested lives and treasure to realize their goals. Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia—the major regional powers—have their own plans for the future of the region. But once again it is the ever changing array of local, state, and non-state actors that will shape the final outcome.

The Actors Sykes and Picot Forgot

Several factors explain why, once the dust settled over the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Sykes-Picot Agreement had become largely irrelevant: the upsurge of nationalism in the region; the rise of modern Turkey; the Bolshevik revolution that turned Russia from an ally into an enemy of France and Britain, to be contained rather than awarded territory; and the bankruptcy of the two major colonial powers—France and Britain—in the wake of the war, which kept them from devoting to the region resources commensurate with their original aspirations. Ultimately, France and Britain could not realize their goals, despite their superior power and the League of Nations mandates over the Levant

they had awarded themselves. They succeeded in drawing the borders of the new countries, but they had limited capacity to shape the states contained within those borders.

Going into the war, France and Britain were convinced that the Arab parts of the Ottoman Empire were not ready for self-government and would not be ready for a long time—statesmen in both countries were in total agreement on that point. The issue they wanted to settle was not whether these areas would be under foreign supervision, because that was a foregone conclusion, but which areas would be supervised by France and which by Britain. The Sykes-Picot Agreement provided the answer. Britain would get complete control over an area of “Mesopotamia” starting north of Baghdad and extending through Basra all the way down the east coast of the Arabian Peninsula. France would get complete control over an area extending along the Mediterranean coast from Haifa to southern Turkey and inland to a part of Anatolia. Britain and France could do what they wanted: putting these areas under direct administration by colonial officials or indirect control through local rulers of their own choosing. In addition, France and Britain also awarded themselves their respective zones of influence, where they would set up independent Arab states, or a confederation of states, under their supervision. Finally, an area comprising roughly today’s Israel and the West Bank, would be declared an international zone controlled jointly by Britain, France, and Russia. The Arabian Peninsula, with the exception of the east coast claimed by Britain, would be left under Arab control. The text of the agreement and British-French correspondence around it show clearly that the main concern of both France and Britain was to protect their interests against the other—there is much discussion about access to ports and the impositions of tariffs, none about the interests of the local population.

In negotiating the agreement, Britain and France had ignored not only the issue of the rights of the Arabs whose territories they were disposing of, but also their probable reaction. Convinced that Arabs were not ready to govern themselves, the colonial powers also seemed to believe that they would remain passive. Instead, the high-handed approach of the European powers stirred nationalist reactions through the region, where currents of Arab nationalism had been evident for a long time. With the weakening of the Ottoman grip, nationalists gained prominence in Cairo, Damascus, and Baghdad, among others. The British themselves contributed to stirring up Arab nationalism by dangling in front of Hussein, the Sharif of Mecca, the vision of an independent Arab state under his rule when they were trying to enlist his support against the Ottomans and stir the Arab Revolt. Finally, the issuing by Britain of the November 1917 Balfour Declaration, which declared support for the establishment of a Jewish home in Palestine, encouraged the Zionist movement and inevitably an Arab nationalist reaction. Additionally, after the defeat of the Ottomans, Turkish nationalists under the leadership of Kemal Ataturk fought fiercely against attempts to dismantle the Turkish core of the Ottoman Empire and formed a new strong Turkish state that had not been part of the Sykes-Picot plan. Local actors, in other words, had no intention of remaining passive and allowing Britain and France to design a post-Ottoman Levant as they saw fit.

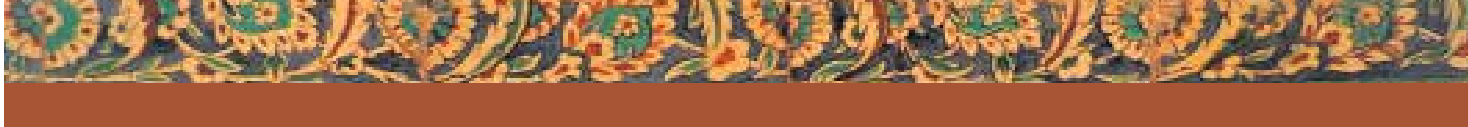
The outcome of the war also made Sykes-Picot impossible to implement in the original form. Syria, including Damascus, was supposed to fall in the

French zone of Influence, but it was the British, not the French, that entered Damascus and expelled the Turks. The British also expelled the Turks from Palestine and remained there, although Palestine was supposed to be put under international administration. Furthermore, U.S. intervention toward the end of the conflict changed the dynamics of peace negotiations, and the formation of the League of Nations meant that the Arab territories Britain and France had viewed essentially as colonies or protectorates to remain under their control indefinitely became instead League of Nations mandates.

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The mandates, on the other hand, were temporary and carried the obligation for the mandatory powers to prepare the countries under their care for independence. The difficult economic situation both Britain and France faced at the end of the war, furthermore, made them unwilling to invest much in the new territories. Both countries were under pressure to demobilize the troops and return men to civilian life and to reduce the cost of controlling and administering the new territories. Britain under the leadership of Secretary of State for the Colonies Winston Churchill pioneered in Mesopotamia the idea of reducing the number of ground troops by relying on the air force for control—a tantalizing antecedent to current U.S. policy in Iraq.

In conclusion, when the Ottomans surrendered in October 1918, Sykes-Picot could no longer provide an answer for the future of the Arab territories. Instead, it took until 1925, repeated rounds of negotiations and several treaties for the map of the Levant to take the familiar shape commonly identified with the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Little survived



of the Sykes Picot Agreement: Syria, including what is today Lebanon, remained in a French zone of influence but as a League of Nations mandate and with boundaries that bore little similarity to those envisaged by the two diplomats in 1916. Similarly, Mesopotamia stayed in the British zone but as a mandate that did not include the east coast of the Arabian Peninsula but included the former Ottoman province of Mosul that Sykes and Picot had given to France. Everything else was different: Palestine had not become an international zone but a British mandate, which included Transjordan but not the much larger zone of influence, extending well into the Arabian Peninsula, designed by the two diplomats. And while an Arab state had indeed arisen in the Arabian Peninsula, as envisaged in the original agreement, it was not the one centered on the Hejaz that Britain had dangled in front of Sharif Hussein's eyes but one dominated by Ibn Saud, who had brought much of the peninsula under his control starting from the Najd. Turkey had lost the empire, but it had successfully fought against dismemberment of its core and had become an independent, fiercely nationalistic, and secular republic. And Egypt, from where Britain had plotted the war in the Levant and directed military operations, had also become independent, although the Suez Canal zone was still controlled by Britain and France.

The Mandates and the Failure of State-building

The mandates system imposed upon France and Britain the responsibility to run restless territories cobbled together in international negotiations into states ready for self-government. The new countries had new and artificial borders and diverse populations, although that was inevitable—all borders are artificial, be they settled by war or negotiations; and

the long history of wars, migrations, invasions, and religious schisms in the Levant guaranteed that no state would have a homogeneous population, no matter how borders were drawn. France and Britain had no experience with state-building overseas—colonization was about control, pacification, and low-cost administration, not about state-building. Diplomats had simply assumed, for the first but not for the last time, that state-building was possible, and that Britain and France, being states, would have the capacity to build states elsewhere and in a few decades. In reality, the states remained hollow, both under the mandates and after they became independent. Whether the failure to consolidate the states was due to poor management or lack of good will by the mandatory states, or whether it was due to the intrinsic difficulty, if not impossibility, of state-building by outsiders is an issue I will not discuss here.

The British encountered serious challenges with its mandates in Mesopotamia and Palestine. In Mesopotamia, they installed Faisal, one of Sharif Hussein's sons, as king, hoping he would prove loyal and compliant in return, but this was not the case. (Interestingly, he had proven a difficult leader to manage in Syria, which the British had controlled briefly before being forced to turn it over to the French, who quickly got rid of Faisal.) The British were also facing nationalists who wanted independence, not subordination to a mandate, in the cities and with a rebellion in the old Mosul province of the Ottoman Empire, where Kurds had been agitating for a state of their own since the fall of the Ottoman Empire. The British had enough power to repress the opposition and retain control, but did not have the time or capacity to build a functioning political system, institutions, and a common identity. In 1932, when the British mandate came to an end, the hollowness of the new state became evident. The monarchy the British had hoped would bind the

country together was controlled by a foreign dynasty and commanded little loyalty, particularly after Faisal died in 1933 and his young son succeeded him. The strongest institution the British had bequeathed was the military, and in 1936, amidst general unrest, it seized power and continued doing this repeatedly. By 1941, the country, by then called Iraq, had experienced five military coups d'état. The installation in 1941 of an anti-British, pro-Nazi government that tried to hinder the movement of British troops out of their bases in Iraq led to a short Anglo-Iraqi war and to a new period of British occupation that lasted until 1947. At that point, the history of unrest, revolts, and military coups d'état resumed, becoming even more complicated because Iraq was by this time caught in the Cold War and U.S. efforts to build anti-Soviet alliances with neighboring countries. The mandatory powers' task of building a state ready for self-government had been replaced by the United States and British efforts to keep that state in the Western camp. In 1958, Abd al-Karim Qasim seized power, abolished the monarchy, took Iraq out of the Baghdad Pact, discussed the possibility of joining the United Arab Republic with Egypt and Syria, and threatened to nationalize oil, raising alarm in Washington and London. Inevitably, when Qasim was ousted in a coup in 1963, the CIA was accused of complicity. Certainly, Washington was relieved, but the situation did not improve for Iraq, which remained in turmoil under a series of mostly military governments of short duration until the rise to power of Saddam Hussein in 1979. Instability ceased because a strong, authoritarian regime used repression to make up for the hollowness of the state.


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When Saddam Hussein was removed by American intervention in 2003, the full extent of the hollowness became apparent again.

The situation in the Mandate of Palestine was even more problematic. The British task of building a state embracing the diverse population groups collided with the Zionist project to make Palestine not just the vague “national home for Jews” supported by the Balfour Declaration, but a state in which Jews would be the majority. Britain was caught between conflicting Jewish and Arab nationalisms. Faced with the determination of the Zionists and the flood of new Jewish immigrants on one side, and a revolt by Arabs beginning in 1936, the British toyed with the idea of forming a small Jewish state in Palestine, enraging Arabs without satisfying Zionists, who wanted much more. Eventually, the partition was adopted and recommended by the United Nations in 1947 and it satisfied neither side, with the problem continuing to this day. Again, the mandate left behind an enormous problem, though it should be recognized that Britain had been handed an intractable situation.

Transjordan, formally part of the mandate of Palestine, was administered separately. A smaller and, at that time, less complex country, it settled down more easily under another of Hussein's sons, Abdallah. The British recognized the virtual independence of the territory in 1928, although the formal mandate was not terminated until 1948. In many ways, it was the most successful of the British mandates.

The outcome of the French Mandate in Syria, which officially started in 1923, was the emergence of



not one but two deeply troubled states, today's Syria and Lebanon. Despite the Sykes-Picot Agreement, it was Britain that first administered Syria after capturing it from the Ottomans in 1918. The British installed Faisal as leader of Syria, in recognition of the contribution of the Arab Revolt to the defeat of the Ottoman Empire and of past promises to Faisal's father Hussein. From the outset, Syria was in revolt. Faisal wanted a truly independent Syrian state that included Palestine and Transjordan, and so did the Syrian nationalists who were well represented in the parliament elected in 1919. But negotiations at the Paris Peace Conference led to an agreement that France would control Syria, as envisaged by Sykes-Picot. In 1920 France took over the administration of the territory, just as Faisal and the nationalists declared the independence of a Kingdom of Syria.

The French reacted by forcing Faisal to abdicate, putting an end to the Kingdom of Syria after only four months. They also tried to bring the unruly country under control by dividing it into six separate mini-states: Damascus, Aleppo, the state of Alawites, Jebel Druze, the Sanjak of Alexandretta (which became part of Turkey in 1939), and Greater Lebanon. The latter was the only state to survive long term, becoming the Lebanese Republic under French supervision in 1926 and finally a fully independent state when the French mandate terminated in 1943. The division of Syria into mini-states did not stabilize Syria. The Sunni population in general opposed decentralization, while other states wanted more autonomy than the French were willing to grant them. France succeeded in bringing together Aleppo, Damascus, and the state of Alawites in a Syrian Federation until 1924. At that point, the country exploded in an anti-French uprising in which disparate population groups participated. It took two years and much brutality for the French to pacify the country, but they could not unite it. When the French set up the Syrian Republic in 1930, in

a further attempt to remedy fragmentation, the Alawites proclaimed the Independent Government of Latakia, which only joined the Syrian Republic in 1936, when the State of Jebel Druze also joined. Neither the original decentralization nor the later unitary model helped the French maintain order in Syria. During World War II, Vichy France lost control of Syria to a new British occupation, with the support of the Free French, creating yet another upheaval. Syria became formally independent in 1943, although French troops remained for another three years.

Not surprisingly, given this history, Syria remained extremely unstable after the mandate ended. Between 1946 and 1956, the country experienced several coups d'état and went through 20 cabinets and four different constitutions. In 1958, following another coup, Syria joined Egypt in forming the United Arab Republic, but the troubled union came to an end with yet another coup d'état three years later. The cycle of military coups continued until 1970, when Hafez al-Assad rose to power, also in a coup, and finally stabilized the country under his rule and that of the Ba'ath Party. For 30 years Syria experienced stability, with repression in a police state being its cost. At his death in 2000, Hafez even managed to transfer power to his son Bashar, and stability continued until the uprisings that shook the Arab world in 2011 affected Syria as well, leading the country into war and bringing it to the verge of state collapse.

A New Power Vacuum

Despite their hollowness, the Levant states survived, as indeed most states survive in the contemporary world where military conquest of weaker states by stronger ones is no longer the norm. In part, they survived because international borders were frozen

in place by the Great Powers, particularly during the Cold War. With wars of conquest no longer part of normal relations among countries, new states are destabilizing of the status quo, likely to produce conflict, and in general a nuisance other states prefer to avoid. With rare exceptions, only those directly demanding it favor the formation of new states while the international system is hostile to it.

Furthermore, even hollow states eventually develop an identity over time. By now, several generations have been born as Syrians or Iraqis, and many never questioned that identity. Also, webs of vested interests develop around any state, indeed any organization, aiding its persistence. Somebody always benefits from the existence of a state—from politicians who secure positions of power to businessmen who prosper beyond protective barriers, to civil servants who draw steady salaries. And at least a part of the population comes to identify as citizens of that state, not necessarily by an enthusiastic choice, but at least by inertia.

Finally, there are patterns of governance that help hollow states to survive. In Iraq and Syria, the major mechanism for state survival has been the authoritarianism of regimes. Lebanon, a state so hollow as to be practically a fiction, experienced a nasty civil war but finally survived by letting the state dwindle even more, with power residing in the hands of confessional communities and their foreign backers.

As a result, there has been limited demand for the reconfiguration of the Levant states until recently


(I am excluding here the Israeli-Palestinian issue, which is quite different from the problems of other states). The most important explicit, vocal demands for the formation of new states have come from Iraqi Kurds, who have been in revolt against the

Iraqi state since Mosul was first included in the mandate of Mesopotamia. But even the Kurdish leadership is careful to state that, while independence is the ultimate goal, it cannot be realized under current conditions. This does not prevent Iraqi Kurdistan from trying to build state institutions, including its own military, and from laying the foundations for financial independence through oil exports.

Nevertheless, discussions about the end of Sykes-Picot are not idle talk. Syria and Iraq are no longer functioning as states. The issue is no longer whether they will fall apart, because that has already happened, but whether they can be put back together as they were. Both countries have lost a large part of their territory to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which has an explicit state-building project transcending the established borders. The new state, or “caliphate” as the leaders would have it, appears to have gained some acceptance, or at least passive quiescence, among Syrian and Iraqi Sunnis.

The writ of Baghdad no longer runs in Kurdistan, and in much of Nineveh, Salahuddin, and Anbar provinces. Even in Shi’a regions, Baghdad shares authority and influence with Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, more broadly the religious establishment in Najaf, and the Shi’a militias, most of which are controlled by Iran. These militias may well be more powerful at present than the national Iraqi military. The

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Iraqi state still exists because it has internationally recognized borders and because oil revenue flows to Baghdad, but it is more hollow than ever.

Damascus now controls only about one-third of Syrian territory, in the west. ISIL has established its Islamic state centered on Raqqa and extending to a large part of Iraq. Syrian Kurds have established semi-autonomous “cantons” along the Turkish border; they argue they are not aiming for an independent state but for bottom-up, popular government of the cantons. But they are also busy trying to consolidate what started as separate cantons in a continuous strip of territory along the Turkish border, much to the chagrin of Ankara. Another part of the country, the extremely contentious area around Aleppo, is being disputed among the al-Qaeda aligned Jabhat al-Nusra, so-called moderate groups supported to some degree by the United States and GCC countries, ISIL, and government forces and the militias aligned with them. The intervention of Russia in October 2015 injected more complications in this corner of Syria in an attempt to bring it back under government control, consolidating the part of Syria that Damascus still controls.

Sykes-Picot Redux

As in the aftermath of World War I, there is a power vacuum in the Levant and as a rush by international, regional, and local players to fill it in the way that best suits their interests—or at least in theory, their principles. While the outcome is impossible to predict at this point, two lessons derived from what can be broadly defined as the broader Sykes-Picot experience will affect what happens. Those lessons can also help analysts focus on the most important issues.

The first lesson is that international and regional players have limited capacity to impose solutions, although the military and diplomatic resources

they could mobilize are much greater than those of domestic players. The way in which international players deal with the Levant is influenced by many considerations including some that have little to do with the situation on the ground. The United States has become somewhat more assertive in its policy toward Syria since Russia decided to intervene there. The resources the United States is devoting to Syria are a fraction of what it could theoretically mobilize, but are already greater than they were before Putin started flexing his muscles. Like France and Britain in 1918, the United States and Russia are dealing with Syria with an eye on each other. And so are Iran and Saudi Arabia, while Turkey’s desire to see the end of the Assad regime is tempered by its determination to contain the successes of Syrian Kurds, for fear such successes would strengthen the Kurdish opposition in Turkey. By contrast, local actors are usually much more single minded and bring all their resources to bear on their goals. ISIL has only one goal at this point—to build an Islamic state—and whatever resources it can mobilize are devoted to that goal.

This is an obvious lesson, but it is regularly ignored. Current diplomatic efforts to negotiate an end to the Syrian conflict are a case in point. The first international attempt to settle the present Syrian conflict was a June 30, 2012 meeting in Geneva of the Syria Action Group, in which representatives of the United Nations, the League of Arab States, China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, Kuwait, and Qatar (because of their roles within the League of Arab States), and the European Union met to devise a solution to the crisis in Syria. Participants issued a communique spelling out principles and guidelines for the Syrian transition and outlining steps all parties needed to take. Syrians were not present at the meeting. The communique declared that the Syrian people ought to determine the future of the country, but also

went on to preempt possible choices by declaring their commitment to, among others, the unity of Syria, democratic principles, and the full inclusion of women—obvious principles for participants in such gathering, but not what many Syrian organizations involved in the conflict would have chosen or were likely to accept. In January 2014, with the Geneva communique having had no impact on events in Syria and the war still raging, a conference, which became known as Geneva II, was convoked under the auspices of the

UN after Russia and the United States had committed to bring “all Syrian parties” to the table with a view to implementing the Geneva communique.

Syrian parties proved difficult to corral. The Syrian government agreed to participate in order to pursue “the Syrian people’s demands, first and foremost eliminating terrorism,” a term applied to all opposition. The opposition groups recognized by the international community, and thus invited, split on whether or not to attend, but the Kurds, who were not invited separately from other groups, demanded to be given their own voice. The Islamic State and al-Qaeda aligned Jabhat al-Nusra, both of which controlled substantial territory were obviously not invited, but that meant main players were not involved. International participation was also

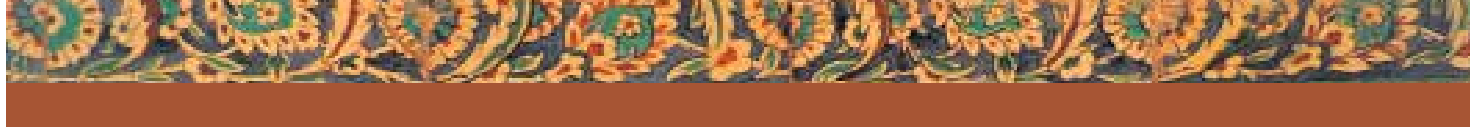
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controversial. The UN Secretary-General invited Iran, causing vehement protest from the opposition and a condition by the United States that Iran must first fully accept the Geneva communique, and Iran

did not participate. The conference did not achieve anything. Like many of post-World War I meetings, the Geneva meeting was driven above all by the politics and requirements of outsiders. So was a meeting held on October 30, 2015 in Vienna, which broadened further the list of participants by including Iran and Iraq, but still did not get the buy-in from the moderate Syrian opposition and excluded the groups that controlled ter-

ritory. There are no easy solutions to this problem. The international community cannot fail to react to the situation in Syria. It is unthinkable at this point to ask ISIL to participate in international peace negotiations. As a result, however, whatever decisions are reached by meetings such as those in Geneva or Vienna will be as irrelevant to what happens in the Levant as the original Sykes-Picot Agreement was to the Arab territories of the Ottoman Empire.

The second lesson to be derived from Sykes-Picot is that any solution devised by the international community in negotiations or imposed on the ground by local actors has to pass the test of implementation. Can new borders—such as those imposed by ISIL conquest in Syria and Iraq, or those of a new Alawite entity some think might be revived—enclose a func-



tioning state rather than hollow territory? There is much but vague discussion about what a post-Sykes-Picot Levant might look like: a division of Iraq into three states, as in the Biden-Gelb plan of 2006; an independent Iraqi Kurdistan, possibly in a loose confederation with Sunni and Shi'a states; a rump Alawite state under the control of Bashar al-Assad in Syria; Sunni states in both Syria and Iraq, replacing the Islamic state; and autonomous Kurdish cantons consolidated in northern Syria. All these ideas have been advocated by some or other groups at some point.

The real question is not whether any of these solutions would be desirable, but whether any of them could become real on the ground. Does the fact that an Independent Republic of Latakia defied French efforts to absorb it into Syria for six years mean that it could be replicated? Would an independent Iraqi Kurdistan survive with hostile neighbors on all sides? Would there be sufficient economic and even political resources to make Kurdish cantons in Syria more than an ephemeral phenomenon? And what would determine whether such entities would remain hollow, kept alive by international agree-

ments and support, or become self-perpetuating and self-sustaining? Outside support could certainly become a factor, but it is sobering to remember the fragility of the states left behind by the mandatory states, armed with superior power and the authority of the League of Nations. And there are equally sobering contemporary examples outside the Levant: in 1995, the Dayton Agreement put an end to war and slaughter in Bosnia, in an excellent example of what international intervention and good diplomatic work can accomplish. Twenty years later, it is still open to question whether the Bosnian state will ever be more than a hollow shell.

These and other questions are not idle speculation. Iraq and Syria, never strong states for all the authoritarian of their leaders, have become fiction. They could survive as fiction, the way the Lebanese state managed to survive as fiction after the end of the civil war; or they could break up. As after World War I, outsiders will come up with proposals and agreements, but they will not determine the final outcome. Prescribing solutions is largely a pointless exercise. Understanding what the outcome of different solutions might be would be useful to all sides.



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Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars
One Woodrow Wilson Plaza, 1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20004-3027
(202) 691-4000
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