

POWER STRUGGLE OR RELIGIOUS WAR?

**THE CONFSSIONALISATION OF CONFLICTS IN THE ARAB
WORLD: THE SITUATION IN SYRIA, LEBANON AND IRAQ**

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Armed conflicts in the Arab world are often referred to as “ethnic conflicts” or “religious wars” and assumed to be unavoidable. When viewed from this standpoint, Arabs are the sworn enemies of Kurds and Iranians, Muslims are fierce opponents of Jews and Christians, and Sunni and Shiite Muslims are in a state of constant feud. However, other observers refute the claim that the conflicts have an underlying ethnic, religious or tribal motivation. They believe that existing resentments are simply being instrumentalised in the struggle for power, expansion or control over resources. Using the examples of Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, this article investigates whether and to what extent ethnic and religious identities determine the actions of the protagonists in these conflicts.

In Europe, in the wake of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, sovereign territorial states began to take the place of supranational empires. This process was completed after the First World War with the collapse of the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires. The 19th century saw the spread of the idea of the nation state, in which the nation and its people identify with the polity. The nation state seeks to create a homogeneous body politic based on an ethnic, linguistic or cultural foundation (*Kulturnation*, cultural nation) or on the citizens’ will (*Staatsnation*, willed nation). Group identities are depoliticised or levelled out by means of administration and laws, the nation state’s ideology, language policy and educational system and through compulsory military service. This homogenisation may also take place via resettlement or the persecution of particular sections of the population.

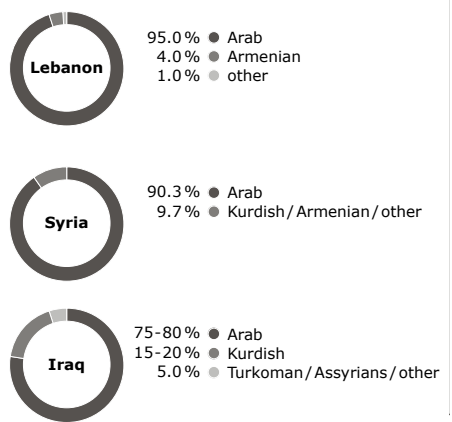
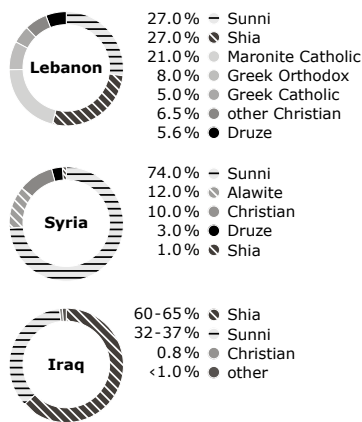
The Arab world followed a different pattern. With the exception of Morocco, the Arabian Peninsula and Oman, this region was formerly part of the Ottoman Empire. The provinces of Beirut, Aleppo, Damascus, Mosul, Baghdad and Basra were the predecessors of today's Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. They are extremely diverse in ethnic, religious and tribal terms and have strong, overlapping group identities.

Fig. 1
Population composition



Religious Groups

Ethnic Groups



Source: Own illustration based on: CIA, *The World Factbook*, 2013-2014, Washington DC, <http://cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook> (accessed 12 Jun 2015). Data on Lebanon is controversial for lack of updated census.

Over the ages, individualism has been afforded little significance in these societies. People are part of an extended family, and also of a tribe, a religious group and an ethnic/linguistic/cultural community. Group identities continue to carry great weight in the Middle East, despite the fact that individualism is beginning to take hold among today's youth, partly as a result of their access to global media and social networks. Religious groups have particular significance because of their historic role over past centuries. They have become the main political and social frameworks for identity. However, they are not necessarily linked to extreme devoutness.

In the Ottoman Empire there was no nation, just a Muslim "nationality", along with "millets" (self-administered and additionally taxed non-Muslim religious communities, such as Jews, Armenian Apostolic Christians and Greek Orthodox Christians). Their religious leader was also their political leader, and in return he was responsible for the loyalty of his community to the government. This system allowed the communities to live peacefully side-by-side for many centuries.¹

In the Ottoman Empire, Shiites were accused of being "fifth columnists" of the Persians. Post-Islamic religious communities such as the Alawites and the Druze found themselves even more disadvantaged.

Shiites had no legal status because Sunni Islam was the state religion. In the Mesopotamian provinces they were constantly accused of being "fifth columnists" of the Persians.

They were barred from holding high administrative or military positions. In 1915/1916 the Shiites rose up in protest against the Ottomans.² Post-Islamic religious communities such as the Alawites (also known as the Nusayris) and the Druze found themselves even more disadvantaged. The followers of both these religious groups withdrew to live in the mountainous regions. Periods of persecution alternated with periods of pragmatic tolerance.³

In the Ottoman Empire, religious communities did not only provide identity, but also cared for the solidarity and survival of their members. The reach of the government was limited in the Arab provinces, so in times of economic need, war and natural catastrophe people fell back on their religious or tribal communities.

- 1 | Cf. Udo Steinbach, *Die Türkei im 20. Jahrhundert. Schwieriger Partner Europas*, Bergisch-Gladbach, 1996, p. 66 f.
- 2 | Cf. Henner Fürtig, "Irak", in: Werner Ende/Udo Steinbach (eds.), *Der Islam in der Gegenwart*, Munich, 5th edition 2005, p. 516.
- 3 | Cf. William Harris, *Lebanon. A History. 600-2011*, Oxford, 2012, p. 85.

Their members lived in particular areas, villages or urban districts; they married each other, were given jobs by their friends and family and helped each other in times of need. Today, religious communities in the Arab world still provide their members with solidarity and help when times are hard. Furthermore, the fundamental lack of individual and civil rights means that religious and tribal communities are vital for lobbying the government on issues that affect their members.

DIVIDE AND RULE

When the power of the Ottoman Empire began to fade in the 19th century, the European powers hoped to be able to make some territorial gains. They tried to fuel tensions between the different population groups in order to destabilise the rule of the sultan, and they instigated and encouraged the growth of independence movements.

The European nations used the pretext of protecting minorities to meddle with the internal policies of the Ottoman Empire. France became the protective power for the Catholics, the Russian Empire protected the Orthodox Christians, and Britain protected the Jews. The minorities benefited from this external support, but their privileged status bred resentment among the Muslim majority population.⁴

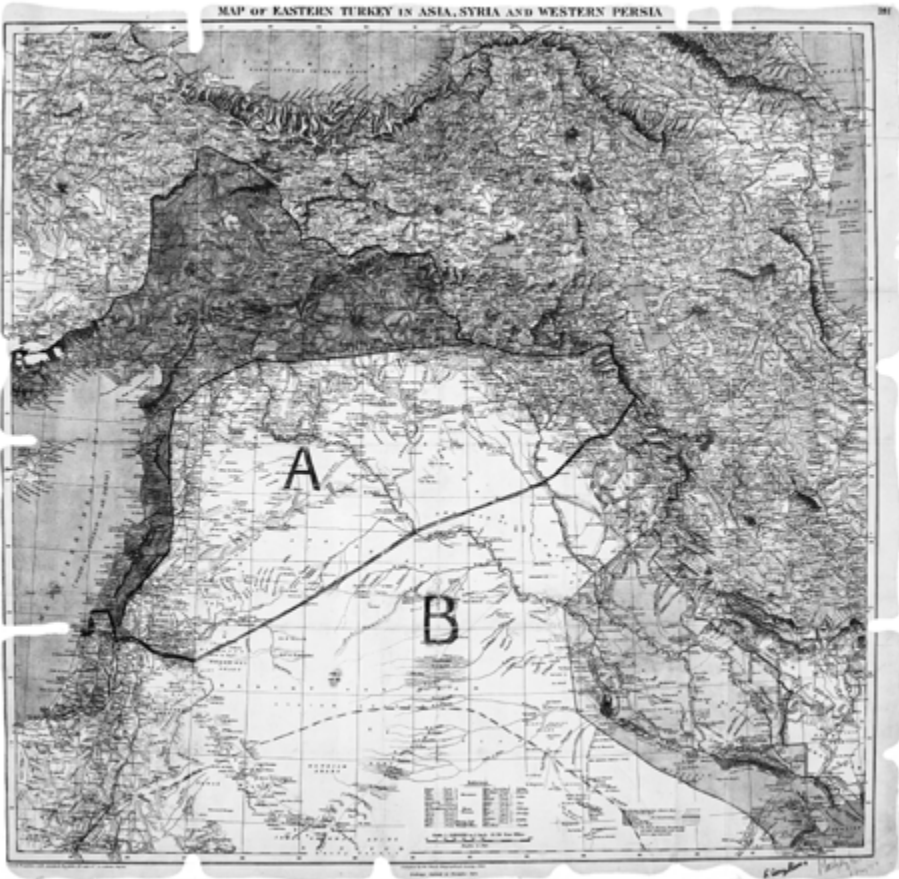
In particular Russia supported the Armenian and Kurdish independence movements. The possibility of a nation state was dangled in front of these two peoples, despite the fact that the supporters were well aware that the territories being claimed were largely overlapping. The creation of Armenian and Kurdish states would quickly have triggered a fierce conflict between the two sides. It is worth noting how these states were never founded after the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War.⁵

In turn, as the 19th century drew to a close, the Ottoman government sought to cling to power by adopting a policy of divide and rule. Sultan Abdul Hamid II (who ruled from 1876 to 1909) played the Kurds of Anatolia off against the Armenians, who generally acted as merchants and tax collectors. In Lebanon, he set the

4 | Cf. Johanna Pink, "Der Islam und die nichtislamischen Minderheiten", in: Ende/Steinbach (eds.), n. 2, p. 734.

5 | Cf. Erich Feigl, *Die Kurden. Geschichte und Schicksal eines Volkes*, Munich, 1995, p. 159-183.

Druze against the Catholic Maronites, in Syria the Sunnis against the Alawites, and in Iraq the Sunni nomads from the Steppes against the Shiite arable farmers.⁶



On 16 May 1916, Great Britain and France signed the confidential Sykes-Picot Agreement on the partitioning of Osmanic territories in the Near and Middle East – after decade-long interventions in the Osmanic Empire’s domestic politics. In a modified form, the agreement has become the fundament for the borders of the British and French mandate of the league of nations that were arranged in San Remo in 1920. | Source: Royal Geographical Society, The National Archives (UK), MPK1/426 ©©.

In the First World War Arab tribes became British allies and were promised an Arab nation state. But in contrast London and Paris were negotiating the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which was signed on 16 May 1916. This defined their spheres of influence and control over Ottoman territories in the Middle East. Based on this

6 | Cf. Ernst Werner/Walter Markow, *Geschichte der Türken. Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, Berlin-Ost, 1979, p. 215.

agreement, in 1920 the provinces of Beirut, Aleppo and Damascus went to France under the League of Nations Mandate for Syria, while the provinces of Mosul, Baghdad and Basra went to Britain under the League of Nations Mandate for Iraq.

In true “divide and rule” fashion, Paris and London favoured the minorities over the majority and in this way made them dependent. France initially planned to partition its

France partitioned its mandate along confessional lines. Four administrative areas were set up: the mainly Christian Lebanon, the State of Jabal Druze, the State of Alawites and the rest of Syria.

mandate into six territories along confessional lines. In the end, four administrative areas were set up: the mainly Christian Lebanon, the State of Jabal Druze, the State of Alawites and the rest of Syria.⁷ The French mainly recruited Christians and Alawites for administrative and military functions. The French made enemies of the Druze by attacking their feudal system, leading to a major Druze uprising between 1925 and 1927. For a time, Sunni Syrians fought on the side of the Druze, though this alliance was destined to be short-lived. In 1936 France ended the autonomy of the Jabal Druze and Alawite State. From then on, the Sunni-dominated government did everything it could to prevent any aspirations for Druze or Alawite autonomy.⁸

In Iraq, the British did not focus on the Shiite majority, whose clerics had spoken out against British influence during and after the war, but on the Sunni upper classes in Baghdad and certain Sunni tribal leaders. A foreign Sunni royal dynasty was also imposed on Iraq in the shape of the Hashemites of Hejaz. The British predominantly recruited Kurds and Christian Assyrians to the armed forces and used them to suppress uprisings. To the Sunni and Shiite Arabs, these groups appeared as henchmen of the British Mandate. Massacres of Assyrians were carried out just eight months after Iraq gained independence in 1932.⁹

7 | The Sandjak of Alexandretta (also known as Hatay) on the Mediterranean coast was governed separately, too. In 1938 its parliament declared it autonomous, in 1939 it proclaimed the unification with Turkey after a controversial referendum. This was approved by France. Syria, which became independent in 1944, did not recognize Hatay's union with Turkey. See Steinbach, n. 1, p. 149 f.

8 | Cf. Margret Boveri, *Vom Minarett zum Bohrturm. Eine politische Biographie Vorderasiens*, Zurich/Leipzig/Berlin, 1938, p. 158-167, 382-408; Liselotte Abid, “Die Religion ist für Gott – das Land ist für alle”, in: Fritz Edlinger/Tyma Kraitt (eds.), *Syrien. Hintergründe, Analysen, Berichte*, Vienna, 2013, p. 24 f.

9 | Cf. Boveri, n. 8, p. 138-143, 435-455.

Unlike Syria, Iraq was an artificial construct, as political, economic and social links between the Ottoman provinces of Mosul, Baghdad and Basra had been marginal. The Kurds who were living in Northern Iraq showed little loyalty to Iraq from the start and had separatist aspirations. From 1922 to 1924 they unsuccessfully tried to create a separate "Kingdom of Kurdistan".¹⁰ Relations between Iraqi Sunnis and Shiites had been tense for hundreds of years. In Shiite strongholds such as Najaf, Karbala and Kufa there had again and yet again been uprisings against Sunni rule.

Eyewitness Margret Boveri wrote: "After the war, when the new state of Iraq was to be built, the enmity between Sunnis and Shiites was so deep and insurmountable that it often threatened to tear the young nation apart."¹¹

NATION-BUILDING AS PART OF PAN-ARAB NATIONALISM

Pan-Arab nationalism recognised all ancestral religions as being part of Arab culture, but they were not to be given any influence over politics, law or administration. The same applied to tribal identities.

Following the European model, pan-Arab nationalists aimed to set up independent "cultural nations". All ancestral religions were recognised as being part of Arab culture, but they were not to be given any influence over politics, law or administration. The same applied to tribal identities. The ultimate goal was to bring the Arab states together to create a powerful pan-Arab nation.¹²

Syria, which gained independence in 1944, was the first to be gripped by pan-Arab nationalism. When Shukri al-Quwatli was elected president in 1955, this became the dominant ideology, and in 1958 Syria created a pan-Arab union with Egypt under Nasser in the form of the United Arab Republic (UAR). This was dissolved in 1961, but in 1963 the equally pan-Arabist Ba'ath Party seized power in Syria.

After gaining its independence in 1932, Iraq initially remained a conservative kingdom with close ties to Britain under the rule of its Hashemite king and the Sunni upper class. When the king was deposed in 1958, left-wing parties took over, and in 1963 the pan-Arab Ba'ath Party seized power also in this country after a military coup.

10 | Fürtig, n. 2, p. 517.

11 | Boveri, n. 8, p. 151.

12 | Albert Hourani, *Die Geschichte der arabischen Völker*, Frankfurt am Main, 2000, p. 483-494.

Lebanon's story was very different. Here, Ottoman group particularism was not overcome but elevated to the organisational principle behind the state after it gained independence in 1943. In light of a blockade between supporters of independence and supporters of a union with Syria, the two sides agreed to the National Pact, which remains in place today. This agreed that the sovereign state of Lebanon should be set up, that there should be no union with Syria, that France should not be a protective power and that there should be no military alliance with the West. Lebanon was set up as a consociational democracy without majority rule, based on 18 recognised religious communities (Sunnis, Sevens and Twelver Shiites, Druze, Alawites, Jews and twelve Christian religious denominations). Parliamentary seats, furthermore the highest governmental positions and many other posts were allocated according to a set ratio of 6:5 in favour of Christians. To some extent, the constitution was a continuation of the Ottoman millet system, but the Sunnis were no longer afforded their previous privileges. The absence of a parliamentary majority and special constitutional provisions necessarily led to consociationalism. Syria viewed Lebanon's independence as a neocolonial manoeuvre on the part of France, and indeed only recognised its independence in 2008.¹³



Places of worship of different religions shape Beirut's cityscape up to this day. They reflect Lebanon's religious diversity. | Source: Frode Bjørshol, flickr ©.

13 | Cf. Maximilian Felsch, "Der Libanon zwischen Integration und Fragmentierung", in: Rüdiger Robert/Daniela Schlicht/Shazia Saleem (eds.), *Kollektive Identitäten im Nahen und Mittleren Osten*, Münster, 2010, p. 379-398.

In Syria in the 1960s, the idea of nation-building gained ground among all the various groups. This secular one-party state allowed relatively large amounts of religious and cultural freedom, but individual freedoms were severely curtailed. Some of these group freedoms were retained when the country came under the rule of the Assad clan in 1970. In contrast, Iraq only paid lip-service to the idea of nation-building, as the majority Shiites were still effectively excluded. For a long time, the Shiites saw pan-Arab nationalism as an instrument for equal political participation. When the Ba'ath Party seized power in 1963, Shiites made up the majority of its members and held 54 per cent of its leadership positions. But this unity party soon became dominated by Sunnis. By 1968 Shiites held only six per cent of the leading positions in the party. Effectively excluded, many of them turned to Islamic underground organisations such as Da'wa (Islamic Call), supported by their clergy.¹⁴

The main group to suffer from Pan-Arabism was the Kurds. As a people, they have a very clear sense of identity but are very divided in terms of clanship, language and religious beliefs.

As the aim was to create a "cultural nation" rather than a "willed nation", Syria and Iraq both allowed discrimination based on ethnicity, language and culture. Non-Arabs were treated as de facto second-class citizens. The main group to suffer was the Kurds. As a people, they have a very clear sense of identity but are very divided in terms of clanship, language and religious beliefs (they include Sunnis, Shiites, Christians, Jews and adherents of smaller religions such as Ahl-e Haqq, Haqqa, Yazidis and Shabaks). From the outset, the Kurds were sceptical of pan-Arab nationalism, preferring to support communist parties and secessionist movements.¹⁵

Between 1960 and 1970 in Iraq, Kurds conducted a bitter guerrilla war to try to gain autonomy. The Iraqi government responded by introducing forced assimilation and resettlement measures. The oil-rich region of Kirkuk was resettled by Arabs at the expense of the Kurds, Assyrians and Turkmens.¹⁶ Syria also pursued a policy of Arabisation in its Kurdish north. In 1962 thousands of Kurds had their citizenship withdrawn, and by 2011 over 150,000 had

14 | Cf. Fürtig, n. 2, p. 518.

15 | Cf. Wolfgang Bretholz, *Aufstand der Araber*, Vienna/Munich/Basel, 1960, p. 361.

16 | Cf. Brendan O'Leary, "Power Sharing, Pluralist federation and Federacy", in: Brendan O'Leary/John McGarry/Khaled Salih (eds.), *The Future of Kurdistan in Iraq*, Philadelphia PA, 2005, p. 78-86.

been left stateless. From the 1970s onwards, Arab Bedouins were settled in Northern Syria in order to create an "Arab belt" in the border region.¹⁷

RULING CLIQUES UNDER ASSAD AND HUSSEIN

Tensions between the various groups increased during the 1970s, when pan-Arab nationalism in Syria and Iraq was in fact replaced by the rule of small cliques. In 1970, Air Force General Hafiz al-Assad seized power in Syria. Al-Assad's main supporters came from his clan base in the coastal mountains (Jebel Ansariye) and from his religious group, the Alawites. He also courted other religious minorities such as the Christians, Druze and Shiites and gave them positions in his government, civil service and army. From the Sunni camp, he co-opted the merchant classes in Damascus and Aleppo and the conservative clergy in Damascus. Otherwise, Arab Sunnis were discriminated against when official posts, resources and public services were being distributed. Assad's ruling position was precarious, as his Alawite religious group only made up one tenth of the Syrian population. Attracting the support of other privileged groups meant he could count on at least one third of the Syrian population.¹⁸

The status of the co-opted religious community is similar to the Ottoman's millet system. The Grand Mufti of Damascus, the Christian bishops and other religious leaders are personally responsible for ensuring the loyalty

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of their followers to the country's president. In return, the Syrian state affords them the official status and privileges of ministers. If their political behaviour is correct, the religious communities are rewarded with favours. So it is hardly surprising that all Syrian religious leaders have so far remained (or had to remain) loyal to President Bashar al-Assad, the son and successor to Hafiz al-Assad.

In Iraq Saddam Hussein took power in 1979 and also created a ruling clique supported by his family clan, his Al-Bu-Nasir tribe and others tribes and Arab Sunnis (who make up one quarter of the population of Iraq). Saddam Hussein also co-opted Arab religious

17 | Cf. Kristin Helberg, *Brennpunkt Syrien. Einblick in ein verschlossenes Land*, Freiburg i.Br., 2012, p. 99-108.

18 | Cf. Tyma Kraitt, "Eine alawitische Militärdiktatur? Zum Verhältnis von Staat, Militär und Religion in Syrien", in: Edlinger/Kraitt (eds.), n. 8, p. 31-44.

minorities such as Christians and Mandaeans and his government applied similar mechanisms to those used in Syria. The appointment of the Chaldean Catholic Tarik Aziz (born Mikhail Yuhanna) as Deputy Prime Minister in 1979 and as Foreign Minister in 1983 was a signal to Iraqi Christians that they would be rewarded if their political behaviour was correct.¹⁹

The clearest and perhaps most painful manifestation of the crypto-confessionalist nature of the system could be found in the security forces and secret services. In Syria, their leaders and elite units came from the Alawite minority, in Iraq they were recruited from the Sunni minority.



Bashar al-Assad (photo) as well as Saddam Hussein secured their power through the establishment of a ruling clique and the co-opting of religious minorities, economic interest groups and tribes. | Source: Beshr Abdulhadi, flickr ©.

The majority of the population were discriminated against and in both countries increasingly turned towards Islamism. This ideology gained in popularity, while pan-Arabism became discredited after the Arab states' devastating defeat by Israel in 1967 and because of its failure to deliver on its economic promises. The Islamists promised honesty, fairness, global power and a different kind of supranational union based on a common faith.

19 | Saddam Hussein also used a divide and rule policy to control the tribes in his country. He sought alliances with powerful tribes and played them off against other tribes. Cf. Amatzia Baram, "The Iraqi Tribes and the Post-Saddam System", *Brookings Paper*, 8 Jul 2003, <http://brookings.edu/research/papers/2003/07/08iraq-baram> (accessed 28 May 2015).

In Syria the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood made rapid advances in rural areas during the 1970s. The dominance of the “heretical” Alawites was a particular thorn in the side of the Brotherhood. Its radical wing declared war on the government in 1976 and carried out some bloody attacks. Hafiz al-Assad reacted by persecuting them mercilessly, culminating in the Hama massacre in 1982, when tens of thousands were killed.²⁰

In Iraq the Shiite-Islamist underground movement gained momentum thanks to the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. Attacks proliferated against public officials and symbols of the Ba’ath regime. Saddam Hussein reacted

Saddam Hussein’s attack on Iran in September 1980 was a result of his fear of radicalisation on the part of Iraqi Shiites. However, they generally remained loyal to him during the First Gulf War.

by deporting or murdering activists. His attack on Iran in September 1980 was also a result of his fear of radicalisation on the part of Iraqi Shiites. However, they generally remained loyal to the government during the First Gulf War. After Iraq’s defeat in the Second Gulf War, the Shiites dared to revolt in 1991. Hussein’s brutal clampdown cost the lives of up to 100,000 people. He continued with his deportation policy and also widely decimated the Shiite clergy.²¹ Even when he was on his way to the gallows on 30 December 2006, Saddam Hussein was still cursing the “Persians”. This clearly demonstrates how the dictator always viewed the Iraqi Shiites as a fifth column of Tehran.²²

Saddam Hussein was equally brutal in his treatment of the Kurds, who, unlike the Shiites, had openly collaborated with Iran during the First Gulf War. During the Anfal Campaign between 1986 and 1989, thousands of Kurdish villages were levelled and tens of thousands of Kurds were killed, some by chemical weapons.

After the fall of Saddam Hussein, the U.S. occupiers failed to initiate the building of an Iraqi nation that encompassed all its various groups. During the country’s rebuilding process, civilian administrator Paul Bremer turned to the divided ethnic and religious groups and to the tribal sheikhs. This contributed to the country’s ongoing particularisation.²³ New political parties were largely founded based on ethnic, religious and tribal affiliations. Fair general elections resulted 2005 in the Shiite majority taking power for

20 | Cf. Werner Schmucker, “Sekten und Sondergruppen”, in: Ende/Steinbach (eds.), n. 2, p. 720.

21 | Cf. Fürtig, n. 2, p. 518-520.

22 | Cf. “Saddam starb mit Hasstiraden auf den Lippen”, *Die Welt*, 31 Mar 2006, <http://welt.de/705683> (accessed 26 May 2015).

23 | Cf. Fürtig, n. 2, p. 520.

the first time in the country's history. A constitutional reform with three widely self-governed constituent states that was propagated by senator Joseph R. Biden and Leslie H. Gelb was dismissed by the Bush administration in favor of the status quo of a strong federal government.²⁴ Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki (2006 to 2014) of the Islamist Da'wa Party turned the former ruling system on its head. Now the Shiite majority discriminated against the Sunni minority when designating positions in government, the civil service and the security forces, and in the provision of infrastructure and public services. The Kurds were able to get validation for their autonomy in Northern Iraq they had achieved in 1991 and worked on extending it still further. Today the words of Peter W. Galbraith still resonate in the artificially created state of Iraq: "The fundamental problem of Iraq is an absence of Iraqis."²⁵

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Maliki's policy of reverse discrimination and the ongoing stationing of U.S. troops on Iraqi soil fuelled the fires of Arab Sunni resistance.

With its long and barely controlled borders, Iraq became a magnet for radical Islamists from abroad. The group conflict increasingly turned into a proxy war, with Saudi Arabia and its allies supporting the Sunni resistance fighters and Iran supporting Maliki's Shiite government. In this way, the two countries brought their ideological and geopolitical rivalry onto Iraqi soil.

THE SUNNI-SHIA DIVIDE

The origins of the Sunni-Shia divide lie in the distant past.²⁶ After the death of the Prophet, a bitter political battle for succession developed between the more dynastic-oriented Sunni party and the Shiite party, which believed in the supremacy of blood ties. In the end it was the Sunnis who prevailed and since then the Shiites have managed to hold on to long-term political power in just two countries – Yemen (897 to 1962) and Iran (1501 to today). Throughout history, the relationship between the two sects has generally been characterised by resentment and prejudice, yet there are still many places where Sunnis and Shiites coexisted

24 | Joseph R. Biden/Leslie H. Gelb, "Unity Through Autonomy in Iraq", *The New York Times*, 1 May 2006.

25 | Peter W. Galbraith, "What Went Wrong", in: O'Leary/McGarry/Salih (eds.), n. 16, p. 242.

26 | Cf. Council on Foreign Relations, "The Sunni-Shia Divide", 2014, <http://cfr.org/peace-conflict-and-human-rights/sunni-shia-divide/p33176#!> (accessed 26 May 2015).

peacefully for centuries. This all changed in the 18th century with the beginning of the Sunni Wahhabist movement on the Arabian Peninsula. The puritanical Wahhabis believed in the idea of returning to an idealised form of a pristine Muslim community. They saw Shiites as traitors and deviants and fought bitterly against them. This kind of puritanical thinking also tends to be shared by today's Salafists and Jihadists.

In the 1920s the Wahhabis conquered large swathes of the Arabian Peninsula and founded the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which went on to become the dominant power in the Gulf on account of its extensive oil reserves. As a result, Saudi Arabia became Iran's key political rival in the region. Following the success of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, the rivalry between the two countries became ideological as well as political. Both

countries sought to become the leaders of the Gulf region and the leaders of the Muslim world. However, there are fundamental differences between the two: Saudi Arabia tends to act anti-Shiite, whereas Iran does

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not act anti-Sunni. Saudi Arabia seeks to promote the Wahhabist way in the Muslim world, while Iran simply promotes its political model of an Islamic Republic as the ideal for all Muslims, including Sunnis. Iran has endeavoured to strengthen Shiite communities in Arab countries in order to gain political influence. Saudi Arabia is worried about the anti-monarchical politicisation of Shiites in the Gulf and is seeking to form its own anti-Iranian Sunni bloc. For at least a decade, Saudi Arabia has also had to live with serious concerns over Iran's alleged military nuclear program. In December 2004, King Abdullah of Jordan warned of the formation of an Iranian-led "Shia Crescent" stretching from the Mediterranean to the Gulf, which would pose a serious threat to the Sunni states.²⁷

In many places, the political and ideological struggle for power between the Saudi and Iranian camps has succeeded in poisoning relations between many Sunnis (who make up some 85 per cent of all Muslims worldwide) and Shiites (some 15 per cent). Violent attacks are on the increase, mostly carried out by fanatical Sunni activists. In Syria and Iraq, these activists see it as their divine mission to destroy the Shiite "heretics" and their "temples" (i.e. mosques). They also consider the Alawites to be Shiites as

27 | Cf. Ian Black, "Fear of a Shia full moon", *The Guardian*, 26 Jan 2007, <http://theguardian.com/world/2007/jan/26/worlddispatch.ianblack> (accessed 26 May 2015).

their movement grew out of Shia Islam in the 9th century. For their part, senior Shiite clerics such as Ali al-Sistani of Najaf have repeatedly and successfully called on the followers of their own branch of Islam to exercise restraint. Admittedly, repeated attacks by Salafists and Jihadists in recent years has resulted in the formation of militant Shiite militias in Syria and Iraq, which have fought on the side of those countries' governments.²⁸



The most important party of the Lebanese Shiites is the Hezbollah (Party of God), which is led by Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah. It commands a battle-trying militia that is currently also fighting in Syria on the government's side. | Source: © Martin Pabst.

DEVELOPMENTS SINCE 2011

In March 2011, Syria became the next country to be affected by the Arab protest movement. As the police fired on protestors and imprisoned and mistreated young demonstrators, the protests spread to the suburbs of Damascus and large swathes of rural Syria. At first, the government wavered between giving in to the protests and suppressing them, but by the middle of the year it had decided it was in its interests to quash the protest movement. The response from the demonstrators was to take up arms and form militias in order to fight back. Defectors from the government's armed forces and local volunteers formed themselves into a "Free Syrian Army" (FSA).

28 | Cf. Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival. How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future*, New York/London, 2007, p. 178/197.

The protest movement was striving for political freedom and better economic opportunities. It was dominated by the disadvantaged Sunni majority, but was also joined by representatives from minorities, such as the Alawite writer Samar Yazbek. During the protests, demonstrators invoked the idea of the national unity with chants such as "We are all Syrians, we are united" and "No to sectarianism". Small Alawite and Christian militias were even formed under the umbrella of the FSA.²⁹

The strategy of the Syrian government was and still is to present the protest movement as an insurrection by radical Islamist Sunnis in order to create fear amongst the country's minorities. This strategy has been successful as the overwhelming majority of Syrian Alawites, Christians, Druze and Shiites have remained loyal to the government or at least remained neutral. The fear of revenge and retaliation is especially widespread amongst the Alawites – a fear that is justified in light of their painful history.

A number of developments have ensured that the Syrian resistance movement has in fact gradually taken a confessionalist direction. Turkey, for example, has been able to exert significant influence over the FSA because its high command and training camps were based in the Turkish province of Hatay. The opposition Syrian National Council (SNC) also set itself up in Turkey. Ankara made sure the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood exerted a disproportionate amount of influence on its committees, thus bolstering Sunni dominance.

The FSA and SNC were not recognised by every resistance group in the country. However, confessionalist tendencies also gradually increased in these independent groups, as evidenced by the decidedly Sunni names given to many of the new militias. Islamisation also grew stronger during the fierce battle for Aleppo in mid-2012, largely due to the infiltration of Salafist preachers and mercenaries. Battle-hardened radical Sunni groups such as Liwa al-Tawhid and Jabhat al-Nusra (part of the al-Qaeda network) began playing an ever more prominent role, while slogans such as "Christians to the Lebanon, Alawites to the coffin" could be heard being chanted at rallies. By 2013, the newly formed rebel alliance Islamic Front had attracted some 45,000 fighters, far outstripping the FSA. It

29 | Cf. Samar Yazbek, *Schrei nach Freiheit. Bericht aus dem Innern der syrischen Revolution*, Munich, 2012.

was also clearly anti-Shiite and anti-Alawite.³⁰ The appearance of the Jihadist “Islamic State in Iraq and Syria” (ISIS, now known as Islamic State/IS) in the same year represented an additional and, as yet, unprecedented level of radicalisation.



Saudi Arabia’s emergence as a regional power is closely linked to its oil deposits. In addition motivated by the Wahhabi Islam, it rivals for the pre-dominance in the Gulf region with Shiite Iran. | Source: hamza82, flickr ©f©.

There were a number of reasons for this particular development. The Syrian government itself contributed to the rise of Islamic extremism when, in early 2011, it released numerous Sunni Islamist prisoners and began to focus its attacks more strongly on secular rather than Islamist resistance groups.³¹ Their rationale was that a fear of Salafists and Jihadists would force the West to decide the government was the lesser of two evils. Secondly, a clear picture of the enemy increased the combat strength of both

30 | Cf. Ulrike Putz, “Syriens Alawiten: Minderheit in Todesangst”, *Spiegel Online*, 22 Feb 2012, <http://spiegel.de/politik/ausland/a-816735.html> (accessed 26 May 2015).

31 | According to information gathered from defectors, Zahran Alloush and Hassan Aboud, for example, were released from the Sednaya prison near Damascus in 2011. With the possible help of the Syrian secret service, they set up and led the Islamist resistance groups Jaysh al Islam and Ahrar al Sham. Cf. Phil Sands/Justin Vela/Suha Maayah, “Assad regime set free extremists from prison to fire up trouble during peaceful uprising”, *The National*, 21 Jan 2014, <http://thenational.ae/world/syria/assad-regime-set-free-extremists-from-prison-to-fire-up-trouble-during-peaceful-uprising> (accessed 26 May 2015).

sides and confessional aspects became increasingly important. This made it also easier for government and opposition alike to attract external support. The Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi-Shiite militias, for example, felt compelled to fight on behalf of the government in order to protect Shiite villages and holy sites (such as the Sayyidah Zaynab Shrine in Damascus) against Salafists and Jihadists. Meanwhile, opposition militia saw an influx of Sunni volunteers from many different countries, all keen to join the fight against "heretical Shiites". By adding a confessional aspect to the image of the enemy, external actors such as Iran, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia were able to recruit fighters to join the conflict in Syria as a front for their own political ambitions. The confessionalisation of the conflict was also a direct result of the unending civil war, the progressive collapse of public services and the state losing its monopoly on the use of force. The only way that people could survive the daily attacks and destruction of their way of life was by falling back on the support of their communities. And finally, feelings of hatred and revenge were also fuelled by the brutal war crimes committed on civilians solely on account of their religious affiliations.

Since 2011, both sides have been guilty of carrying out numerous massacres and expulsions. As we saw in the Balkans in the 1990s, this kind of ethnic cleansing is a popular tool for realigning and consolidating territorial boundaries. IS in particular is currently pursuing a policy of systematic settlement by Sunnis in the territory it controls across Syria and Iraq, an area the size of Britain. Other religious groups in the area (Shiites, Alawites, Yazidis, Shabaks and recently also Christians) have been either displaced or killed and their houses and possessions redistributed.

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In Iraq, Sunni resistance, which has been supported by Saudi Arabia since the fall of Saddam Hussein, has resulted in a civil war breaking out in the country along confessional lines. Radical Sunni terrorist organisations in Iraq, such as Al Qaeda in Iraq (the forerunner to IS) led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, have carried out numerous brutal attacks on Shiite residential areas, mosques and holy sites. Religious hatred has been combined with calculated confrontation strategies with a view to creating solidarity.

THE SITUATION TODAY

The instrumentalisation of minorities in the Ottoman Empire by external states, the divide and rule policy of Sultan Abdul Hamid II and the European colonial powers, the failure of pan-Arab nationalism to provide all citizens with freedom and equality and the resulting authoritarian ruling cliques that favoured particular minorities in their allocation of power and resources – all these led to heightened tensions between the various population groups, and particularly between religious groups.

After 2003 tensions in Iraq escalated into a state of permanent armed conflict between the Sunni minority and the now-dominant Shiite majority. Salafist and Jihadist groups supported from the Sunni Gulf states carried out targeted campaigns against Shiites.

The longer the – now overlapping – wars in Syria and Iraq drag on, the more the population is gripped by the confessional polarities that are being fuelled from outside.

This constellation increasingly coloured the simply-drawn lines of the Syrian civil war: Sunnis vs. Shiites (and Alawites). Both sides present the enemy in extreme terms in order

to consolidate and mobilise their own camps. The longer the – now overlapping – wars in Syria and Iraq drag on, the more the population is gripped by the confessional polarities that are being fuelled from outside. They are being pigeonholed, whether they like it or not. The armed conflicts are “religious wars” only from the viewpoint of Salafists and Jihadists, yet polarisation actually occurs along religious lines; mutual resentment has increased massively and is being instrumentalised by the political parties.

Flight and expulsion have led to huge population movements that will be largely irreversible. The virtual “segregation” of the various groups and the resulting hatred makes it unrealistic to expect a return to the multireligious and multicultural status quo of the past. Any peace agreement must focus primarily on reconciliation, but this will not be enough in itself. New systems of government have to be found that will make it possible for people to enjoy a permanent, peaceful coexistence.

ARE NEW STATES THE SOLUTION?

It is increasingly being reported that the young nation states of Syria and Iraq have failed and that the best solution is now to redraw their territories on religious, ethnic or tribal lines based on historical group identities. The journalist Rainer Herrmann writes

in *Internationale Politik* magazine: "The political map of the Middle East is disintegrating. Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Egypt – the list of collapsing states is long. [...] But why shouldn't there be three Iraqs if one Iraq doesn't work? Why shouldn't there be six or more Libyas if a single Libya is unable to hold together?"³²

The idea of partition is nothing new. In 2006, the author, media commentator and former Pentagon staff officer Ralph Peters caused a stir when he published a book calling for the borders in the Middle East to be redrawn. He believed this should include an expanded Lebanon that took in the Syrian coastal strip dominated by Alawites, Christians and other minorities; a "Free Kurdistan" made up of Iraqi, Iranian, Syrian and Turkish territories; a "Sunni Iraq" and an "Arab Shia State".³³ Two decades earlier, Oded Yinon, a journalist with close ties to Likud and a former employee at the Israeli foreign office, proposed breaking up large Arab states such as Egypt, Syria and Iraq into smaller units along ethnic and religious lines. Some of his suggestions seem to have anticipated current developments:

"Syria will disintegrate into several states along the lines of its ethnic and sectarian structure, as is happening in Lebanon today. As a result, there will be a Shiite Alawi state, the district of Aleppo [sic!] will be a Sunni state, and the district of Damascus, another state which is hostile to the northern one. The Druze – even those of the Golan – should form a state in Hauran and in northern Jordan. This will be the long-run guarantee for security and peace in the entire region. [...] Iraq can be divided on regional and sectarian lines just like Syria in the Ottoman era. There will be three states, or more, around the three major cities, Basra, Baghdad and Mosul, while Shiite areas in the south will separate from the Sunni north which is mostly Kurdish."³⁴

32 | Rainer Hermann, "Nach dem Staatszerfall", *Internationale Politik* 5, Sep-Oct 2014, p. 8-15. Also dealing with debates concerning border demarcations: Yaroslav Trofimov, "Would New Borders Mean Less Conflict in the Middle East?", *Wall Street Journal*, 10 Apr 2015, <http://wsj.com/articles/would-new-borders-mean-less-conflict-in-the-middle-east-1428680793> (accessed 8 Jun 2015).

33 | Cf. Ralph Peters, *Never Quit the Fight*, Mechanicsburg PA, 2006. The presentation of Peter's map at the NATO Defence College in Rome in September 2006 by an American colonel led to massive Turkish protest and an apology by the U.S. State Department. Suleyman Kurt, "Carved-up Map of Turkey at NATO Prompts US Apology", *Zaman*, 29 Sep 2006.

34 | Oded Yinon, "Making the Arab World Collapse", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 4 / Vol. 12, No. 1, "Special Issue: The War in Lebanon", Summer/Autumn 1982, p. 213 f. (issued first in: *Kivvonim*, Winter 1981/82, Feb 1982).

At first glance, these seem to be quite promising ideas. But they hold many pitfalls. First of all, partitioning is generally proposed by interested third parties. This leads many Arabs to fear that the Arab world will once again be the victim of an external "Sykes-Picot" type of agreement.

Yinon also primarily proposed the strategic division of Arab countries as being to Israel's advantage in terms of security policy: "Every inter-Arab confrontation will help us to persist in the short run and it will hasten the achievement of the supreme goal, namely sub-dividing Iraq into elements like Syria and Lebanon."³⁵

It is hard to imagine that representatives of Arab governments and population groups could ever come together at a peace conference and amicably agree on redrawing the borders. In general, border changes are either the result of military victories or are imposed from outside. Both of these scenarios sow the seeds of future conflicts.



The Islamification of Syria's opposition intensified in the context of the battle of Aleppo (mid-2012) – a process desired and discretely supported by the Syrian government. | Source: Christiaan Triebert, flickr ©.

35 | *Ibid.*, p. 213. Consequently, the Israeli government is today one of the supporters of Kurdish independence in Northern Iraq. In a speech given to the Institute for National Security at Tel Aviv University on 29 June 2014, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that Israel would support a Kurdish declaration of independence Cf. "Israel's prime minister backs Kurdish independence", *The Guardian*, 29 Jun 2014, <http://theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/29/israel-prime-minister-kurdish-independence> (accessed 26 May 2015).

A restructuring of the Middle East would also be problematic because of the region's overlapping religious, ethnic, linguistic, cultural and tribal identities. Which principle should be employed? Division along religious lines would seem to be the easiest, but this would result in splitting mixed Sunni/Shiite tribes such as the Jubur or the Shammar. Population groups such as the Kurds tend to define themselves in ethnic, linguistic and cultural terms, not in terms of their religion.

It is also doubtful whether new states created on the basis of group identities could lead to peace. Of course it would mean that different population groups would have their own "homeland", but this would still result in the new and old states having minorities (as happened with Serbs in Kosovo and Kosovo Albanians in Serbia). Very often, it is these minorities who are the losers in the event of separation. At best they manage to negotiate protective rights, otherwise they run the risk of discrimination, persecution or expulsion.

What is more, the groups are not homogeneous. Christians in the Middle East are divided into a dozen different denominations with their own strong identities. Peoples such as the Kurds certainly have a strong sense of being one nation, but they are still divided into numerous tribes and religious communities. There is not even a common Kurdish language.

Founding a state for small population groups (such as the Yezidis and Shabaks on religious lines, or the Turkmens on ethnic/linguistic/cultural lines) is hardly a viable option; they would not benefit from such a solution. The principle of separation also goes against the centuries-old tradition of coexistence in the Middle East. Finally, it could only be pushed through with the aid of yet more painful population movements.

By redrawing borders, events may be set in motion that gain their own independent momentum. Creating a break-away Alawite state from Syria could turn into a Piedmont for the "unredeemed" Alawites in the Lebanon and the Turkish province of Hatay. Creating a break-away Kurdish state from Iraq could turn into a Piedmont for the "unredeemed" Kurds in Iran, Syria and Turkey. This would only provoke new regional conflicts.³⁶

36 | The Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia was the trigger for Italian unification in the 19th century and the annexation of "unredeemed" territories (*terra irredenta*) with Italian populations in neighbouring states.

It should also be borne in mind that secession can lead to long conflicts about borders and resources. The examples of today's Ethiopia/Eritrea and Sudan/South Sudan should act as warnings in this respect.

Even if over the next few years there were to be a successful secession of certain territories such as Iraqi Kurdistan or South Yemen, a new political map of the Middle East is simply not a panacea for creating peace in the region.

IS AN ISLAMIC SYSTEM THE SOLUTION?

Islamists do not propagate the creation of new states, but on the contrary want to see all Muslim states unite on the basis of the *ummah* (community of believers). There are a number of possible models for this, from a confederation to a caliphate.

In a Sunni Islam commonwealth Shiites and non-Muslims would not be equal members of the *ummah*. At best they would be tolerated as protected minorities or they may be discriminated against or even persecuted.

This solution has the advantage that it (at least in theory) integrates Muslims of different ethnic origins. So in a Sunni Islam commonwealth, the Sunni Kurds and Turkmens would be de jure citizens with equal rights.

On the other hand, Shiites and non-Muslims would not be equal members of the *ummah*. At best they would be tolerated as protected minorities (as is the case with Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians in the Islamic Republic of Iran), or they may be discriminated against or even persecuted.

Islamic systems therefore only have limited capacity to resolve conflicts between groups. It is also doubtful as to whether and to what extent it is possible to combine democracy and Islamism, as postulated in the Islamic Republic of Iran and propagated by the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood. On the other hand, radical Islamists are fundamentally opposed to democracy and religious pluralism.

OTHER SOLUTIONS?

A general, equal and unitary democracy with guaranteed basic liberties and human rights is certainly not sufficient in light of the strong group identities and the way that enmities have been fuelled over recent years. The following systems may be alternatives:

- A federal state with provinces enjoying certain powers,
- Territorial autonomy for a particular population group,
- radical decentralization and self-administration of different groups,³⁷
- Consociational democracy without majority rule (need for grand coalitions, veto rights, proportional representation).

All the above systems have their pros and cons. A federal system may reduce the dominance of a larger population group in a state, yet at provincial level there may still be tensions between different groups. Territorial autonomy favours a particular population group, which of course may lead to resentment among other groups. Consociational democracy without majority rule explicitly involves all population groups in the political process and prevents the largest group from outvoting other groups. But consociational democracy can be very bureaucratic, making it difficult to make quick decisions.

Lebanon is a good example of the latter system. It was not consociational democracy as such, but the lack of adaptation to demographic realities that caused the outbreak of the civil war in 1975, coupled with malign external influences (such as the Palestinian Fatah, Israel and Syria). Lebanon is the only country in the Arab world that has consistently upheld democracy since its independence, and no other Arab country enjoys such high levels of religious and cultural freedom and freedom of opinion.

Regardless of how Syria and Iraq will choose to restructure themselves, one thing is clear: they will have to take into account the complexity of group identities and guarantee that all their people enjoy protection and equal rights. If state borders would lose their dividing impact due to regional integration, the basis for a peaceful coexistence of different groups would be strengthened.

37 | This approach is lately brought forward by the Kurdistan Worker's Party under the name "Democratic Confederalism". Every religious, ethnic and cultural group has the right to democratic self-governance. It is said that this concept is already being implemented in Syria's Kurdish regions ("Rojava"). Cf. Songül Karabulut/Müslüm Örtülü, "Rojava oder das Konzept des Demokratischen Konföderalismus", *WeltTrends*, No. 101, Mar 2015, p.42-48.