

## Whither the Old Order?: The Regional Implications of the Syria Crisis

by *Karim Emile Bitar*

### Key Points

- The Syrian revolution started in March 2011 as a spontaneous and non-violent movement, akin to the uprisings which had taken place in Tunisia and Egypt. While the underlying political, economic and demographic causes of the Syrian revolt were similar to those that triggered the earlier revolutions, the regime's brutal reaction, Syria's geostrategic position and its sectarian make-up, as well as the agendas of regional and international powers led the revolution to morph into a bloody civil war.
- While it is unlikely that post-colonial borders will be redrawn, the territorial framework that was born following the demise of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I is beginning to shatter, illustrated by the weakening of central authorities, the flourishing of old solidarity networks and the negative reactivation of tribal loyalties.
- The Syrian fault lines are increasingly sectarian and, throughout the Middle East, the animosity between Sunni and Shiite is rapidly rising. In the wake of the rise of Iranian power that followed the US-led Iraq invasion, some are hoping to see a Sunni restoration take place in Syria and Iraq. As Syria burns, contiguous neighbouring countries are teetering on the brink.
- Iraq is progressively veering towards civil war. The Lebanese Sunni-Shiite 'balance of power' logic has yet to be hammered out in Iraq. Iraqi factions seem less willing to compromise than their Lebanese counterparts. The Kurds could emerge as winners. In a reversal of earlier policies, relations between Turkey and Iraqi Kurds improved, while Syrian Kurds are benefiting from the chaos to establish facts on the ground which will be hard to reverse.
- Despite their denials, Lebanon's two opposing camps are deeply involved in Syria, the Iranian-supported Shiite movement Hezbollah trying to prop up the Assad regime while the Saudi-backed Sunni Future Movement is attempting to hasten Assad's demise. While the fall of the Syrian regime would represent a severe blow to Hezbollah, it is questionable that such blow would be fatal.

Writing in September 2011, Hussein Agha and Robert Malley pointed out that the Arab awakening was "a tale of three battles rolled into one: people against regimes; people against people and regimes against other regimes."<sup>1</sup> Nowhere is this more evident than in Syria where all three dimensions are forcefully present, simultaneously making Syria arguably the most complex of all Arab revolutions. The Syrian revolution started in March 2011 as an inevitable, spontaneous, legitimate and overwhelmingly non-violent movement, much akin to the Arab Spring revolutions that had taken place in Tunisia and Egypt. While the underlying political, economic and demographic causes of the Syrian uprising were quite similar to those which triggered the earlier revolutions, the regime's brutal reaction, Syria's geostrategic positioning

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and its sectarian heterogeneity, as well as the political agendas of regional and international powers led the revolution to morph into a bloody civil war.

The simultaneous presence of these multiple dimensions allow the parties to focus their propaganda on the narrative that suits them best, with regime apologists underestimating the legitimate revolution dimension, and rebels minimising the proxy war dimension. The situation on the ground has reached a military stalemate and political mediation efforts have failed so far. A significant proportion of Syrians remained on the fence, sceptical towards both the regime and the rebellion.

### **The End of the Post-World War I territorial configuration?**

Attempting to draw the initial lessons of the Arab uprising, one analyst argued that the post-colonial borders and

<sup>1</sup> Hussein Agha and Robert Malley, "The Arab Counterrevolution", *The New York Review of Books*, 29 September 2011.

their derived entities have now been firmly consecrated.<sup>2</sup> Nineteen months later, and in light of the destructive energies stirred by the Syrian conflict, one wonders if this remains true: Has indeed the post-colonial territorial framework been consecrated? Are we not, alternatively, witnessing the relative demise of the colonial order brought about at the end of World War I?

**Map 1: Syria and its neighbours**



Source: CIA's World Factbook

Another observer argued<sup>3</sup> that, notwithstanding their proclaimed pan-Arabism, nationalist leaders like Saddam Hussein and Hafez Al Assad were, in point of fact, the guardians of the colonial borders. However, according to him, this matrix is being shattered. The first blow to the Sykes-Picot order was the US invasion of Iraq, which opened a Pandora's Box of ethnic and communal rivalries. The Arab revolutions then weakened the central and coercive national authorities, making it only natural for the Syrian conflict to create strong ramifications in Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq. Old solidarity networks, like those of the Shammakh tribes, are gaining renewed influence.

The evolution of the Kurdish question is another reason we are witnessing an important paradigm shift. According to David Hirst,<sup>4</sup> the great losers in the break-up of the Ottoman Empire could be winners in the wake of Syria's civil war and the Arab Spring. Indeed, in a stunning reversal of previous policies, relations between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds improved dramatically. Meanwhile, in Syria, Kurdish areas along the borders with Turkey have seen movements take advantage of the global chaos and succeed in establishing new facts on the ground, which will be difficult to reverse. Self-rule is already in place in some areas.

2 Jean-Pierre Filiu, *The Arab Revolution – Ten Lessons from the Democratic Uprising*, Oxford University Press, 2011.

3 Christophe Ayad, "La fin d'un Ordre Colonial", *Le Monde*, 15 February 2013.

4 David Hirst, "This could be the birth of an independent Kurdish State", *The Guardian*, 9 January 2013.

Notwithstanding, Kurdish autonomy still faces several obstacles. The rift between the Kurdish movement and the Syrian opposition remains wide and the Iraqi 'model' is contested. Turkey's stand and Iran's would prevent a high degree of Kurdish autonomy, as the Syrian opposition is not sympathetic to Kurdish demands. Most members of the Syrian National Coalition remain strongly attached to Syria's unity, territorial integrity and Arab identity. Any concessions made to the Kurds are likely to be mostly tactical and may not reflect the genuine long-term desires of the opposition.

### Will the Spill-over be worse in Iraq or in Lebanon?

While most commentators have their eyes set on Lebanon, many predicting an imminent spill-over of Syria's sectarian conflict, there are reasons to believe that it is Iraq which is most exposed to the resumption of its own post-US invasion civil war.<sup>5</sup> The Lebanese Sunni-Shiite 'balance of power' logic has yet to be hammered out in Iraq. In Lebanon, Sunnis and Shiites know exactly where they stand with regard to one another. They know that they are roughly on par demographically, each sect representing about 32% of the population. Hezbollah enjoys considerable military superiority but there are limits to what it can do. Iran knows that its Lebanese proxy is constrained by the institutionalised sectarian nature of Lebanese politics. Similarly, the Future Movement is supported by most pro-US Sunni Arab regimes, particularly its patron, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Despite some vitriolic arguments, both Lebanese camps know that they have a lot to lose and little to gain in case of a massive conflagration. With the exception of a few second-tier politicians, for the past two years most Lebanese leaders have been exercising restraint, waging their battles, for now, inside Syrian territory rather than in Lebanon.<sup>6</sup>

In Iraq, on the contrary, the balance of power has yet to stabilise, as Iraqi factions seem more prone to miscalculations and less willing to compromise than their Lebanese counterparts. Many Sunnis are still willing to contest the Shiite power that has emerged after the fall of Saddam Hussein, hoping that a potential post-Assad Sunni restoration in Syria will see a simultaneous Sunni restoration in Iraq.<sup>7</sup> Sunni countries like Turkey and Saudi Arabia are still lamenting the fall of Iraq under Iranian influence. The destinies of Syria and Iraq remain inextricably linked and many would like to regain in Damascus what was lost in Baghdad. Turkey's deteriorating relations with Iraq's Shiite-dominated Maliki government led Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan to offer unprecedented support to Iraqi Kurds.

### Fallout to Iraq

For all these considerations, Iraqi Sunnis are no doubt feeling emboldened by the Saudi, Turkish and Qatari vindictive state of mind and empowered by their determination to confront Iran and Arab Shiites. In the Sunni Anbar governorate of Western Iraq, some

5 Joshua Landis, "Syrian War Spillover in Iraq Will Be Much Worse than in Lebanon", *Syria Comment*, 28 October 2012.

6 Neil MacFarquhar, "Lebanon's Shiites and Sunnis Battle in Syria, but Not at Home", *The New York Times*, 19 December 2012

7 Geoffrey Aronson, "Sectarian Agenda Seeks 'Sunni Restoration' in Syria", *Al Monitor*, 27 January 2013

are starting to entertain the idea of secession, with the creation of a 'State of Western Iraq'. They held massive demonstrations, and their views, no matter how unrealistic or farfetched, are bound to become more popular should Maliki pursue his authoritarian policies. Iran's support for Maliki is likely to become even more considerable in case Assad falls, as Iran will feel the need to bolster its last remaining Arab ally.

As for Iranian-backed Iraqi Shiite radical militias, the Leagues of the Righteous ('Asaib Ahl Al Haq), they are allegedly active in Syria, along with Lebanon's Hezbollah, and trying to prop up the Assad regime. Reportedly, militant Iraqi Sunnis are also present in Iraq, fighting alongside the rebels.<sup>8</sup> While the Syrian war rages, Iraq is progressively slipping into civil war, car bombs are exploding amidst Shia processions, a resurgent Al Qaeda seems determined to strike at Shiite symbols and to undermine the Maliki government.

### Lebanon on the brink

Like Iraq, Lebanon teeters on the Sunni-Shiite precipice. When the Syrian uprising started in March 2011, and particularly after the militarisation of the revolution, many people felt that the overflow of the Syrian war into Lebanon was only a matter of time. The country had always been susceptible to the meddling of regional and international powers. Ever since 2004, when in the aftermath of the Iraq War, Iran upgraded its ambitions in the Near East, the Syria-Iran-Hezbollah axis has been engaged in a rough battle with the US-Saudi axis over Lebanon, each axis supporting one of the two Lebanese camps, in a climate of intense polarisation.

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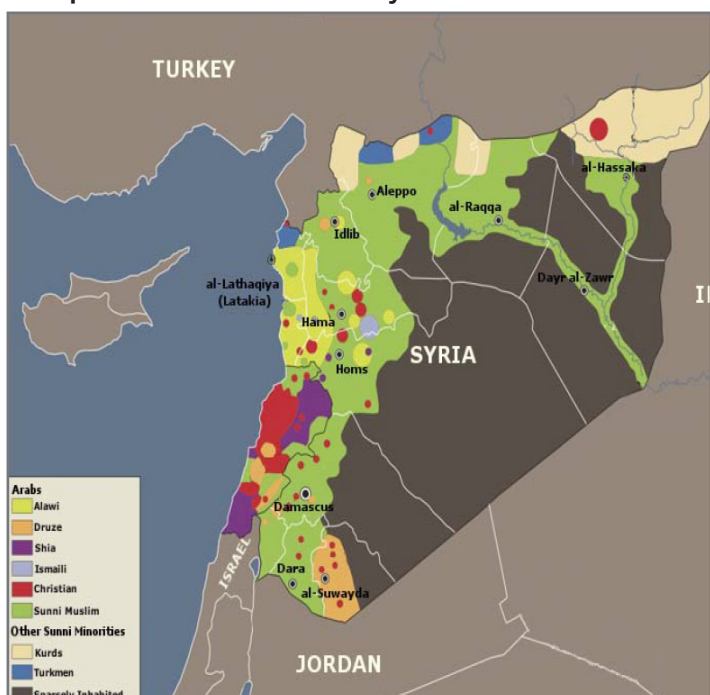
When the Syrian revolution turned into a full-fledged civil war, it was only natural that the Lebanese factions would invest the Syrian scene and try to veer it in a direction favourable to the interests of their Iranian or Saudi godfathers. Along with Iran's Revolutionary Guards, Hezbollah, worried about its supply line, became involved militarily in Syria, and in charge of providing training to the pro-Assad militias, the Shabbihas and 'Jaysh Ash Shaab', the so-called 'People's army'. This led Iraq's Shiite Grand Ayatollah Ali Al Sistani to call Hezbollah's participation in the Syrian war "a catastrophic mistake".

Sunni Islamist fighters close to Lebanon's Future Movement are also said to intervene in Syria to bolster the Free Syrian Army. Ironically, some of the Lebanese networks in charge of sending radical Sunni militants to fight against Assad in Syria were previously used by Syrian intelligence services in Lebanon, at a time when Syria was attempting to send Islamist activists to fight US forces in Iraq. Several Hezbollah fighters were killed in Syria, and the party ended up recognizing their deaths after a few months in which the Hezbollah leadership tried to maintain plausible deniability. Both Shiite and Sunni Lebanese Fighters who operate in Syria are based in the Bekaa Valley or in North Lebanon, in areas where the Syrian-Lebanese frontier has not yet been demarcated.

The number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon is growing exponentially and may soon reach 25% of the Lebanese population. United Nations Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi has warned that Syrian refugee influx could break both Lebanon and Jordan, if faced with half a million refugees. If the final battle of Damascus starts in earnest and is as devastating as feared, the number of refugees could well double. The situation in Lebanon could further deteriorate if parliamentary elections that are supposed to take place in June 2013 end up being postponed, due to the inability of the various parties to agree on an electoral law. The Lebanese government would then lose its legitimacy, which is already questioned. Also, Syria's Al-Qaeda related Nusra Front is allegedly seeking a Lebanese training base in the Palestinian camp of Ain al-Hilweh in the Southern city of Saïda.

The looming question is what would become of Hezbollah in a post-Assad configuration. Does the fall of Assad represent an existential threat to Hezbollah? Will the Shiite movement be able to survive if it is alone in the Levant? While the fall of the Syrian regime would certainly represent a severe blow to Hezbollah, it is questionable that the blow would be fatal. Hezbollah has been straddling a tenuous line between Lebanon and Syria. It has reached an impasse in the domestic Lebanese arena and will be weakened if Assad falls, but it can probably adapt. In the 1980s and 1990s, Hezbollah learned to navigate through the vicissitudes of the sometimes conflicting Iran-Syria agendas. Hezbollah leaders might have to make concessions as the fall of Assad would tilt the domestic balance of power in favour of their local adversaries, but Hezbollah's dominance

Map 2: A Sectarian Look at Syria and Lebanon



Source: Limes, Rivista italiana di geopolitica

8 Yasir Ghazi and Tim Arango, "Iraqi Sects Join Battle in Syria on Both Sides", *The New York Times*, 27 October 2012.

within the Shiite community is not likely to be threatened.

### **Whither Jordan?**

Arguably the Arab World's most fragile monarchy, Jordan faces a host of economic and political challenges and is increasingly showing signs of nervousness. While it is true that the Jordanian King initially called on Assad to step down, Jordan has since refused to take part in military action against the Syrian regime and adopted a cautious approach to the Syrian uprising, in sharp contrast to the attitudes of other Sunni Arab countries like Turkey, Saudi Arabia or Qatar.

Jordan's national economy is severely strained, with increased reliance on international community support (though under-written by GCC States) and the massive influx of Syrian refugees is threatening to destabilise the Hashemite monarchy. In a country where Palestinian refugees are already a demographic majority, a new increase in refugees will further weaken the indigenous East Bankers and the tribal bedouins who constitute the traditional support base of the throne. The Jordanian regime has also seen hundreds of its own Salafist Youths leave the country to join the Syrian rebellion, and Jordanians worry that these militants will one day return to their native country wanting to pursue the struggle.

More ominously for the Jordanian monarch, the Muslim Brotherhood has become a leading force in both Egypt and Syria, and this will inevitably embolden the Jordanian branch of the Brotherhood, which has hitherto been relatively tepid in its opposition to the regime. Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood calls for "reform of the regime" (islah al nidham), shying away from using the popular slogan of the Arab Revolutions, "the fall of the regime" (isqat al nidham).

### **Iran, Israel and Turkey hedging their bets**

A final word needs to be said about three Middle Eastern powers that might not be directly threatened in their territorial integrity by the repercussions of the Syrian war, but which nonetheless have to engage in soul-searching and re-evaluate their strategic positions in light of the Syrian situation; Iran, Israel and Turkey.

Iran is said to be working with Hezbollah to build militia networks in Syria. This would allow Iran to have operatives

inside Syria in the event that Assad falls or if the country disintegrates into sectarian entities. The stakes are high and senior Iranian Revolutionary Guard commanders were killed in Syria. In the words of Iranian Shiite cleric Mehdi Taeb, losing Syria is like losing Iran, since "Syria is the 35<sup>th</sup> province" of Iran.

Israel's positioning towards the Syrian revolution has been ambiguous and passive, until Israel's strike on a weapons convoy in late January 2013.<sup>9</sup> For four decades, the Syrian-Israeli border has been the quietest of all borders. Israel saw Assad as a predictable leader. After the 2006 Lebanon War, Israel started to re-evaluate its 'Assad as the devil we know' strategy. Yet it remains cautious as there are lots of negative Syrian scenarios for Israel, notably instability, fragmentation and Islamist takeover. Face with this catch-22, Israel is said to be considering the establishment of a security zone within Syrian territory.

Finally, Turkey, which has a 566-mile border with Syria, is also more and more edgy. Until 2003, Turkey and Syria enjoyed a problematic relationship, with hostility caused by the historical territorial dispute over the province of Hatay/District of Alexandretta. Relations improved after Turkey, sensing EU rejection, started to re-orient its positioning towards the East and put in place its 'Zero Problems with Neighbours' policy. The situation radically changed after the start of the Arab Spring, with Turkey taking the lead in supporting revolutionary forces. With many commentators now speaking of a Turkish diplomatic overstretch, it remains to be seen whether Turkey's hard line Syria stance will bring benefits or if it will backfire. Regardless, domestic Turkish considerations, and particularly the Kurdish factor, determine official Turkish positions regarding intervention in Syria. Turkish fears of rebel infighting in case Assad falls are genuine though a Turkish military intervention in Syria remains highly unlikely.

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<sup>9</sup> The convoy was allegedly carrying SA-17 Russian made anti-aircraft missiles from Syria to Hezbollah.

NB: This paper is solely the opinion of the author and does not necessarily reflect the official view of the GCSP.

### **About the author**

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