

## Instability in the Levant

The Committee Report is an excellent account of developments in MENA, in the Levant in particular. I would like to supplement it, highlighting two basic features of international affairs in the region, and using those observations as starting points for a discussion of recent events.

### National interests and the role of religion

First, religion plays a greater role in the Middle East than in most other parts of the world. Religious affiliations are necessary for political movements to gain legitimacy and grow strong. Typically, their sectarian orientations are reflected in their names. For instance, as the Committee Report notes, in Libya, a great many militias carry religious names – though the civil war is not primarily about religion. Major actors play on sectarian connections to promote their interests. Fellow Sunnis and Shias, and fellow members of their various branches, are mobilized in support of political causes. Nowhere is this clearer than in the foreign policies of Wahhabi Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran. Saudi Arabia, other Arab states and rich individuals on the Arab peninsula support their brothers in faith in Iraq and Syria – and that still includes some support for ISIL. Iran works closely with the Shia government in Baghdad, the Shia-related Alawite government in Damascus and the Shia Hezbollah. Regional conflicts tend to follow sectarian lines.

However, this does not mean that religious affiliations are the main drivers of foreign policy. *National interests trump sectarian preferences*. Iran is the only country in the Middle East where religious leaders hold executive political positions, but whenever the two are in conflict, national interests prevail over sectarian ones whenever the two are in conflict. For instance, Iran sees fit to support Hamas, which is Sunni, and while Assad remains useful, in the end he is an expendable figure. Iran's basic interest in Syria is to have a cooperative regime in Damascus. For Riyadh, the need to contain Iran is a main driver. The Saudis lost in Iraq, so the stakes in Syria and Yemen are all the higher. Therefore, in the Middle East as elsewhere, competition for power and influence explains more than other factors.

### The role of external powers – and their limitations

Second, where strong national and regional interests are set against the objectives of external powers, there is not much the latter can achieve except to destroy states by the use of force, leaving societies in shambles. In Iraq and Libya, the only up-side was the removal of the tyrannical top leadership. In Afghanistan, the jury is still out, but will the objectives – whatever they were: fighting Taliban, stabilizing the country, introducing democratic practice and promoting women's rights; various worthy ideas have been mooted – be achieved? The Western world has worked for a two-state solution to the Israeli–Palestinian problem, but developments on the ground point towards a one-state outcome with different rights for different population groups. US foreign ministers have frequented Damascus for meetings with Assad father and son, returning empty-handed. Sanctions and military threats did not stop the Iranian nuclear programme: the sanctions worked as intended only when a realistic prospect emerged for lifting them. When new engagements in the region are to be considered, these experiences should weigh heavily on the side of caution. Washington seems to have learnt that lesson.

## External powers in Syria

Syria is different, however. What started as a civil war – the government using military force to quell peaceful demonstrations inspired by the Arab Spring – drew more participants and degenerated into a chaotic, rapidly changing battlefield. In this case, there was no determination to stand up to external powers, whether regional or extra-regional. On the contrary, Syria became an utterly fragmented landscape where the warring parties begged for outside support, and where governments and non-governmental actors responded to promote their own interests, partly by proxy and partly by direct involvement (Iran and Hezbollah). The big powers have been loath to put boots on the ground. Receiving economic and material support from numerous external actors, the fighters have been sustained in their belief that they can be victorious. Today, roughly half of the Syrian people are refugees or IDPs. As yet, there is no end in sight.

Five external governments are more important than others. Three are regional: Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey; and two are extra-regional: the United States and Russia. Saudi Arabia is preoccupied with Iranian influence in the region, especially after the nuclear agreement was clinched. That agreement recognized, in effect, Iran as a sovereign state with legitimate national interests, and the lifting of sanctions is likely to stimulate economic growth. Iran may use that in the way the Saudis fear: in more aggressive pursuit of its regional interests. Or, it may use it to enhance the Islamic republic's standing by helping to solve regional problems in cooperation with the United States, Russia and/or other states in the region. In the Middle East, regional affairs are usually conducted in a zero-sum spirit, but Iran's escape from isolation raises the spectre of potential win-win endeavours. At the moment, Turkey's profile seems subordinated to Erdogan's election calculations, attacking the PKK at least as much as ISIL to maximize support from nationalist and patriotic elements of the electorate.

Enter the Russian build-up in Syria, and the war has been internationalized to an even greater extent. At the moment, its military posture is consistent with the local objective of enhancing Assad and pushing his opponents back, attacking moderate opposition groups as well as ISIL and al Nusra. In so doing, it tries to make itself indispensable in future talks about the reorganization of Syria.

In the long term, Russia aims to regain a big power role in the region. In 1974, after the Yom Kippur War, it lost Egypt; in 2003 it lost Iraq; and in 2011 everybody lost Libya. Only the naval base on the Syrian coast remained (Tarsus). The recent build-up seeks to correct this. Moreover, recent moves show the contours of a coalition consisting of Russia, Iran, the governments of Bagdad and Damascus and Hezbollah, and thereby the possibility of a wider regional role for Moscow. So far, the Russian bombing has been limited to Syria – but al Abadi shares intelligence information with Russia; is dissatisfied with US coalition bombing; and says he wants Russia to get more involved in the war against ISIL.

## Israel

In all of this, Israel has had a low profile. It has responded in kind to being shot at on the Golan Heights, and has taken action to prevent modern weapons that could be used against it from falling into Hezbollah hands. Much of this has gone below the radar, and Netanyahu has remained tight-lipped about the war. When Russia began its military build-up in Latakia, he had the foresight to go to Moscow to conclude an agreement on a Russian–Israeli hotline to prevent incidents. From there

we can trace a line to Putin's proposal at the UN for a Security Council resolution to coordinate military actions in the region.

### Cooperation on Syria?

While Assad was on the defensive, the US talked with Turkey and Jordan about a no-flight-zone over northern and southern Syria, to constrain Syrian airpower. In Russia not least, the idea brought to mind UNSC Resolution 1973 calling for a no-flight-zone in Libya, which became the starting point of an air campaign that toppled Gaddafi. Some observers see this as an important factor in Russia's decision to engage militarily, and in Putin's proposal at the UN for a new, broad coalition against ISIL based on a Security Council Resolution. Rather than being co-opted into the existing US coalition, a nationalist Russia that seeks to assert a role for itself in world affairs wants to enter a broader one including Iran, preferably on a par with the US. The US remains pre-eminent, but not dominant.

The big powers are coming closer on the role of Assad: on the one hand he is important in the fight against ISIL; on the other hand he has too much blood on his hands to be a man of the future; and a new regime should build on the remains of the Syrian state apparatus. Furthermore, coordination of air attacks is essential – anything else would be a recipe for disaster.

However, the big powers stop short of making pronouncements on the political future of Syria and Iraq. Obama admits he has no strategy. The Russians may not have much of a strategy either. The situation on the ground is so complex and chaotic and is shifting so rapidly that it is hard to decide what to go for. However, although they may be in the same boat in this regard, the two differ in one important respect: while the US is transparent, Russia is not – and lack of transparency nurtures suspicions and worst-case assumptions.

It would be no surprise, however, if Russia would try to shore up a geographically contiguous enclave led by Assad, but where the Assad family would leave the scene after a while in favour of a leadership more palatable to some of the opposition groups. Both Russia and Iran have been talking to moderate members of the opposition, and Russia has stopped denouncing them all as terrorists. This might secure a Russian bridgehead in Syria and, likewise, Iranian interests. In this perspective, Damascus would no longer claim authority over other parts of Syria. However, Saudi Arabia and other countries on the Arabian Peninsula would object, as would Turkey, and the Russian bombing may have rendered illusory any hopes of bringing moderate opposition groups into the fold. For the Arabs, reducing Iran's influence in Syria remains a top priority.

This is a scenario for partition of Syria, one among many. Iraq may unravel as well – in which case it would start with statehood for Kurdistan. In the past, there have been many attempts to redraw borders in the region – but, except for Israel and the enlargements of Israeli territory – Sykes-Picot has survived for nearly one hundred years. Now, however, the architecture is more shaken than at any time before.

### Tunisia - the one and only up-side of the Arab Spring

Public and political attention focuses on things that go dead wrong, as usual. Sometimes, action is taken on warning signals of upcoming threats, but if there is no public attention to the problem, governments find it hard to mobilize economic and political resources for preventive action.

Even more difficult is it to mobilize support of things that are moving towards the better, but that may fall apart for lack of international assistance. It is easier to work *with* existing trends than to *bend* them and it is also far more cost-effective – yet such instruments are seldom employed, or employed only marginally.

Tunisia, the one and only up-side of the Arab Spring, is a case in point. Four elections have been held, free and fair; a change of government has taken place in orderly democratic fashion; a new constitution has been adopted, almost by consensus; and a modus vivendi seems to have been found between the Muslim and secular elements of society. However, terrorism has struck Tunisia, too, and at the point where it is most vulnerable: the vital tourist industry. This has hit an already weak economy very hard; in addition, the country's population of 10 million has received one to two million refugees from Libya. Tunisia has taken major steps toward good governance, but the process remains fragile and cries out for international assistance. With Tunisia there is a strong case to be made for concerted action that can protect and further improve what has been achieved.

Oslo 7 October

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