COMMENTARY

No.209   **Friday, 8 August 2014**

Are the Sykes-Picot Borders Being Redrawn?

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The dramatic seizure of the northern Iraqi city of Mosul by a coalition of Sunni Arab militias spearheaded by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) marks what may be a fateful turning point in Iraq's history. Many have gone further, arguing that the entire system of nation-states designed in 1916, when British diplomat Mark Sykes and his French counterpart François Georges-Picot secretly planned the eventual fate of the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of World War One, is now being erased.

The challenge to regional states is moreover increasingly framed as a struggle between the Sunni and Shia branches of Islam, including in several Arab countries whose populations are almost exclusively Sunni. The narrative of sectarianism as the main driver of regional and domestic politics has gained ground since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and subsequent establishment of majority rule there—regarded by many Iraqi Sunnis as a formula for Shia domination—but the Syrian conflict since 2011 has helped make it dominant.

Both narratives of paradigmatic change are gripping, but they confuse appearances with causes. Certainly, many of the region's states are experiencing deep, structural crises, threatening societal cohesion and destabilizing internal political alignments. But framing this in terms of a sweeping challenge to the borders drawn by Sykes and Picot and of an overarching Sunni-Shia sectarian divide overstates the threat to existing nation-states and over-simplifies the social dynamics behind emerging political challenges, offering a poor guide to appropriate policy responses.

In the first instance, far from being general, the challenge is very localized. The one serious challenge to the map drawn by Sykes and Picot comes from the growing autonomy of the Kurds.

The deployment of the Kurdish Regional Government's army—the pesh merga—into the strategic oil-rich city of Kirkuk in northern Iraq on June 12 fulfils a longstanding objective and takes the Kurds closer to full independence. Whether or not this is reached anytime soon, it enhances the autonomy of Syria's Kurds, although the differences in political agendas and social constituencies between the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iraq and the dominant Democratic Union Party of Syria may prevent unification of the Kurdish regions of both countries.

In the meantime, the only border that appears to have been erased so far lies between eastern Syria and western Iraq, where local Arab clans, traders and smugglers, and armed groups have moved in both directions for years. But even here, political and social dynamics in eastern Syria are not wholly interchangeable with those of western Iraq, and few fight in each other's wars, despite the emergence of a swathe of Salafist and jihadist militancy.

Clans on the Syrian side of the border, for example, align mainly with the Assad regime or with rebel groups, including Al-Qaeda's affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, whose struggle for power focuses entirely on Syria. Even when clans declare allegiance to ISIS, they do so to counter their local rivals, but their material interests and long-term political calculations still centre on relations with provincial capitals and with Damascus. On the other side of the border, the insurgent Iraqi clans and other militias similarly have their sights set firmly on relations with the national capital, Baghdad.

Iraq may suffer de facto partition between Sunni and Shia regions as the outcome of the current fighting, but this is unlikely to be stable or lasting. Significant political parties and religious leaders in both communities still insist on coexistence and integration, while those who seek regional autonomy insist on winning a share of key assets—the capital and oil—and therefore will be compelled to reach mutually acceptable compromises with other communities.

And despite frequent dire predictions, the Syrian conflict is unlikely to end in formal partition, even if societal reconciliation and national reconstruction prove painfully difficult and slow. In contrast to the Sunni Arab inhabitants of Mosul, for example, who have always looked to Aleppo in Syria and southeast Turkey for their socio-cultural and economic ties and may now prefer autonomy within a federal Iraqi state, their counterparts in Aleppo have never ceased to see themselves solely within the context of a unitary Syrian state.

Even ISIS, which operates as a truly cross-border movement, remains heavily focused on Iraq, where it first appeared. In Syria it has been unable to hold on to any territory west of Aleppo, nor to put down genuine roots in the areas it controls in the eastern provinces of Raqqah, Deir az-Zor, and al-Hasakeh. ISIS is moreover limited geographically to the Iraqi-Syrian border. It has no presence in Lebanon and Jordan so far, and little prospect of gaining a significant local constituency in either country. This is partly due to the social and sectarian composition of Lebanon and the strength of state institutions in Jordan, but it also reflects the reaction of local

populations to the spectre of violence next door and to the massive influx of Iraqi and Syrian refugees over the past decade.

Second, the challenge to the existing system comes not from Sunni-Shia sectarianism, but from three processes that have driven it over the past two decades or more. First is the decline of state provision of critical public services such as health and education, and other forms of social welfare and safety nets amidst distorted forms of economic liberalization unaccompanied by parallel political "decompression." Second, predatory privatization in the decade prior to the start of the Arab Spring widened income disparities to levels that were unprecedented as recently as the mid-1990s, leaving 20-40 percent of the population in many Arab countries at or below the poverty line (measured as a per capita income of US$ 2 a day).

The impact of these processes has cut across sectarian or ethnic lines in many cases. It is where they have converged with state policies that privilege certain communities or marginalize others—whether in terms of political access, social welfare, or economic opportunity—that they have generated anti-systemic counter-forces. On one hand, this explains why communities that experience worse poverty rates may not turn to militancy whereas less afflicted ones do: some southern Jordanian cities have up to four times the proportion of people in poverty than the average in the greater Amman area, for example, but are cushioned by the assurance of job security in the public sector, and so the jihadists who call for the overthrow of the governing domestic and regional order tend to come from the low-income neighbourhoods of Amman-Zarqa rather than impoverished Mafraq, Ma'an, or Tafila.

On the other hand, conversely, the deliberate securitization of the Baghdad government's relations with the predominantly Sunni provinces of western Iraq under Maliki, which he employed as a means of concentrating his power and compelling his Shia rivals to stand behind his bid for a second and then third term in office, has revived and fuelled Sunni insurgency. Similarly, longstanding government neglect of "inner-city" neighbourhoods in the Lebanese cities of Tripoli and Sidon has produced Sunni militancy, just as it has in the large poverty belts around Syria's cities since 2011.

Sectarianism has arguably become more than a mere consequence of these processes, but its greatest potency still comes from the convergence of the above three processes. The fragility of the Levant's nation-states and porosity of their borders is being brought into sharp focus, but the real threat to the Sykes-Picot system comes from those who insist on re-framing region's societies and politics as governed by sect and ethnicity. This prompts them to seek or endorse new political arrangements that, by ignoring socio-economic realities, are equally flawed and likely to be at least as unstable. The internal regional or communal borders of states like Iraq may be redrawn, but not their external ones.

Note: This article was originally published in *Carnegie Middle East Centre, Beirut* and has been reproduced under arrangement. Web Link: http://carnegie-mec.org/2014/06/26/are-sykes-picot-borders-being-redrawn/hej5

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