THE MIDDLE EAST CRACK-UP[*]

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JERUSALEM – The horror stories emerging from northern Iraq, as well as the continuing slaughter in Syria's civil war, point to a tectonic shift in the Middle East. Almost 100 years after World War I, the regional state system established after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire is unraveling.

The contemporary map of the Middle East was drawn by the victorious Western imperial powers, Great Britain and France, during and after WWI. While the war was still raging, they signed an agreement drafted by the diplomats Sir Mark Sykes and François George-Picot, which delineated their respective spheres of influence across the Levant – an agreement that entirely disregarded the region's history, ethnic and religious traditions and affiliations, and the will of local populations.

The modern states of Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon thus arose as separate, independent entities. Their borders were arbitrary and artificial, and none had ever existed in such form. (The case of Palestine was even more complicated, owing to Britain's conflicting promises to Arabs and Jews.)

Eventually, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon became independent countries, modeled on the Westphalian idea of the modern nation-state. Their leaders maintained this system – and its borders – as the best available. None of these rulers, especially the authoritarian ones who emerged after independence, had an interest in rocking the boat.

That Western-imposed system is now unraveling. Nation-states cannot be sustained when they do not reflect the wishes of their populations.

The United States-led invasion of Iraq put an end not only to Saddam Hussein's rule, but also to Sunni-minority control, established by the British generations ago. The Shia majority, once unleashed, viewed US-backed democratic elections as a vehicle for imposing hegemonic control over the country.

Iraq today is not the unitary Arab nation-state that it was, and it is doubtful whether that state can be restored. The Kurdish Regional Government in the north is a *de facto* state, with its own army, border authorities, and control (up to a point) of the natural resources located on

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its territory. Foreign consulates in the KRG's capital, Erbil, effectively function as embassies.

In Syria, what started as peaceful pro-democracy demonstrations deteriorated quickly into an armed insurrection of the Sunni majority against the hegemony of the Alawite sect, led by the Assad family. As with Iraq, it is difficult to see how Syria can be reconstituted as a unitary Arab nation-state.

The *de facto* dismemberment of both countries' central state authorities gave rise to a totally new player – the Islamic State, which has announced the establishment of a caliphate straddling Iraq and Syria, totally disregarding the old Sykes-Picot arrangement.

The Islamic State, an offshoot of Al Qaeda, probably will not succeed in creating a viable, cross-border entity, but its brutal effort and Islamist ideology certainly suggest that the old borders, and the states delineated by them, are on their way out. Indeed, the group's recent incursions into Lebanon may also undermine the fragile inter-communal balance there.

The unraveling of the Western-imposed state system is taking place elsewhere in the greater Middle East. Sudan – a vast, multiethnic, and multi-confessional country, established as a political entity by the British in the 1890s – is continuing to fray. The emergence, after a prolonged and bloody civil war, of an independent South Sudan in 2011, freed the local Christian and animist population from the Arab/Muslim yoke. But Darfur is still bleeding, and South Sudan is far from being a stable polity.

Libya, too, is disintegrating. The two provinces of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, which Italy wrested from the Ottomans just before WWI, were forced together into an entity called "Libya," despite their profound historical and cultural differences. Since Muammar el-Qaddafi's demise in 2011, Libyans have failed to establish a coherent state structure of any sort, cycling through six prime ministers. Pious Western sermons about the need to form a unified, democratically elected government sound utterly irrelevant, given the extent of social and political fragmentation.

There is one exception to this regional development: Egypt. For all of its internal tribulations, there is no doubt that Egypt is a coherent entity, deeply anchored in history and in the consciousness of its population. For all of the problems confronting the Coptic Christian community, no one doubts that they are as Egyptian as the Muslim majority.

But Egypt, too, has followed a defining regional pattern. Whereas secularism in the West arose with the emergence of liberal and democratic forces inspired by the Enlightenment, in the Muslim Middle East it has always been imposed by authoritarian rulers: the Shah in Iran, Atatürk in Turkey, Saddam in Iraq, Assad in Syria, and Nasser and Mubarak in

Egypt. This explains why Syria's Christian and Druze minorities now support Assad, and why the Copts in Egypt support military rule: democratic majoritarian rule means Muslim hegemony.

Europe endured centuries of violent religious and national struggle, culminating in the horrors of the two world wars, before achieving its current stable state system. The Middle East probably will pay less in terms of time and violence; but the idea that what emerges will necessarily be European-style nation-states may turn out to be a Western conceit. The late literary theorist and public intellectual Edward Said might even have called it an example of paternalistic Orientalism.