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BORDERLANDS Project

Erosion and resilience of the Iraqi-Syrian border

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Challenging the notion of Fortress Europe, the BORDERLANDS research project investigates relations between the European Union and the states of North Africa and the Mediterranean Middle East (MENA) through the concept of borderlands. This concept emphasises the disaggregation of the triple function of borders demarcating state territory, authority, and national identity inherent in the Westphalian model of statehood. The project explores the complex and differentiated process by which the EU extends its unbundled functional and legal borders and exports its rules and practices to MENA states, thereby transforming that area into borderlands. They are connected to the European core through various border regimes, governance patterns, and the selective outsourcing of some EU border control duties.

The overarching questions informing this research is whether, first, the borderland policies of the EU, described by some as a neo-medieval empire, is a functional consequence of the specific integration model pursued inside the EU, a matter of foreign policy choice or a local manifestation of a broader global phenomenon. Second, the project addresses the political and socio-economic implications of these processes for the 'borderlands', along with the questions of power dynamics and complex interdependence in EU-MENA relations.

Funded by the European Research Council (ERC) within the 7th Framework Programme, the BORDERLANDS project is hosted at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, and directed by Professor Raffaella A. Del Sarto.

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Abstract

Syria and Iraq's accelerating fragmentation has prompted feverish speculation about the erasure of the modern Middle East's Western-imposed borders. Such notions are not altogether divorced from reality: Syria and Iraq today are scarcely recognizable as nation-states, and their once rigid border has become increasingly porous while falling entirely from governmental control. Yet this erosion must not be mistaken for dissolution. The post-Ottoman border continues to serve an array of material and symbolic functions, and as such will remain of paramount relevance, as a resilient object of contention, for the foreseeable future. By grappling with this paradoxical state of mutation and durability—and by tracing its roots back into the late twentieth century—we can draw broader insights into the seismic changes roiling the Middle East, where brittle, centralizing power structures are increasingly giving way to a more grassroots and fluid political landscape with which Western actors have yet to come to terms.

Keywords

Syria, Iraq, Borders, Kurds, Islamic State, Sykes-Picot

Introduction*

The ongoing wars in Syria and Iraq have triggered a spate of commentary and counter-commentary debating “the end of Sykes-Picot,” shorthand for the collapse of the century-old state system imposed on the Middle East by European powers after World War I.¹ One class of commentators has warned of the erasure of the post-Ottoman order—in which Britain and France, they say, carved up the region with reckless disregard for ethnosectarian and tribal fault-lines—proposing in the meantime new maps more closely aligned, allegedly, with communal identities.² A second, more sophisticated line of analysis has rebutted these claims, pointing out that, for all the talk of erasing Sykes-Picot, the post-Ottoman borders show no signs of being redrawn and appear, for the most part, “to be alive and well.”³

Both narratives bear unpacking and exploration. Indeed a third narrative has stressed the fundamental error in focusing on Sykes-Picot as the grand symbol of colonial arrogance in the Middle East, pointing out that the Sykes-Picot map ultimately bore little relation to the final borders laid down in the region. What is more, these borders often were not so artificial and arbitrary as is typically imagined, but rather had roots in local administrative arrangements during and before the Ottoman period.⁴

Eulogies for the map of the modern Middle East remain premature and dangerously facile, ignoring as they do the very real ways in which borders continue to shape dynamics in Syria, Iraq and throughout the neighborhood. Yet the fantasy of erasing Sykes-Picot cannot be altogether discounted: the symbolism—expertly manipulated by the Islamic State (IS)⁵—resonates deeply with the regional psyche and springs from very real changes that the border has undergone in recent years.

The second narrative, meanwhile, may go to the opposite extreme: the post-Ottoman borders are indeed alive, but they are by no means well. They have eroded and mutated to the point of being totally unrecognizable within the modern conception of borders as rigid, centrally controlled boundaries delineating sovereign nation-states.

The Syrian-Iraqi border has survived in a state of ever-evolving limbo between resilience and degeneration, losing certain quintessential functions yet continuing to shape the rules of the game at the local, national and international levels. As this article will show, following an attempt at conceptualizing the current state of affairs, this evolution can be traced back across decades: to the 1970s-1980s, when Baathist regimes in Damascus and Baghdad set about hardening and sealing borders in the service of their own centralization campaigns; to the 1990s and 2000s, when the

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¹ “Sykes-Picot” refers to the secret 1916 correspondence between French and British diplomats Francois Georges-Picot and Sir Mark Sykes, in which the two designated French and British spheres of influence in what are now Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. The agreement has, for many regional and Western observers, become synonymous with post-war colonial meddling that sowed the seeds for inter-communal strife in the coming decades.

² See, for a widely-read recent example, Robin Wright, “Imagining a remapped Middle East,” *The New York Times*, 28 September 2013. For an earlier article making a virtually identical argument, see Jeffrey Goldberg, “After Iraq,” *The Atlantic*, January/February 2008.

³ Steven Simon, “The Middle East’s Durable Map,” *Foreign Affairs*, 26 August 2014. See also F. Gregory Gause III, “Is this the end of Sykes-Picot?” *The Washington Post*, 20 May 2014.

⁴ See Sara Pursley, “Lines drawn on an empty map,” *Jadaliyya*, 2 June 2014, and Reidar Vissar, “Dammit, it is NOT unraveling,” 30 December 2013, *Iraq and Gulf Analysis*.

⁵ See “The End of Sykes-Picot,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i357G1HuFcI>.

deterioration and, ultimately, overthrow of the Iraqi regime undermined Baghdad's ability to exert sovereign control over the border; to the period since 2011, when the Syrian uprising and subsequent civil war—coupled with resurgent sectarian violence in Iraq—set the stage for the border's final devolution from state control. By mid-2015, all three official crossings between Syria and Iraq were controlled by non-state actors: two by IS and one by the Kurdish Peshmerga.

The need for a blurry-eyed vision of borders

This process—wherein the border has by no means disappeared despite being fundamentally transformed—may be conceptualized as a kind of “diffraction”: an unbundling of the various functions that were once closely intertwined, interdependent and tightly controlled by Baghdad and Damascus. These functions—chief among them delineating territorial sovereignty; regulating the flow of commerce, citizens and information; and providing a physical demarcation within which to formulate a national consciousness—have become ever more unfastened from one another and subject less to the policies of national governments than to the changing whims of a convoluted array of sub- and transnational actors.

This dynamic is further complicated by a divergence in the way that various local and state actors choose to relate to the border. The US, for instance, continues to sanctify the border through its insistence on treating Iraq and Syria as two discrete arenas, including in cases where this is demonstrably not the case. Power structures in Baghdad and Damascus, however, possess neither the will nor the capacity to enforce the internationally recognized border, choosing instead to prioritize (with Iranian backing) internal borders that have moved closer to the capitals, and in all but rhetoric treating large parts of their own territory as if they were truly foreign. At the same time, substate actors—namely the Islamic State, the Kurdish Peshmerga and Shiite jihadists from Iraq, Lebanon and beyond—increasingly subvert the border (with the passive acceptance or active complicity of Baghdad and Damascus) by treating Syria and Iraq as one battlefield.

From this tapestry have emerged multiple paradoxes that reflect both the border's enduring relevance and its profound mutation. Even as non-state actors have set about dismantling it as a physical reality separating two sovereign nation-states, the border retains great legal and symbolic significance within the framework of an international system clinging to the boundaries it created a century ago. This symbolic relevance is not restricted to the international legal sphere: despite an increasingly unhindered flow of information, culture and ideas, the Syrian and Iraqi polities have retained their own distinctive characters and remain, with a few notable exceptions, mostly disinterested in radical notions of redrawing or erasing borders.⁶ This reflects the extent to which existing borders—however reviled as a symbol of colonial hubris—have become engrained in the region's collective consciousness.

Critically, and although breathless talk of erasing Sykes-Picot has reached fever pitch in the past several years, the transformations in the Syrian-Iraqi border have been underway for decades. They began in the early 1990s and have been accelerating ever since, facilitated by the gradual retrenchment of the Syrian and Iraqi states and the increasingly intimate ties between those states' constituent parts.

This process reflects a larger trend unfolding across the Middle East and North Africa, where hyper-centralized security states with national identities imposed from the top down are giving way to more organic, grassroots movements drawing on ethnic, tribal, sectarian and other affiliations, as will be further discussed below. Within this new milieu, the Sykes-Picot borders will neither disappear nor cease to be relevant, but will continue to evolve in ways unpredictable and perhaps bewildering to

⁶ Nor, however, are these same polities interested in a re-hardening of the borders. Rather, they appear quite comfortable with the current state of blurriness, further reflecting the extent to which the Syrian-Iraqi border currently hangs in an ambiguous, intermediate realm between endurance and erosion.

observers. Western actors will, it seems, continue to obsess about finding national partners to deal with—a form of fetishization of the state to which the Obama administration is particularly prone—even as their savvier regional competitors (not least Iran) learn to adapt to and capitalize on the accelerating momentum away from centralized governance structures.

The 1970s-1980s: From pan-Arabism to nationalist lockdown

The 1970s and 1980s were a period of profound transformation in Syria and Iraq, as military coups in both countries replaced several decades of pan-Arab soul-searching (punctuated by a series of six abortive Syrian-Iraqi unity ventures from 1954-1964) with an era of contrasting insulation. (Throughout the region in fact, the 70s, 80s and, to a lesser extent, 90s were a period of lock-down making societies largely invisible to themselves.) Jettisoning their pan-Arab roots, neo-Baathist governments in Baghdad and Damascus set about cultivating their own Iraqi and Syrian flavors of nationalism in the service of their own centralizing, absolutist political programs. This meant, among other steps, overhauling state education to supplant former notions of pan-Arabism with more suitable conceptions of Syrian and Iraqi Arabism; expanding the Baath party to the degree that personal advancement became primarily dependent on party membership; and developing the coercive apparatus required to stamp out any dissenting narrative through perceived ubiquitous spying and liberally applied violence.⁷

Throughout these centralization campaigns Baghdad and Damascus took the concept of borders to its extremes, clamping down on their own territories while engaging in war over border conflict with neighbors.⁸ The Iraqi-Syrian border became one of the most rigid of all, to the point where Syrian passports, extraordinarily, specified that they enabled travel anywhere with the explicit exception of Iraq and Israel.⁹ Trade, whether formal or informal, was virtually non-existent. In line with their political rivalry, each capital hosted some of its neighbor's dissidents, but their ability to assume any role across the border was marginal. The only notable cross-border activity consisted in Damascus and Baghdad investing in each other's more troublesome dissenters—a rare and relatively regulated element of porosity.

The border thus served as a critical tool in both governments' efforts to exert absolute control over their respective societies in the 1970s and 1980s. By stifling migration as well as communal and commercial ties and even information sharing, the Syrian and Iraqi regimes enlisted the border to cement their territorial control and protect their centralizing endeavors from regional meddling. This was a period during which all aspects of the border—economic, military, cultural—were closely tied to and dependent upon one another, and all were totally and unequivocally under the control of the governments in Baghdad and Damascus.

⁷ Both states modernized and massively expanded their military and security apparatuses during the 1970s and 1980s. In 1967, 1 in every 100 Iraqi citizens was a member of the armed forces; by 1987 this number had increased six-fold. In Syria, the number jumped from 1 to 3.6 of every 100 citizens during the same period. See F. Gregory Gause, III, "Sovereignty, Statecraft and Stability in the Middle East," *Journal of International Affairs*, 45, no. 2 (Winter 1992), 459. The transformation undergone by the countries' educational systems was no less stark, particularly in Iraq: newly enforced compulsory education, coupled with a massive literacy campaign, cut the country's illiteracy from over two-thirds in 1957 to under half in the early 1980s, while overhauled curricula "from nursery school to university" sought to ensure that youth would "be immunized against ideologies and cultures conflicting with our Arab nation's basic aspirations and its aim for unity, liberty and socialism." Kanaan Makiya, *Republic of Fear*, University of California Press, 85-88.

⁸ The most prominent examples are Syria's 1973 attempt to reclaim the Golan Heights (which it lost to Israel in 1967), the Syrian occupation of Lebanon beginning in 1976 and the Iraqi invasions of Iran and Kuwait in 1980 and 1990, respectively.

⁹ For detail on these travel restrictions, see Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Syria: "Information on whether there were any Syrian government travel restrictions, difficulties and procedures regarding Syrians travelling on Syrian passports to Iraq during the period 1980-1989," 1 June 1994.

Somewhat ironically, the two countries followed remarkably similar itineraries when their common border was at its most rigid: decisive coup d'Etats were almost concomitant and were underpinned by the same body of ideology, the regimes developed along comparable lines, met economic crisis around the same time, and deployed similar tactics in consolidating absolute power within their territories. Damascus and Baghdad alike set about systematically crushing alternate loci of power and sources of identity—whether this meant independent intellectual elites, the landowning gentry and traditional business establishments, tribal structures, large Kurdish minorities or political-religious opposition movements (namely the Muslim Brothers)—while developing the massive party and security apparatuses required to enforce total subservience. Hardening the border was all the more necessary given that these two countries both claimed a unique destiny while looking remarkably alike.

The 1990s-2000s: Retreat and reopening

Beginning in the early 1990s, a series of increasingly fast-paced and complex developments began to break down the dynamic of national quarantine, ultimately giving way to a remarkably integrated transnational space in which the border remains both very real and very porous.

This process effectively commenced following the Iraqi regime's military defeat in 1991 and the subsequent, predominantly Shiite and Kurdish uprisings in southern and northern Iraq. The crippling military, financial and ideological fallout of military adventures in Iran and Kuwait prompted the Iraqi regime to inaugurate a process—later seen elsewhere in the region—of retreat and retrenchment, focusing on “useful” portions of territory at the expense, in particular, of the country's fringes. Baghdad set about empowering residual tribal structures while tolerating a growing informal economy, not least when it came to smuggling.¹⁰ Tribes straddling the border, such as the Shammar or the Obeid, were then engaged in a very different set of relationships with central authorities in Iraq and Syria – with Syrian tribes witness to, and somewhat envious of, an Iraqi tribal awakening. In that sense, tribes on both sides of the border were becoming more aware of themselves – although their fates differed starkly.

Relatively insular societies in both countries started to open up through the spread of satellite television and access to the internet in the mid-1990s, breaking down the state monopoly on news and narratives obtained through the usual mix of heavy propaganda and tight censorship – a process that would gradually lead to an unprecedented degree of reciprocal familiarity on a people-to-people level.

The Syrian succession in 2000 introduced a new dynamic between the two capitals, with Bashar Assad quickly normalizing ties to Saddam Hussein, with a view to kick starting economic relations. These mobilized businessmen spanning the area between Aleppo and Mosul more particularly, and reviving a long-standing tradition of trade across what is known as the Jazeera – an “island” of steppes bridging the fertile valleys of Syria and Iraq, and delimited by Turkish lowlands in the north and the deserts verging on the Arabian peninsula to the south. Thus the re-connecting of Damascus and Baghdad also re-connected the two country's northern cities, which historically had enjoyed strong commercial and, as a result, social ties.

This rekindling of cross-border ties accelerated with the 2003 US invasion, whose shockwaves extended well beyond Iraq and deep into Syria. The humiliating defeat of the Iraqi regime—in many ways the mirror image of its Syrian counterpart¹¹—exposed profound social decay, prompted a shift toward all-out sectarianism as a default identity and generally said volumes about the frailty of the

¹⁰ For detail on the strategic devolution of power to tribal actors, see Amatzia Baram, “Neo-tribalism in Iraq: Saddam Hussein's tribal policies 1991-1996,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29 (1997), 1-31.

¹¹ Beyond their original Baathist credentials, both regimes were, by this point and at varying degrees, ideologically bankrupt, economically foundering, internationally isolated and heavily reliant on repression to impose their respective wills on society.

nation-state model and the absence of a clear alternative. The mob-like execution of Saddam Hussein, a deeply controversial but highly symbolic Arab leader, compounded this realization, along with an influx of refugees that made Iraq's reality all too tangible to Syrians. Although Syria didn't share Iraq's fate, the latter nevertheless resonated profoundly within the former.

The invasion's symbolic and psychological impact on Syria was accompanied by a concrete increase in the degree of interconnection between the two countries' political and military topographies as Damascus sought to influence increasingly chaotic events in Iraq. Dissident Iraqi elites in Damascus returned to rule Baghdad, and newly disenfranchised tribal and Baathist elites in Iraq sought refuge in Syria—while retaining considerable ability to affect the dynamics back home.

Meanwhile, fearful of the precedent set by the US invasion and eager to hasten the occupation's end, Damascus began funneling jihadists—from Syria, Iraq and elsewhere across the Muslim world—across the border into Iraq, such that Syria became the epicenter of Iraq's burgeoning, increasingly fundamentalist insurgency. A transnational jihadist culture thus took root in parts of Eastern and Northern Syria as a result of volunteers learning the ropes in Iraq.¹² The smuggling of goods, weapons and fighters also energized and entrenched historical cross-border ties between Dayr Zor and Anbar, and between the Northern parts of Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. A common sense of disenfranchisement also grew in the Jazeera as elites in the capitals neglected the countries' fringes (as a result of collapsed central authorities in Baghdad and an inward-looking and capitalistic new generation in Damascus).

Although the US invasion thus ushered in a period of heightened interconnection between Syria and Iraq, the border remained, at least in part, a functional boundary separating two territories fallen under entirely distinct jurisdictions. While control of Iraq's western borderlands was disputed between US occupying forces, a partially reconstructed centralized security apparatus and non-state actors following Saddam Hussein's ouster, the Assad regime retained a large degree of control over its own territory and its side of the border: even as Damascus blurred the line between the two states by hosting dissidents and incubating cross-border jihadist activity, it did so in a way that was—at least initially—carefully regulated in the context of an as yet high-functioning security state.¹³

Post-2011 disintegration and integration

This shift toward an increasingly permeable border leapt forward in the aftermath of the Syrian uprising in March 2011, which created the environment in which the Syrian-Iraqi border would fall entirely from state control and give way to levels of integration unprecedented since Syrian and Iraqi independence. A new symmetry emerged between the two states as Syria's uprising was followed, in late 2012, by a fresh wave of unrest that swept through marginalized Sunni areas of northern and western Iraq, leaving both societies in a state of massive social, economic and political turmoil.

The movements fed off one another from the outset: Syrian protesters taking to the streets in 2011 learnt a lesson from the cautionary tale of Iraq's civil war and for months strove to resist the allure of violence and sectarianism (which nevertheless proved overwhelming). Iraqi protestors, who for their part staged sit-ins throughout 2013 and 2014, learned a lesson from Syria's initially inspiring

¹² For detail on Bashar Assad's policy of funneling jihadists into post-invasion Iraq, see Peter Neumann, "Suspects into collaborators," *London Review of Books*, 36 no. 7, 3 April 2014, 19-21.

¹³ As the insurgency progressed and the Syrian pipeline grew, however, Damascus's control over the borders began to slip. In a sign of things to come, jihadists reentering the country from Iraq—and, eventually, Lebanon, where Damascus had rerouted some returnees from Iraq—in the mid-2000s began carrying out shootings and terror attacks, including a foiled plot targeting the American embassy in Damascus. These were among the first indications that the Assad regime had, by investing in the destabilizing cross-border influence of Sunni jihadists, accelerated the process of transforming a border that had until recently formed an impenetrable barrier between two tightly insulated states. See Neumann, op. cit.; see also Christine Hauser, "Syrian forces repel attack on U.S. embassy," *New York Times*, 12 September 2006.

revolutionary movement, appropriating many of its tactics and slogans.¹⁴ Damascus and Baghdad likewise followed one another's example: Nouri al-Maliki's government sought and found inspiration in Assad's example, berating his own Sunni Arab opposition as "terrorist" in an ultimately successful campaign to radicalize that opposition and capture the support of domestic constituencies fearful of a fundamentalist Sunni takeover.¹⁵

The links binding the two countries multiplied as both protest movements intensified and militarized. Defections and guerrilla warfare eroded the Syrian military and prompted Damascus—like Baghdad two decades before—to initiate a process of strategic retrenchment, consolidating its hold over western and central Syria at the expense of the country's northern, southern and eastern fringes.

In this context, the Assad regime welcomed the military support of Shiite jihadists who crossed into Syria from Lebanon to the west and Iraq to the east. As early as 2012, the Maliki government had begun facilitating the passage of Iraqi Shiite jihadists—many of which had initially been trained and equipped by Iran to resist the US occupation—into Syria through official border points; Assad welcomed the influx, which added depth to Syria's foundering regular forces.¹⁶ These jihadists brought with them a deeply sectarian outlook forged in earlier years and alien to the Syrian context.¹⁷ Their arrival has sped the "militarization" of power structures in both countries, with collapsing political and military institutions increasingly reliant on a multiplying array of militia forces of varying levels of professionalism.¹⁸

As the Syrian and Iraqi regimes and their supporters have grown closer to one another—viewing their respective fates as intertwined—alienated constituencies in Eastern Syria and Western Iraq have themselves been pushed closer together, developing a similar sense of marginalization and persecution at the hands of their respective capitals, whom they tend to regard as an alien, occupying force.¹⁹

This alienation, along with Sunni jihadi networks and culture inherited from years of funneling fighters into Iraq, underpinned the growth of an indigenous jihadi movement that flourished particularly in northern and eastern Syria. At the same time, the Iraqi government's increasingly flagrant repression of the country's predominantly Sunni protesters revitalized remnants of al-Qaeda in Iraq, providing the group with a strong enough social base to recover from several years on the defensive and project into the Syrian arena under the banner of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. In return, material and symbolic capital acquired in Syria helped the movement further expand and consolidate back in Iraq, in what would become a cyclical process whereby success in one state fueled more success across the border.²⁰

¹⁴ For a discussion of the growing ties and mutual influence between protest movements in Eastern Syria and Western Iraq, see Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°143, "Syria's Metastasizing Conflicts," 27 June 2013, 11-12:

¹⁵ For further detail on the increasingly interdependence of the Assad and Maliki regimes, see Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°144, "Make or Break: Iraq's Sunnis and the State," 14 August 2013, 12-13.

¹⁶ For background on the Shiite jihadi nexus between Iraq and Syria, see "The Militarization of Iraqi Politics," King Faysal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, March 2015. Available at <http://www.rd-kfcris.com/all-masarat-pdf/Masarat-Issue-17-En.pdf>.

¹⁷ Iraqi militiamen in particular brought with them "a millenarian, vengeful, assertive narrative of victory over Sunni domination" that "quickly spread among Alawites and Lebanese Shiites caught up in the conflict, although it ran counter to the traditional, mainstream, self-indulgent narratives of communal harmony and non-sectarian motives pushed by the regime, Hizbollah, and Iran." "Militarization of Iraqi Politics," op. cit.

¹⁸ In Syria and Iraq alike, these militias have often been cloaked in nationalist or populist garb, with designations like the National Defense Forces (Syria) or Popular Mobilization Units (Iraq) papering over the extent to which these groups' rise to prominence is in fact subverting the Syrian and Iraqi states.

¹⁹ Alienated Sunnis in both countries have increasingly decried their governments as Iranian or "Safavid" proxy forces (the latter evoking centuries-old narratives of ethnosectarian animus).

²⁰ Perhaps the most prominent example came in summer 2014: after capturing the northern Iraqi city of Mosul from the Iraqi Security Forces, ISIL rode its momentum—and its spoils, including American Humvees—to victory in its months-long showdown with its rival Jabhat al-Nusra in Dayr Zor.

Just as Sunni Arab jihadis have expanded along the Syrian-Iraqi border, Syrian and Iraqi Kurds have capitalized on the space left by eroding and destabilized central states to claim unprecedented levels of autonomy. In northern Syria the Democratic Union Party (PYD), originally a state-controlled pawn or proxy used by Syria to pressure Turkey in the context of conventional regional power politics, has grown into a local hegemon, while in Iraq the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has begun, for the first time in its history, to project strategically as a regional player in the context of rival Kurdish models of emancipation.²¹

All these changes have profoundly reshaped dynamics along the border, which can no longer plausibly be understood as delineating two states defining themselves within the framework of “sovereignty,” with authorities in Baghdad and Damascus neither willing to nor capable of enforcing the border’s integrity.

The Syrian-Iraqi border alive, but not well

Perhaps the most potent symbols of all came in November 2013 and June 2014, when the PYD and IS (respectively) declared the establishment of two new states—the Kurdish Rojava in Northern Syria and the essentially Sunni Arab Islamic State straddling the border.²² Both announcements were, of course, overstatements in practice, but they nonetheless posed, deep down, the fundamental question of the new order to be: what of existing borders, capitals, power structures, social compacts and definitions of political legitimacy?

The fact that IS portrayed itself with great fanfare as “erasing” the border speaks to its understanding of both the relevance and resilience of existing frontiers (such that they have to be spectacularly “erased”) and the potency of symbols related to the collapse of a failing regional order, in which ideology and identity had long been imposed from the top down by a combination of European powers and repressive, highly centralized state structures. Today, sub- and transnational spaces that have always existed in some capacity have grown in importance and are defined by dynamics entirely distinct from the center-periphery interaction and negotiation that prevailed under centralized states, even as they gradually eroded. These spaces tend to be defined, rather, by the articulation of local narratives of victimhood: Iraqi and Syrian Sunni Arabs see themselves victimized by narrow sectarian regimes; Shiites, Alawites and Christians fear eradication at the hands of Sunni “terrorists”; and both countries’ Kurds continue to understand themselves as locked in a decades-old struggle for self-determination.

The relationship between Iraq and Syria today is thus one organized around competing narratives of victimhood, by contrast with the competing narratives of statehood of old. What narrative of statehood there is, is vested in non-state players, while the states themselves have quite explicitly relinquished what we may call their “universal competence,” namely a willingness and an ability to represent and to rule over their nation as a whole, rather than a particular constituency within it. Within these sub- and transnational spaces reign movements of a new kind, which proceed not from an ideology and a body of cadres but from a popular sentiment, and build themselves up from there—representing the aforementioned shift from the hierarchical to the organic. They are representative of widespread fears and fulfill a number of traditional functions, such as protection (which also degenerates into racketeering and other forms of criminality),²³ justice (which of course can be

²¹ Throughout the Syrian crisis, Massoud Barzani’s Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) has moved to shape Kurdish politics in Northern Syria by supporting the Kurdish National Council (KNC) at the expense of the rival Democratic Union Party (PYD). For detail, see Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°136, “Syria’s Kurds: A struggle within a struggle,” 22 January 2013, 22-28.

²² The PYD’s announcement of Rojava is available (in English) at <http://www.pydrojava.net/en/index.php/pyd-statements/116-a-statement-by-the-executive-committee-of-the-democratic-union-party>.

²³ For detail on IS’s extortionist system of “protection” in territory it controls, see Nour Malas and Maria Abi-Habib, “Islamic State Economy Runs on Extortion, Oil Piracy in Syria, Iraq,” Wall Street Journal, 28 August 2014.

arbitrary),²⁴ and governance (typically by association with or appropriation of residual state structures, as is the case with both Rojava and the Islamic State).²⁵

At the same time, the intricate legacies of a century of state-building, however imperfect, are resisting. The starkest manifestation of this resistance is in the disconnect between what Jackson and Rosberg have called “juridical” and “empirical” statehood; the former term refers to a state’s international legal sovereignty—its recognition and acceptance as a legitimate member of the international community—while the latter refers to a state’s ability to *exert* its sovereignty in the Weberian sense of monopolizing the legitimate use of force within its territory.²⁶ In the 1970s and 1980s Damascus and Baghdad enjoyed total empirical sovereignty—today that sovereignty lies in tatters, due in part to both regimes’ willingness to devolve ever more power to a kaleidoscopic array of non-state armed groups.

Each state’s juridical sovereignty, however, remains very much intact, as the international community remains loath to acknowledge—let alone accelerate—the unraveling of central-state paradigm it helped install in the Middle East. In particular and as suggested above, the United States has insisted on continuing to treat the governments in Baghdad and Damascus as sovereign interlocutors who must be involved in ending their countries’ respective civil wars, even as they actively add fuel to the flames. This is not to say that Western states have, across the board, refused to adapt to changing circumstances: Paris and Rome, for instance, have both hosted (with considerable fanfare) official delegations of Syrian Kurds, indicating a desire to build goodwill with one particularly influential non-state actor in Syria.²⁷ The US, too, has long supported a large measure of (Iraqi) Kurdish autonomy, and has of late been more assertive in insisting that Baghdad financially and militarily empower Sunni tribes to combat IS.

Such efforts, however, remain cautious and piecemeal, framing outreach to sub-state groups in terms of inclusivity (or, in the extreme case of the Iraqi Kurds, federalism) while taking great care to avoid outright challenging Baghdad or Damascus’s increasingly dubious claims to sovereignty. This is especially clear in the American case: Washington is officially arming Syrian “moderates” and yet steers far clear of a policy that would allow those rebels to challenge the Syrian regime, while initiatives to empower Iraq’s Sunni Arabs are channeled through a government whose corruption and sectarianism have thus far precluded any meaningful engagement with them. Even Washington’s military support to Iraqi Kurds continues to require Baghdad’s approval due to fears of encouraging a Kurdish push away from federalism and toward independence.²⁸ All of these policies are particularly striking when compared to those of Iran, which in addition to backing Damascus and Baghdad continues to provide direct military support to a wide range of Shiite militias and, as of 2014, Iraqi Kurds.

The enduring relevance of the nation-state model and the borders on which it is based go beyond the international arena to shape dynamics within and between Syria and Iraq. The infrastructure of highly centralized states, whose lattice does not coincide with the sub- and transnational spaces mentioned above, imposes itself on all concerned, forcing them to negotiate their relations on that

²⁴ A wide range of non-state actors across Syria and Iraq today administer makeshift judicial bodies characterized by varying levels of institutionalization and effectiveness. These include IS throughout its territory, Jabhat al-Nusra in northwestern Syria, non-jihadist rebels in Southern Syria and Kurds in Rojava.

²⁵ In Raqqa, for instance, IS has occupied buildings including the governor’s palace and municipality, and has been “pragmatic in running municipal services... keeping expert employees in position, including in government-run services such as the phone network.” Sarah Birke, “How ISIS Rules,” *The New York Review of Books*, 5 February 2015.

²⁶ See Robert Jackson and Carl Rosberg, “Why Africa’s Weak States Persist: The Empirical and Juridical in Statehood,” *World Politics*, 35 no. 1, October 1982, 1-24.

²⁷ See, e.g., Fehim Tastekin, “Hollande-PYD meetings challenges Erdogan,” *Al-Monitor*, 12 February 2015.

²⁸ For in-depth analysis of Western-Kurdish military relations, see “Arming Iraq’s Kurds: Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict,” Crisis Group Middle East Report N°158, 12 May 2015.

basis. While IS and the Syrian regime trade oil, Sunni tribes in Western and Northern Iraq have been effectively forced to either accept IS or seek succor from the same central government that has spent years marginalizing them and that today has largely handed off power to overtly sectarian Shiite militias.

Meanwhile, the border itself remains particularly real as an object of contention due to its continued economic, military and symbolic relevance. Control over the border brings with it a number of material advantages, chief among them freedom of movement and the ability to regulate the flow of weapons, commercial goods and individuals. For a group with transnational aspirations—such as those of IS or the Kurdish national movement—the border remains a key symbolic prize insofar as it confers legitimacy on their claim to be redrawing the post-Ottoman order in their own image.

Finally, the border continues to draw a line between surprisingly distinct “national identities”. Despite all their deepening ties and the increasingly unhindered flow of people, culture and information, the Syrian and Iraqi citizenries have remained unmistakably Syrian and Iraqi. Longstanding observers of both contexts will struggle to pin down and explain a paradox that nevertheless appears self-evident: there is a very Syrian way, just as there is a very different, Iraqi way, of living a similarly fragmented, conflicted, confused and evolving identity. For example, while a well-established urban culture has deeply permeated Syrian society even in its rural settings, the reverse can be said about Iraq, where a tribal ethos shapes to a remarkable extent the ways of city dwellers.

What is more, the Syrian and Iraqi polities—despite their increasing fragmentation—remain, for the most part, disinterested in radical notions of erasing or redrawing borders. With the (admittedly formidable) exceptions of transnational jihadists and select Kurdish entities, sub-state constituencies continue to articulate their goals within the framework of existing borders: from Iraq’s Sunni tribes and Shiite militias to Syria’s ideologically diverse opposition (excluding al-Qaeda and IS), Syrian and Iraqi groups continue to speak the language of national unity, albeit with varying shades of sectarianism and occasional calls for decentralization.²⁹ While Sykes-Picot has become a dirty word throughout large swathes of the Arab world, there can be no denying the extent to which modern borders have become internalized.

As the border continues to undergo this process of diffraction and the realities on either side become more blurred, observers must find new ways of conceptualizing words like “state,” “nation” and “border,” which tend to be defined in too narrow and binary a fashion not to be misleading. The framework within which we have come to understand these ideas—that of the European-style nation-state, defined by a central state capable of (and committed to) exerting its sovereignty within rigid borders—is becoming ever less coherent as Middle Eastern politics are increasingly driven by crumbling state apparatuses and potent grassroots movements that exist within or across modern borders. The fluidity of these dynamics requires a loosening of our vocabulary, an adjustment of the lens through which we view a region whose modern contours have become so blurred that we will see it better with less perfect a vision.

²⁹ We may consider, for instance, PYD leader Salih Muslim’s insistence that Syrian Kurds do not seek independence but rather a measure of autonomy within a “united, democratic Syria”; frequent references by Syria’s Sunni Arab opposition to maintaining Syrian unity; and efforts by Iraq’s Shiite militias to cast their activities as nationalistic rather than sectarian. See Amberin Zaman, “Syrian Kurdish leader discusses son’s killing by jihadists,” *Al-Monitor*, 23 October 2013, and “The Militiarization of Iraqi Politics,” op. cit.

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