

The new war for the Middle East¹

By David Gardner

■ Executive summary

The would-be new caliphs of ISIS proclaim their intention to unite what were generally known as Greater Syria and Mesopotamia, tearing up the Levantine canvas designed by European imperialists and bulldozing its frontiers. But unity of any sort looks forlorn in this deeply troubled region. ISIS, entrenched in a cross-border “jihadistan” in the Euphrates valley, with lines stretching from Raqqa in north-east Syria to the western approaches to Baghdad, has really stepped opportunistically into a sort of three-dimensional vacuum, characterised principally by an absence of the state, a loss of a shared national narrative and the feeble leverage of big powers. In Syria and Iraq, state institutions have collapsed, throwing citizens back into the arms of sect and militia, clan and tribe.

The present situation is the result of the ideological collapse of pan-Arab nationalism, which some people had seen as a sort of secular proxy for modern caliphism, but which long ago became an alibi for dictatorship, masking the will to power of ambitious, usually army-linked local elites.

Shattered mosaic countries such as Syria and Iraq – but some others too – are going to need a new institutional architecture. This will somehow have to combine a high degree of devolved local power with credible federal or even looser confederal institutions. Elements of such a settlement would need to include such things as local policing; a fair share-out of national resources; or, for example, a bicameral legislature with an upper house representing the territorial interests of the devolved powers and a lower house representing the interests of all citizens.

When the radical totalitarians of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – known to themselves as the Islamic State but usually labelled by the acronyms in English of ISIS or ISIL, and Daesh in Arabic – burst out of eastern Syria into north and central Iraq in the summer of 2014 they announced not just a new caliphate, but that they had “broken” Sykes-Picot, the secret Anglo-French pact of 1916 to carve up the Ottoman Empire’s Arab provinces and throw disparate religious and ethnic groups into European-style nation states. But Iraq and Syria, created by Britain and France after the First World War to serve their imperial interests, had already started coming apart before ISIS appeared on the scene.

The de facto partition of Iraq, a state shattered by the U.S.-led invasion of 2003, was well under way. Syria, where

the regime of Bashar al-Assad has been waging a pitiless war against its own people since the uprising against his tyranny in 2011, was already fragmenting along sectarian lines – not least because the Assads were cynically wielding a sectarian knife to bolster their ultimately self-fulfilling narrative that what they were facing from the very beginning was the terrorism of al-Qa’ida.

What had been a Sunni-Shia subplot in this drama – going back to the schism in 7th-century Islam – burst on to centre stage after the 2003 invasion of Iraq. That catapulted the Shia minority within Islam (a majority in Iraq) into power in an Arab heartland country for the first time in centuries, overturning the balance of power across the region and tilting it towards the Islamic Republic of Iran – Shia, Persian and with ambitions as a regional hegemon.

¹ This text is an updated and adapted version for NOREF based on the author’s October 6th 2014 lecture at the Columbia University Centre, Amman.

This more than anything fanned the embers of the Sunni-Shia stand-off into millenarian flame. Iraq dissolved into an ethno-sectarian bloodbath, grinding minorities such as its ancient Christian communities between the wounded identities of the Sunni and Shia. Syria, similar in its ethno-sectarian make-up, has been taken the same way: grafting the Sunni-Shia schism and the Saudi-Iranian contest for regional power onto what started as another Arab struggle against tyranny.

With the ensuing fragmentation – acute in the Levant, but extending to other Arab countries, notably Libya and Yemen – it can look as though the Middle East has been pitched back a century into a neo-Ottoman shape: a return to the millet system under which the sprawling Ottoman Empire allowed its Arab subject peoples a degree of autonomy within relatively cohesive ethno-religious units.

The ideological collapse of pan-Arabism

The would-be new caliphs of ISIS proclaim their intention to unite what were generally known as Greater Syria and Mesopotamia, tearing up the Levantine canvas designed by European imperialists and bulldozing its frontiers. But unity of any sort looks forlorn in this deeply troubled region. ISIS, entrenched in a cross-border “jihadistan” in the Euphrates valley, with lines stretching from Raqqa in north-east Syria to the western approaches to Baghdad, has really stepped opportunistically into a sort of three-dimensional vacuum, characterised principally by an absence of the state, a loss of shared national narrative and the feeble leverage of big powers. In Syria and Iraq, state institutions have collapsed, throwing citizens back into the arms of sect and militia, clan and tribe.

Partly this is the result of the ideological collapse of pan-Arab nationalism, which some people had seen as a sort of secular proxy for modern caliphism, but which long ago became an alibi for dictatorship, masking the will to power of ambitious, usually army-linked local elites. The Ba’th parties in Syria and Iraq became in many particulars an Arab version of fascism. They were also minority regimes: built around the Alawite sect of the Assads, an esoteric offshoot of Shiism, and the (Sunni) Tikriti clan of Saddam Hussein. As already mentioned, their implosion has rekindled the age-old schism between Sunni and Shia Islam into border-busting flame, with Saudi Arabia, a Sunni absolute monarchy allied with Wahhabi doctrinal absolutism, pitted against the Islamic Republic of Iran, a Shia (and Persian) theocracy.

But a huge difference between now and the position a century ago in the Middle East is the relative weight of the superpowers of the day. Britain and France, although about to enter the twilight of empire, could then shape the region – literally dismember it and stitch it back together. Now, after the Iraq fiasco and U.S. and Western mishandling of Syria – let alone Washington’s inability or unwillingness to influence Israel over Palestine – there is real doubt that the U.S. can use its diplomatic clout and unique military power

to shape, or even manage, the region. That, incidentally, makes Russia, a subprime superpower, look implausibly good. But even in the Soviet era Russia rarely managed to be more than a spoiler in the Middle East.

Yet there is no real meta-narrative for a mess as chaotic and bloody as the present-day Middle East. Its present condition does originally date from the aftermath of 1914, but also from the end of the cold war, which often replaced ideological difference with divisions based on identity – which we have seen from the wars in the former Yugoslavia to today’s sectarian carnage in the Levant.

By a geopolitical fluke the cold war ended just as technology developed unique power to encourage the formation of global tribes, many of them trivial, some much less so. As the great French-Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf pointed out in his book *Disordered World*, a follow-up to his seminal essay “On identity”, the digital revolution arrived at a moment when identity politics was unleashed and the triumph of the U.S. as sole, fallible superpower had raised questions of legitimacy at a global level, reinforcing tribal narratives and inherited allegiances.

In the Arab-Muslim world, moreover, disfigured by what Maalouf called “a local, nationalistic brand of Stalinism”, a Western mix of support for tyranny and tactical alliances with religion-inspired movements such as the mujahidin in Afghanistan “meant that at the end of the Cold War the Islamists were on the winning side”. This is, then, a world much more complex than that of Sykes-Picot.

Leading a Sunni mass movement

Erupting near the centre of this region, and threatening its neighbours beyond its self-proclaimed state, is ISIS – which is probably best seen more as a symptom than a primary cause of the current chaos. Spawned and then spurned by al-Qa’ida, among other reasons for its insubordination and savagery towards other Muslims, ISIS regrouped in Syria, from where it swept into north and western Iraq, fanning out across the upper Euphrates valley or Jazeera, and pressing down towards Baghdad, which it can now approach from the west after capturing the cities of Fallujah and Ramadi at the beginning of 2014. In autumn 2014, after the collapse of the Iraqi army in Mosul and parts of central Iraq, ISIS got very close to the western approaches to Baghdad.

ISIS is the most sulphurous and savage organisation yet of *takfiris* – with their extreme interpretation of monotheism that anathematizes all other religions, regards less zealous Muslims as apostates, and reserves the lowest circle of hell for the Shia, whom they see as idolatrous and polytheist. They are well armed, well financed and seem to be well versed in the tactics of irregular warfare. A Western official who has been intimately involved in Syria and Iraq says that “they seem to have read everything”; he was not referring to the Koran or the Hadith, but to Mao Tse Tung and Frantz Fanon.

But ISIS's real novelty is that it has managed to fasten on to structures of Sunni power – not just disaffected tribes, but the substantial residue of Saddam's army and party – and above all place itself at the head of a Sunni mass movement, which a group such as al-Qa'ida could only dream of. There is a lot at stake here. ISIS cannot be relied on simply to over-reach itself and self-destruct in the manner of its precursors, such as the Zarqawi organisation in Iraq, affiliated to al-Qa'ida and driven out of Anbar province by Sunni tribal militias during the 2007-09 U.S. Army-led "surge".

Were this just about Iraq – a once prosperous Arab country laid low by tyranny, wars, crippling sanctions, and the U.S.-led invasion and occupation in 2003 that ignited the ethno-sectarian carnage – that would be bad enough. But at stake is the disintegration of Syria as well, and the looming shadow of a new Afghanistan in the heart of the Middle East, trying to punch through a jihadi corridor to the Mediterranean across the battlefield of the Levant and reach down to the Gulf.

Meanwhile, ISIS is banging hard on the doors of its neighbours, such as Lebanon and Turkey – maybe eventually Jordan and Saudi Arabia too. All these states have the ability to repulse ISIS militarily, but the jihadis can still rack up political advantage by sowing discord and exploiting divisions among their neighbours. Whatever happens in the present siege of Kobani, for example – which many regard as a second-order strategic goal both for the jihadis and the coalition being cobbled together by the U.S. to fight them – by attacking it ISIS has already driven a wedge between the neo-Islamist new establishment in Turkey and its Kurdish minority.

A struggle for power, not for religion

There is an understandable tendency to liken this rapidly ramifying conflict to a religious war, similar to the Thirty Years War that devastated Europe in the first half of the 17th century. Yet this does not quite ring true. In theological terms, the warriors of the new caliphate are painting by numbers (the meticulous deconstruction of their quasi-theological arguments by an international group of senior Muslim clerics late last year highlighted this). Such legitimacy as they do have in their cross-border jihadistan may be ephemeral, leached from collapsing unitary states with oppressive rulers who have driven the Sunni masses temporarily into their bloodstained arms.

In that light, this is not so much a war of religion as a struggle for power bespattering the region, in which rival Islamic identities – Sunni and Shia – have replaced nationalism as the mobilising agent, and the states with most interest in the outcome – Saudi Arabia and Iran – have (to paraphrase Shakespeare) cried havoc and let slip the dogs of sectarianism.

Almost every leader in the region, from Anwar Sadat to Tansu Ciller, has at some point played sorcerer's appren-

tice with Islamism and sectarianism, even Saddam Hussein. Saddam used nationalism to mobilise against Iran during the 1980s, but with his religious values campaign in the 1990s he sought to emulate the practice of his hero, Stalin, who coopted even the Orthodox Church in the war against the Nazis. Saddam meant to stiffen popular resolve against international sanctions, but it opened doors for Sunni and Shia irredentism, and what Charles Tripp, the British scholar of Iraq, has called "sectarian entrepreneurs". Sectarianism escapes the control of those who touch it, much more so those who unleash its demons.

Western policy in Syria – to use the term "policy" loosely for what seems to have been a catalogue of inept improvisation – has poured more petrol on the fire by failing to support mainly Sunni mainstream rebels against the Assad regime. As mentioned, that created a vacuum for the jihadis, facilitated by Western-allied Sunni powers – Wahhabi Saudi Arabia and Qatar, as well as Turkey – to whom support for the rebellion was subcontracted. ISIS is riding a wave of Sunni revolt from Syria into western and northern Iraq. But religion here is secondary to identity and a sense of entitlement.

When governments and oppositions – and states such as Iran and Saudi Arabia that back them – play the sectarian card, this prevents popular grievances from becoming a dispute between haves and have-nots, or about access to power and opportunity. There is no room, therefore, for reasoned debate about why this state spends six times more on wasteful energy subsidies than on education, or that state spends four times more on defence and security than on health. Would-be citizens who might seek common institutions to arbitrate their interests are instead faced with the hard wiring of sectarian affiliation and the subconscious grammar of tribal loyalty, both of which are intrinsically cross-border phenomena spilling all over the Middle East.

Take, for instance, the way Qassem Soleimani, master puppeteer of the al-Quds Brigade of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, is stitching together in Iraq a national Shia militia network like the one he built in Syria for the Assads, the so-called National Defence Force. The need for this irregular and barely controllable force became urgent after Iraq's U.S.-trained army, whose commanders Nouri al-Maliki had replaced with incompetent and corrupt cronies, often in command of non-existent troops whose salaries they pocketed, melted away before the ISIS onslaught.

This should have long since been apparent, since Maliki himself had for some time relied for his own protection on a praetorian guard of Iranian-trained militia, such as the Asaeb Ahl al-Haq. Yet under his rule the sectarian mould in Iraq has hardened such that almost everyone became drawn into a circle of patronage and power.

An axis of power from Baghdad to Beirut

As mentioned, ISIS fastened on to the Sunni power networks of Saddam's army and the Ba'th party, supposedly dismantled by the U.S.-led occupation, and the tribes, hostile to jihadi totalitarianism, but subsequently more aggrieved by the Maliki government and its sectarian policies. While sectarianism is not religion, it does seem to have the preternatural power to resurrect the zombie ideologies of Osama bin Laden and the Ba'th – and even get them to work together.

The Shia, moreover, after centuries on Islam's sidelines, finally have something to protect. It is not just about preventing a repeat of 1801, when Wahhabi marauders from the first Saudi kingdom sacked Kerbala and other Shia shrine cities. It is about 2003 and the rise of the Shia after the invasion of Iraq, which helped Tehran forge an axis of power from Baghdad to Beirut.

If this is a Thirty Years War, therefore, it resembles more the convulsion of Europe between 1914 and 1944: not competing nationalisms, but still a clash of aggrieved – in this case, sectarian – identities, in a common space they cannot agree to share amid vengeful atavism and a yearning after past glory: a reich then, a caliphate now.

It is important to stress that the sentiments at work here – which the term "identity politics" inadequately defines – are not unique to this region. In India, for example, a Hindu supremacist party is back in power, whose stock-in-trade is to fire up a sense of victimhood among a billion Hindus, as if they were a minority threatened with extinction by less than 200 million Muslims and fewer than 30 million Christians. To be very clear, this is not intended to compare that party with ISIS. It is just that the *takfiris* are using a similar tactic in conjuring from the Sunni sense of betrayal in Syria and dispossession in Iraq the idea that more than a billion Sunnis are in some way a threatened minority.

Are there possible ways through or out of this sectarian whirlwind, even though sectarianism, by its very nature, is not really susceptible to conventional analysis or rational policy? There may be.

Some analysts emphasise the role of state actors. Some even insist that is all there is to it: that there is no intrinsic problem between Sunni and Shia, and this is really just a conventional power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran. That is wrong, in the sense that once you uncage the demons of sectarianism, they take on a life of their own. But there is, of course, truth in the state actors narrative – fortunately, because states can be influenced. For that reason, it is just about possible to imagine a sort of four-stage sequence that just might, conceivably, start to calm the storm.

A regional framework for conflict resolution

Firstly, there is the possibility in coming weeks of a rapprochement between the U.S. and Iran – following a possible deal on Tehran's nuclear ambitions between the so-called P5+1 and Iran – that starts to reintegrate Iran into the international order and make it part of solutions rather than of problems in the region. This is, of course, intrinsically difficult. There are countervailing forces – hardliners and vested interests in Iran on one side, Israel and Saudi Arabia on the other, with their influence on the U.S. Congress now under the lock-hold of the Republican party – lying in wait to sabotage any such outcome. Yet the clearest policy towards the Middle East outlined by President Barack Obama (aside from his wish to extricate the U.S. from the region's wars) is his idea – spelled out in an interview in the *New Yorker* at the beginning of 2014 – that getting Iran back inside the tent could draw off some of the poison from the Sunni-Shia battle and lead to a self-regulating balance of power in the region.

Secondly, for this to work would require some form of détente and some framework of security cooperation – or even architecture – between Saudi Arabia and Iran. That sounds, if anything, even more difficult. Yet it is noticeable how the Saudis have dialled down their high dudgeon towards the U.S. and its allies of late 2013, when the interim nuclear deal was reached with Iran. Last March, for example, the Saudis and Iranians stood back from their respective clients in Lebanon, and a coalition government was patched together there after a hiatus of 11 months. Last September the Saudi and Iranian foreign ministers met on the margins of the UN General Assembly in New York. The stakes are much higher now – for everybody, including the Saudis.

Pressure, moreover, has already been working to some extent on Iran, whose economy has been crippled by sanctions and which was haemorrhaging away about \$9 billion that it can ill afford to prop up the Assad regime, a sum that has gone up even more – some say it has doubled – with the implosion of Iraq. More pressure needs to be applied to Saudi Arabia, which is less important in the oil universe as a result of the shale revolution and collapsing oil prices and which, despite its perception of the U.S. as an unreliable ally, doesn't really have anywhere else to go.

A problem with Saudi Arabia, however, is that while it is politically opposed to – indeed outraged by the presumption of – the so-called caliphate of ISIS, doctrinally there is not much to separate them. ISIS comprises Wahhabis on steroids; they are both doctrinal heirs of Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Abdel Wahhab, the ideological authors of the uncompromising and sectarian brand of the Saudi brand of Islam.

ISIS shares Saudi Wahhabism's disdain for all other religions and less rigorous interpretations of Islam. Where do their ideas come from: such as total rejection of the

so-called rejectionist Shia; iconoclasm and the destruction of shrines; not to mention the practice of beheadings in the public square on Fridays? The Saudis may denounce ISIS as deviants who seek not just to topple the House of Saud, but to usurp its position as Custodians of the Holy Places of Mecca and Medina – in a limited but legitimising sense the nearest modern equivalent of a caliphate. But there were no Wahhabi clerics among the initial signatories of the open letter mentioned earlier that picked apart the ideas of ISIS.

That prompts the third element in this sequence. Who exactly is going to turn Sunni sentiment away from ISIS in Syria and Iraq? Saudi Arabia, the leading power in the Sunni Arab coalition the U.S. has assembled, is hardly equipped for the task of re-energising the Sunni mainstream in both countries and splitting it off from the jihadis. That absolutely vital goal can only be accomplished on the ground, inside each of these countries. President Obama showed an awareness of this by staying his hand in Iraq until Maliki was replaced by a more inclusive prime minister, at the head of a coalition that might have a chance of recapturing the support of the big Sunni tribes – only *might* have a chance, given how far gone things are.

In Syria, things are very far gone too. Although even the remnants of what is loosely described as the Free Syrian Army, fighting on two fronts against the regime and ISIS, look at least as militarily plausible as the often phantom Iraqi national army – making recent progress, for example, across the southern front. Yet it seems unlikely that the Sunni mainstream in Syria will turn or re-energise until the Assads are removed from the picture. Is that difficult? It may look unlikely now, but ultimately the Assads are wards of the Iranian state – and very expensive ones at that. And if the Iranians saw virtue in ditching Maliki in Iraq, why not the Assads in Syria, provided Iran can conserve at least some of its national interest there?

It is possible, absent the Assads – no longer popular inside even their own Alawite community, which has borne such a heavy toll in this destructive war – to conceive of a realignment of mainstream rebels with the less compromised elements of the present regime – in alliance against ISIS and determined to salvage something from the ruins of Syria. Obviously, some basic consensus would then have to follow on power and how to share it; and how to institutionalise it – with full protection for all minorities, without exception.

Which brings us to the fourth and final point – which may seem very much for the future, but which needs to be thought about now. Shattered mosaic countries such as

Syria and Iraq – but some others too – are going to need a new institutional architecture. This will somehow have to combine a high degree of devolved local power with credible federal or even looser confederal institutions. That is a tall order in the best of circumstances – which these clearly are not – but it is not obvious that there is any alternative except warlordism. The type of iron centralism exercised in the past by the classic Arab security state offers no solution. It is part of the problem, as Egypt under Abdel Fattah al-Sisi shows: since the 2013 coup against an elected but divisive Muslim Brotherhood government there, the ban on mainstream Islamists appears to be swelling the ranks of jihadis inspired by ISIS.

In the main arena of the conflict, moreover, there is already local power, i.e. devolved regional power inside existing international borders: *de jure*, in the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq; *de facto*, in the now-threatened Kurdish entity of three enclaves in northern Syria; and on an ad hoc basis across the region. What is now needed is a credible proxy for sect, tribe and clan that everybody can recognise. But for all groups to be more or less comfortable with this, it needs to be institutionalised. It is that which requires a centre and a national compact, a consensual federal government, based on common platforms of equal citizenship that are attractive and secure enough for devolved power to participate.

Elements of such a settlement would need to include such things as local policing; a fair share-out of national resources; or, for example, a bicameral legislature with an upper house representing the territorial interests of the devolved powers and a lower house representing the interests of all citizens. That may come about because of a combination of factors: exhaustion with war and dislocation; revulsion against the brutality of ISIS and others; regional *détente* – as outlined above – and perhaps some kind of regional congress of nations to advance it, with outside aid to support the right incentives; and other pots of glue, such as oil and gas, as incentives to hold together.

It is very hard to see any of this now. The region could just as easily continue with a bewildering panoply of warlords picking through the ruins and scrabbling for their share of diminishing resources. Clearly, this will only change if the main actors – all the way down through the sequence described above – want it to happen. Perhaps one should paraphrase Churchill, who famously said that the Americans always do the right thing, after all the alternatives have been exhausted. While it is not clear that the alternatives in this case are exhausted, the peoples of the region and their countries certainly are.

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