

# State De-Construction in Iraq and Syria

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**Abstract:** In International Historical Sociology, states and states systems co-constitute each other. While IHS focuses on state formation, this paper argues that state de-formation, and in its extremes, state failure, is also “co-constituted”. In Syria and Iraq, state failure was co-constituted through an interaction between internal insurgencies and the Western interventions aiming at regime change. Iraq and Syria were created by Western imperialism as weak states suffering from identity fragmentation and pervasive irredentism. Ba’thist state builders used populist versions of neo-patrimonialism to consolidate regimes but excluded social forces were permanently poised for rebellion and regime decline gave them opportunities to bid for power. Nevertheless, external intervention was the extra factor that initiated state de-construction and tipped both into failed states. In Iraq the US invasion deconstructed the existing state and established a sectarian based regime bound to fail. In Syria, shrinking inclusiveness led to revolt but external intervention, making it a battleground of regional and global powers, tipped the country into a failed state. Two failed states left a vacuum in which the ‘Islamic State’ arose, inviting yet a further round of external intervention.

**Keywords:** Iraq, Syria, state failure, intervention, Islamic State

**Schlagwörter:** Irak, Syrien, Staatsversagen, Intervention, Islamischer Staat

## 1. Introduction

In the paradigm of International Historical Sociology (HS), states and states systems (the international) co-constitute each other. While the HS tradition usually focuses on state formation, via e.g. war and capitalism, the increased incidence of failed states, and the current wave of them in the Middle East/North Africa, invites us to consider also the co-constitution of state “de-construction” or state failure. If it is true, as Tilly’s (1975) famous aphorism expresses it, that in the West’s state formation “war makes the state and the state makes war”, so – this paper will argue – in the contemporary MENA, “intervention makes for state failure” and “state failure makes for war”.

The paper will examine the co-constitution of the Middle East states system through a Historical Sociology lens, beginning with an overview of the HS paradigm. It then surveys the historical construction and de-construction of the MENA states system over the *long duree* since WWI. The trajectory of state formation begins with initial Western interventions to empower friendly MENA regimes which led to flawed states with built-in instability (as documented e. g. by Fromkin 1989; Dodge 2003; Yom 2015); then a wave of alternative nationalist states constructed *against* external intervention attained a certain level of stability (Mufti 1996). The bulk of the paper then explores the latest episode of global-regional interaction, namely how combinations of external intervention and in-

ternal insurrection against these regimes has led to widespread state failure. This is documented through case studies of the de-construction first of Iraq and then of Syria. Disastrous region-wide spillover of instability has been the immediate consequence, as prominent studies of state failure would lead us to expect (Coyne 2006; Priest 2005), making MENA the current epicentre of global crisis.

## 2. Historical Sociology

Historical Sociology has several advantages over other frameworks for doing macro level analysis on state formation, state failure and conflict.<sup>1</sup>

First, while the dominant international relations paradigm, neo-realism, prioritizes the structural systemic level and comparative politics focuses on the domestic level, HS posits the *co-constitution of the inter/trans-national and the state levels*. On the one hand, it traces the impact of long-term macro transformations of global structure on state formation, as in Barrington Moore's (1966) analysis of how agricultural modernization shaped dictatorship and democracy, Tilly's (1975) account of how war-making drove state formation in the West and Buzan and Little (2010) on how the globalization of the Westphalian states system under imperialism and non-Western nationalist reaction to it together constituted the post-colonial state order.

On the other hand, HS's Weberian strain (Hudson 1975) focuses on agency: shorter-term internal (domestic) state building projects and processes: such as the cycle between charismatic, patrimonial and bureaucratic leadership and the interaction of political participation and institutionalization. And as Buzan and Weaver (2003) argue, the *kind* of state prevalent in regional states systems – “pre-modern patrimonial”, “modern” bureaucratic – in turn, determines its distinctive dynamics – with the kind of practices expected by realists – notably balancing threats – typical of “modern” systems.

Second, instead of seeing the international system as a uniform anarchy, as does neo-realism, HS sees it as mixing elements of *hierarchy and anarchy*, and specifically the embedding of anarchic regional states system in a global hierarchy. Thus, Neo-Gramscian (Cox 1996) and World Systems Theory (2001) see periphery states as sharply constrained by the world capitalist economy which successive global hegemonies have sought to impose, via periodic interventions, on them. Yet, the hierarchical relation is normally one of threats and incentives, not bureaucratic command, for in the post-colonial period, as Buzan and Weaver (2003) argue, regional states systems like MENA have sufficient autonomy and distinctive practices that they constitute a level of structure distinct from the global level. As such, MENA state formation and deformation has to be analysed as the outcome of *interaction* between global intervention and regional resistance or collaboration.

Third, HS takes history seriously, and specifically path dependency, the expectation that historic junctures shape future possibilities, excluding certain trajectories and biasing outcomes toward others; thus the foundation of the MENA re-

1 For elaborations of the following features of Historical Sociology see Hobden and Hobsen (2002).

gional states system significantly narrowed future possibilities. This is not to say that there is any predetermined trajectory, as modernization theory imagines, and indeed, the trajectory of MENA regional state formation has described a bell shaped curve. Moreover, at critical junctures agency matters, such as Saddam Hussein's decision to invade Kuwait, Bashar al-Asad's violent response to the Syrian uprising or the rise of ISIS. Thus, analysis of state formation and deformation has to be traced through the interaction of structure and agency over time.

Fourth, HS privileges structural and material factors, but acknowledges ideational factors such as identity, culture and religion. It takes a largely instrumentalist approach, focusing on how "political entrepreneurs" – state elites and oppositions – employ identity (in MENA Arabism, Islam, and currently Sunni vs Shia sectarianism) to mobilize support and legitimize or de-legitimize authority. However, it also acknowledges that identity matters: that the violation of historic MENA identities in the constitution of the state system encouraged a profound dissatisfaction among regional peoples that agents regularly exploit; the power of identity to mobilize activism by social movements against the status quo; and its power to shape legitimacy and to normatively constrain agents. For this reason, the current sectarianism wave, only the most recent episode of the identity wars that have prevailed since the founding of the state system, is primarily treated as an instrumentalization of religion in power struggles which nevertheless has unique power to affect outcomes.

Thus, the approach of this paper is to systematically uncover the *interactions* of structure and agency – more specifically how global level interventions and constraints, regional resources and movements, and state elites and oppositions, interact to contribute, over the historical long term, to state formation and deformation. It first gives a historical overview of the trajectory of state formation in the Levant and follows this with an analysis of the current de-construction of the two states in the contemporary period.

### 3. Syria and Iraq

Nowhere better illustrates the theme of states construction and de-construction than the Levant where recurrent Western intervention, indigenous state building projects, and state de-construction have interacted to produce today's unstable and violent political landscape. Syria and Iraq are near 'siblings' with key shared experiences that are difficult to disentangle. Firstly, their malformed construction under imperialism left behind fragmented 'artificial'<sup>2</sup> and very weak states penetrated by powerful trans-state identities, in which revisionist movements struggled for power, with the Pan-Arab Ba'th party winning out in both. Secondly,

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2 A main theme and argument of this paper is that the Levant states were in an important sense "artificial" and their borders "arbitrary" and indeed that this is a major root of their long-term instability and current de-construction. Because this claim in highly contested and debated among scholars and observers of the region, I want to make clear exactly what I am contending (and what not). *All states are constructed* and in that respect are "artificial" if this is taken to mean man-made; yet as the debate between primordialist and constructivists/instrumentalism underlines, they cannot simply be made up, without being rooted in long shared traditions. The extent

both states' formation advanced under Ba'athist authoritarian regimes via a combination of party-building, oil and war. Finally, beginning in 2003 in Iraq, with the US invasion, and in 2011 in Syria, with the outbreak of the Syrian Uprising, both states suffered de-construction under various combinations of internal revolt and external intervention. Syria and Iraq have again been reduced to weak states suffering loss of territorial control and challenges to their borders. This, allied to the penetration of both by trans-state jihadist movements, has made Syria and Iraq epicentres of a widening sectarianization of the whole regional system.

While these internal conflicts have internal origins – grievances and actors – civil war and state failure must be seen as “co-constituted” by local, regional and global actors. The dominant Western narrative usually sees the West-led “international community” as threatened by and or defensively intervening in failed states to undertake state reconstruction, with benign motives that may sometimes have unintended dysfunctional consequences. In reality, the Western dominated external world has played a major role in state de-construction, whether through war, intervention or the backing of insurgents; through the imposition of a globalized neo-liberal economic order that undermines states' social contracts and generates highly inequitable crony capitalist orders; or thorough the de-legitimation of states via democracy promotion campaigns (Hinnebusch 2015).

#### 4. The Evolving Co-Constitution of the Regional State System

Understanding the current crisis requires examination of the historical context of initial state formation in MENA and in the Levant in particular. Western imperialism, together with the collaboration and resistance of local actors, ‘made’ a conflict prone and unstable states system. First, the Middle East was ‘born’ as an exceptionally penetrated (Brown 1984) periphery of the world capitalist system. Its ruling elites, in varying degrees, were initially imposed, co-opted or dependent on, and often more responsive to, global elites than their own citizenry. Second, imperial boundary drawing, which took little account of regional identity or opinion, resulted in incongruence between dominant identities and the new states.

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to which they are artificial is likely to vary greatly and the differences between them only ever relative. Yet the *agents and process of construction makes all the difference*. Where the state is an organic product, home grown, chiefly the result of indigenous agency (borders in particular) and evolving over centuries, it is more likely to have roots, loyalty and durability; where, as in the Levant, it is imposed chiefly from without, with borders drawn according to the strategic interests of external powers, violating rather than satisfying identity, and in explicit defiance of majority regional opinion (as e. g. surveyed by the King-Crane Commission) it is less likely to command loyalty and likely to be contested. Having said this, from the founding of the system incumbent regime elites, had a strong interest in defending the sovereignty and separate existence of the states they governed; today majorities in Syria and Iraq probably continue to support the separate existence of their states. It is clear, too, that over time, identities started to attach to these externally constructed states; it is equally true however that their peoples have held multiple identities – to the sub-state, state and supra-state communities, which has tended to qualify and dilute identification with the state that dominates in “nation-states”. It is this that explains why a hundred years after the formation of the regional system, trans-states movements still challenge state borders and even their existence. Nor is the durability of the states as particularly strong evidence of their robustness since *external intervention or the threat of it has regularly blocked or discouraged attempts to overthrow the states system by uniting its component state parts*.

This built irredentism (demands to redraw borders) into the regional order and left the new states competing for the loyalties of their populations with powerful sub and supra-state identities – Pan-Arabism, Pan-Islam, i. e. suffering legitimacy deficits. Most states were fragmented by rival sub-state identities; on the other hand, the supra-state Arab nation and/or Islamic *umma* were, for many, a more compelling imagined community than the state itself. Iraq and Syria were particularly vulnerable by virtue of the multitude of sectarian and ethnic identities embraced by what were widely seen as artificial borders dividing up the larger communities with which many identified. This was exposed by the immediate and repeated rise in each of both separatism (e. g. Kurds) and of “Pan” movements and states bidding to re-unify the region, whether in ‘Greater Syria’, ‘Fertile Crescent’ or Pan-Arab schemes. Third, the wider Arab world became an arena of competition by rival states over regional leadership, largely via discourse wars, forcing all regimes to defend their legitimacy by being seen to act on behalf of an Arab or Islamic interests (Barnett 1998). Fourth, the Middle East state system was ‘born fighting’, as Buzan and Weaver (2003) put it: by the imposition of a militarized and mobilized Israeli settler state generating intense insecurity especially on its borders; by arbitrary imperial boundary drawing which produced a multitude of boundary disputes and powerful irredentist movements challenging borders; and by destabilising power imbalances from the juxtaposition of large stronger states and small mini-states (e. g. Iraq and Kuwait). Thus, from the outset, each state felt threatened both by neighbours and by internal, often-trans-state, opposition networks used by rival states to subvert their rivals. The troubled trajectories of the Levant states are ultimately rooted in the ‘original sin’ committed by the imperial powers at the end of WWI in what Fromkin (1989) called a “peace to end all peace”.

Yet MENA states were also ‘born’ with the material apparatus of governance over a fixed territory and, with independence, were accorded formal sovereignty; state-builders, although dealt weak hands, nevertheless set out to make this formal sovereignty real. State formation evolved over several identifiable phases. Initially, actual state sovereignty was very weak, both in terms of external independence and internal territorial control. The immediate post-independence years, 1945-56, was a period of weak *oligarchic states* (whether republican or monarchic) that suffered both high levels of penetration by external powers, especially the British hegemon, and also rising revolutionary nationalist trans-state opposition. In the 1950s and 1960s many oligarchic regimes were overthrown and more legitimate but initially highly unstable populist authoritarian republics emerged. While most states were being destabilised by revolutionary trans-state movements, the exception was Egypt, under Nasser, whose early lead in state formation, as the first successful populist authoritarian regime in the region, allowed it to assert a credible claim as Arab regional hegemon over much weaker rival states. This enabled Cairo to promote Pan-Arab norms and briefly roll back the high external penetration of the region. But the other Arab states remained fragile and unstable, whether republics or monarchies, subject to “praetorianism” – coups, riots, etc. and highly vulnerable to trans-state, regional or global interference. Iraq and Syria exhibited the most extreme cases of such “praetorianism”.

Yet, the ‘original sins’ of a flawed state system, external dependency, domestic instability and inter-state threats, were major incentives for state building. In trying to assert actual sovereignty, Arab state builders gravitated, as a matter of path-dependency, toward *neo-patrimonial* practices that combined time-honoured indigenous state-building formulas, notably Ibn Khaldun’s *assabiya* (elite solidarity built on primordial ties but also a shared nationalist or religious-ideological mission) with modern bureaucratic machinery. While the initially meagre resources at the disposal of most state builders sharply limited their co-optation capacity, the hydrocarbon rent boom of the seventies greatly increased their abilities to buy loyalty and consolidate regimes. In the 1970-90 period of *state consolidation*, states, including Syria and Iraq, were able, taking advantage of global bi-polar system that led the superpowers to compete for clients in the region and largely relying on rent extracted from the international system (oil market, superpower patronage), to built up their bureaucratic and military capabilities which also, however, gave them greater military capacities to both threaten and deter their neighbours; militarization led to wars which motivated and legitimized state building.

Even in notoriously unstable Syria and Iraq, a rising trajectory of state formation was underway as war and oil led to consolidation of quite similar *Ba’thist* neo-patrimonial leader-army-party states; legitimized by nationalism and a populist social contract, based on redistributive reforms (land reform) and economic entitlements, these authoritarian regimes contracted pluralism and elite competition while widening mass incorporation via bureaucratic and party organization and unionization (“populist corporatism”), thus stabilizing the state, which became more immune to trans-state penetration than hitherto. Paradoxically, under Pan-Arab *Ba’thism*, the “normalisation” of the state appeared to advance as the centralisation of power over coercive and distributive apparatuses in Damascus and Baghdad, plus wars with Israel and Iran, strengthened state-centric identities. The new power of state identities could be seen in the ability of Syria and Iraq to wage war with huge conscript armies prepared to fight for the states against their enemies – most striking was the willingness of Shi’a Iraqi Arabs to fight against Shi’a Iranians in the Iran-Iraq war (Mufti 1996).

However, these state building projects were never more than partly successful and had their own costs and vulnerabilities and, again Iraq and Syria manifested these in the most accentuated form. They suffered from dependence on ‘insider’ elite *assabiya*, which tended to alienate ‘outsiders – other identity groups’; and on rents for the material resources needed for state building, which were finite. Also, the reliance on Arab nationalism, anti-imperialism and anti-Zionism for legitimacy not only tended to embroil them in protracted conflicts (Iraq with Iran; Syria with Israel) but also to make them targets of Western hostility.

The 1980s peak in state building was reversed by the beginning of the 1990s, with the fall of oil prices; the end of the Cold War and the rise of US hegemony; and the dominance of global finance capital and neo-liberal penetration of the region. The measures taken in this era to address states’ inherited vulnerabilities, particularly rent-dependent economies, such as the turn to neo-liberalism and crony capitalism, apparent everywhere by the late 1980s, had accumulating costs.

The 1990-2010 period was one of *weakening states*, most of which became increasingly dependent on the West (the “core”) for rents and security. Initially, Syria and Iraq were the exceptions to this dependency on the West, each seeking to maintain its hard won sovereignty and preserve its anti-imperialist legitimacy; although their “solutions” to their vulnerabilities adopted as the Cold War ended were direct opposites – war for Iraq and *infitah*/peace process for Syria – both failed to resolve the underlying problems: economic troubles and/or Western hostility.

The end of bi-polarity and the 1990-2010 era of US hegemony over the MENA region was initiated by the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the consequent US-led war on Iraq, Iraq’s defeat, a massively increased US military presence in the Gulf and a decade of sanctions that debilitated the Iraqi state. US interventionism culminated in the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. Yet, ultimately, the unintended consequence of two US wars against Iraq was the creation of a failed state and a vacuum in which jihadist non-state movements flourished. US militaristic interventionism also unleashed a regional power struggle, bifurcating MENA into pro and anti-US alliances: the post-Saddam shift of Iraq into Iran’s orbit alarmed Sunni powers who conducted a campaign to revive trans-state Sunni identity against what they called a ‘Shi’a Crescent’, stretching from Iran to Lebanon. The latter, grouping Syria with Iran and Lebanese Hizbollah constructed a counter-narrative in which they constituted a ‘Resistance Front’ defending the region against Western and Israel-aligned Sunni regimes, notably Egypt and Saudi Arabia. For a period, backed by Pan-Arab satellite TV and Hezbollah’s demonstrated prowess against Israel, the resistance axis held the ascendancy. But the overall impact was to create intense rivalries that led to the profound destabilization of the regional order after 2010.

The post-2010 period of the Arab Uprisings witnessed a combination of exploding domestic/trans-state opposition to regimes and external war or intervention that further *deconstructed* already weakened states and turned Syria, previously a major actor in regional politics, into an arena of trans-state identity wars similar to what had happened to Iraq after the US invasion. Reversing decades of state formation, Syria and Iraq were reduced to weak – indeed failed – penetrated states reminiscent of the early independence years, except that trans-state conflict was conducted with much higher levels of mobilisation, militarisation, and sectarianisation than the low level subversion of the earlier Pan-Arab period. Also symptomatic of the deeper collapse of states was the loss of territorial control by regimes to insurgent movements, resulting in a de-facto partition, or ‘Somalisation’, of both countries (Dukhan 2013). This, plus the debilitation of the states’ capacity for inclusive co-optation and their inability to provide, not only material benefits, but even basic security, gave trans-state Islamic activists an unprecedented window of opportunity to mobilize support. This included the profoundly revisionist ISIS challenge to the borders of the two states in pursuit of an agenda explicitly aimed at the overthrow of the regional states system. And if the Iraqi and Syrian states had previously been key actors in the promotion of an inclusive Pan-Arab identity, they now became the epicenters of a widening sectarian frag-

mentation of the whole regional system. Table 1 summarizes these phases in state formation, with the last phase detailed below.

**Table 1: Phases in the Co-Constitution of MENA state formation and De-Construction**

| Phase of State Formation and De-Construction         | External (global and regional) Factors in State Formation and De-Construction  | Internal Factors in State Formation and De-Construction   |
|--|--|---|
| <i>Imposition of Regional states system</i>          | *British Imperialism creates flawed states incongruent with regional identity<br>→ irredentism built-into the states system  | *Collaboration and resistance by local forces   |
| <i>Early State Formation and Pan-Arab Revolution</i> | *British hegemony contested with emergent bi-polarity +<br>*trans-state Arab nationalist movements<br>→ regional resistance (Nasserism)  | *Fragile oligarchies overthrown by praetorian republics   |
| <i>State Construction</i>                            | *Bi-polar rivalry<br>→ patronage for regional state building<br>*Oil price boom<br>→ rent for regional state building<br>*Regional War<br>→ militarization<br>→ insecurity<br>→ national security states                     | *Populist Neo-Patrimonialism elite cores built around assabiyeh<br>bureaucratization (army, party)<br>populist corporatism<br>*Regime legitimation via nationalism + populist 'social contract'   |
| <i>State Decline</i>                                 | *War costs + oil price/rent fall<br>→ debt<br>*Rise of global finance capitalism + neo-liberal ideological hegemony<br>*End of Cold War<br>→ US global Hegemony<br>→ US interventionism in MENA                              | *Post-populist Neo-Patrimonialism<br>Crony capitalist social base<br>Exclusionary corporatism   |
| <i>State De-Construction</i>                         | *Decline of US Hegemony<br>→ competitive global rivalry over MENA<br>*Regional Power struggle (between Sunni and Shia regimes)<br>*Trans-state Islamist movements, empowerment of jihadists, sectarian bifurcation of region | *Outside-In De-Construction of Iraq<br>→ US invasion unleashes centrifugal forces<br>*Inside-Out De-Construction of Syria<br>*Centrifugal local forces invite competitive external intervention<br>*Failed states (loss of territorial sovereignty, institutional debilitation, identity fragmentation) |

Source: Compiled by the author

As the table highlights, at each phase of state evolution in Iraq and Syria, the global, regional and local have co-constituted outcomes. In both states similar vul-



nerabilities left behind by imperialism precipitated similar state building projects under the Ba'th party, which had themselves similar vulnerabilities: their only-partial inclusion of social forces, dependence on external rent and nationalist projects that generated international hostility that boomeranged on both regimes. But external interventions, taking different forms, also played pivotal roles in state de-construction. The difference is that the main impetus to state de-construction in Iraq was "outside-in", where the US invasion destroyed the state, unleashing and aggravating pre-existing centrifugal forces and leaving behind a debilitated, territorially divided *failed* state. In Syria de-construction was "inside-out": domestic civil war drew in external interventions which intensified the conflict, and in creating stalemate, led to a similarly failed, territorially divided state. The following sections examine the last phase – that of state de-construction – in detail.

## 5. State De-Construction in Iraq

### 5.1 US Hegemony and Iraqi De-Construction: from Sanctions to Insurgency

Little has been written on the role of the "international" in state-destruction, but Iraq is perhaps the clearest case study where the American global hegemon, supposedly a benign protector of global stability (in the view of "hegemonic stability theory") became, under George W. Bush, a malign actor spreading in MENA what the neo-cons called "creative destruction".

The Iraqi Ba'th regime had, after a decade of relatively successful state building, started to decline in inclusiveness as a result of a decade of power struggle and two wars. Saddam Hussein's consolidation of power in the 1980s came at the expense of the collegial leadership of the Ba'th party and led to the purge of many Shia Ba'thists, making the regime more dependent on Saddam's Takriti Sunni in-group. During the Iran-Iraq war the regime had responded to perceived attempts by Kurdish and Shia elements to use Iranian support against Baghdad with highly repressive measures including the forced relocation of Kurds and the forced expulsion of many Arab Shia of Iranian decent to Iran. The consequences of this alienation were sharply exposed when the weakening of the regime by the 1990-1991 Gulf war defeat was immediately followed by insurgencies among both Kurds and Shia Iraqis. But although the US had encouraged the uprisings, it did nothing to prevent Saddam, as his regime recovered its coercive capacities, from repression of the Shia south (for fear that Iran would benefit from it). It was a different story in the north, however, where a no-fly zone enabled the Kurds to wrest autonomy from the central government. Thus, the loss of inclusionary capacity by the Iraqi Ba'th regime made it highly vulnerable to the centrifugal impact of external shocks.

State de-construction was furthered by the impact of the US-led sanctions regime throughout the 1990s. Sanctions greatly weakened the central government, debilitated the middle class, destroyed the social contract and forced people to fall back on their communal groups for support. The Saddam regime fostered tribalism as a substitute for the deteriorating Ba'th party (Baram 1997). In parallel, centrifugal forces were growing in the soil of state debilitation: the US spon-

sored an autonomous regional government in the Kurdish north while exiled Shi'a leaders and their followers were positioned in Iran and Syria, who, with the US invasion of 2003, were parachuted in from exile.

The US, with its “shock and awe” assault on Iraq’s cities, armies and infrastructure, had little trouble defeating Saddam’s regime but thereafter it failed to deploy the manpower to stop the collapse of law and order in Iraq. By its decapitating of the regime, its dissolution of its pillars, the party, army and bureaucracy, and its debilitation of the central government, the US further empowered centrifugal social forces. The degradation of the social and physical infrastructure, including electricity, potable water, and sewage systems, was not reversed. The killing of at least half a million Iraqis (Burnham et al. 2006; Hagopian et al. 2013) and the displacement of four million, meant the destruction of the Iraqi middle class, while the collapse of the educational system resulted in a lost generation and a growth of illiteracy. The anomie and intense insecurity under the occupation led to a massive exodus from Iraq, depriving the country of its natural leadership (Dodge 2006; Hashim 2004; Rosen 2010).

The invasion and occupation inevitably stimulated resistance, particularly among the Sunni Arab population alienated by the loss of status and employment that came with the US disbanding of the armed forces and by the violent tactics of the US occupation forces. The insurgency was led by former regime military and security personnel in alliance with the Sunni clergy, bolstered by trans-state movement of salafis and jihadis and cross-border tribal groups, for whom Iraq’s porous boundaries were entirely artificial. In August 2004 Shi’i insurgents under anti-imperialist populist Muqtada al-Sadr in Najaf and Karbala, mobilizing the Shia dispossessed, joined the insurgency, while also contesting the empowerment of US-supported Shia politicians who had been in Iranian exile (Dodge 2006; Hashim 2004; Rosen 2010).

Ultimately the insurgency remained too divided and localized to drive the Americans out and they were, indeed, able to exploit Iraqi divisions to get the upper hand over the resistance. The Sunni insurgency was soon divided between jihadists, especially non-Iraqis, and more moderate tribal elements, allowing the US to co-opt the tribal Sahwa or Awakening Councils against the jihadists. Sunni on Shia violence disrupted the tacit anti-occupation alliance with the Sadrists. The bombing of a Shiite shrine in Samarra, precipitated an unprecedented sectarian mobilization that was never to be reversed; after the parliamentary election of 2005 which empowered a Shia majority, while largely excluding the Sunnis, the insurgency against the occupation power was eclipsed by inter-Iraqi sectarian violence in which thousands died during 2006 and 2007.

## 5.2 Iraq’s flawed Reconstruction from above under US Occupation

Iraq’s reconstruction was very similar to the original British imposition of the state system in creating a flawed regime with instability built into it. The US-co-opted new Iraqi elites, largely returning exiles without local bases, were chosen according to ethnic, sectarian and regional quotas while demonizing and excluding those with local support such as the Ba’thists and Sadrists. The US designed a constitu-

tion that distributed posts and resources according to a consociational/federal formula, institutionalising separate identities at the expense not only of the former Arab identity of the country but also of Iraqi identity. This fostering of sectarian identities facilitated divide and rule, “dissolving the hard-won unity of a long state-building project” (Baker et al. 2012). The formerly-exiled Shia politicians depended on sectarian enmity, religious networks and paramount Shia Ayatollah al-Sistani’s authority to mobilize support. The US had planned to co-opt reliable clients into an unelected government until forced by al-Sistani to concede elections: but elections run on the basis of sectarian solidarity ensured Shia dominance and the marginalisation of the Sunnis (Harling 2013; Rosen 2010; Caryl 2013).

Government ministries, gutted of qualified staff under the de-Ba’thification campaign, were turned over to various sectarian based and/or exile led parties. The US dismantling of the professional military left a security vacuum, in which militias engaged in protection rackets. The hasty recruitment of unqualified Shia sectarian militias into a new army and parallel overlapping special forces and security agencies, meant the security forces were bound to be regarded as an occupying force in Sunni areas; the Kurdish armed groups answered to their own separatist leadership. By 2009, the Iraqi army had been ostensibly reconstituted, with 650,000 under arms and in nominal control of much of the country. The 1,242 violent incidents in April 2009 was less than half that the year before. Yet in 2010, violence by armed terrorist groups continued, checkpoints lined the highways, US-built walls divided neighbourhoods, and people feared to travel to areas under the opposing sect. The state still did not enjoy a monopoly of violence, a key indicator of “stateness” (Rogers 2010; Al-Ali 2010).

In parallel, the dismantling of the state-centered economy under US pro-consul Paul Bremmer in favour of an extreme neo-liberal market model marked by privatization designed to open the fragile Iraqi market to foreign capital, especially American, had the effect of further debilitating the state’s economic capacity. The most dramatic transformation took place in the countryside, which became a shadow of its former self as irrigation dependent on electricity was never restored to pre-invasion level; youth therefore flooded into the cities and the bloated military; and desertification and dust storms spread; meanwhile in a classic rentier state syndrome, import booms debilitated productive enterprise (Al-Ali 2010).

### 5.3 Territorial De-Construction

The US also left unsettled issues that made for intractable intra-Iraqi conflict, notably disputed territories and distribution of resources between the regions and central government. To appease their Kurdish allies US constitution makers added provisions legitimizing Kurdish autonomy which encouraged others to follow suit: other provinces were also given the right to group into autonomous ethno-sectarian defined regions, thus building in the potential for extreme decentralization and separatism. Kurdish-Arab conflicts over territory and oil centred around the Kirkuk issue: the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) sought to annex Kirkuk and in 2005 succeeded in inserting an article in the Iraqi constitution stipulating a popular referendum on the status of the province; thereafter large numbers of

Kurds migrated to Kirkuk, which tipped the province's demographic balance in their favour (Parker 2009). After the rise of ISIS drove the Iraqi army out of the region, Kurdish forces used the opportunity to tighten their control of Kirkuk.

The KRG sought to appropriate as its patrimony the estimated 45bn barrels of oil reserves in the area, but this was contested by the Baghdad government that claimed sovereignty over the national oil reserves; a compromise revenue-sharing agreement was proposed but remained a matter of contestation. Until agreement was reached, production-sharing contracts with foreign companies were legally problematic but this did not stop some companies from going ahead with agreements with the KRG. As the only stable part of Iraq, inward investment began to come in, and remarkably from Turkey (which once would have seen an autonomous Kurdish region as likely to stimulate Kurdish separatism at home) whose construction companies won contracts to build infrastructure. Turkey struck an alliance with the KDP not only against the anti-Turkish PKK but also against Baghdad, tending to pull Kurdistan's centre of gravity away from the Iraqi centre. Symptomatic of this distancing of Baghdad was that young Kurds started studying English rather than Arabic as a second language (Black 2010).

As for the Shia, although united around a determination to maintain Shia power, they were divided over the territorial issue: while the Supreme Islamic Council (and its Badr Brigade) advocated an autonomous southern region analogous to the Kurdish region that would enable them to monopolize that region's oil, they were resisted by Maliki's al-Dawa party and the Sadrists in the name of Iraqi state nationalism.

The Sunnis alternated between rebellion and separatism against the Shia dominated regime and insistence on the integrity and of the Iraqi state – since they alone did not occupy areas with oil resources. In the early years of the invasion, having been pushed from power, they were the backbone of resistance; they boycotted the 2005 elections and radical jihadis (led by al-Qaida) mounted a sectarian war against the Shia; but the tribal Sahwa, together with other Sunni local factions, were thereafter partly absorbed into provincial councils in Anbar province and the provincial state and security apparatus. Anti-Kurdish rhetoric gave the Sunni al-Hadba faction victory in the Nineveh provincial elections. However, in a reaction to the attempts of the Maliki regime to exclude Sunni actors and in parallel with the Sunni Uprising in Syria, which came to control areas contiguous to Sunni western Iraq, Sunnis also began to consider grouping into an autonomous region (albeit one lacking oil). This sentiment paved the way for their relative welcoming of ISIS.

In addition to this tripartite struggle, there was a certain “ethno-sectarian cleansing” across the country and especially in formerly mixed Baghdad. Beginning with al-Qaida in Iraq bombings of Shia mosques and neighbourhoods, Sadr's militia, the Mahdi Army, unleashed death squads that assassinated Sunnis and drove them out of Shiite neighbourhoods. This was reinforced by the walled segregation of Baghdad neighbourhoods started by the Americans. Writing in 2013, Harling observed that people rarely ventured into areas affiliated to the opposing camp because “prejudice is now expressed openly on all sides”. And politicians routinely used it as a tool, mobilising support through fear of the “other” (Al-Ali 2010).

#### 5.4 Electoral Sectarianism and Clientalism

In principle elections give all actors a stake in the system from the expectation that their votes matter and that they can win office. In post-invasion Iraq, however, the main political blocs were sectarian and elections intensified sectarian majoritarianism that meant the Shia parties would likely always win them. Thus, in the first national elections of 2005, the Islamic Dawa party of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), along with the Sadrists, came together to secure the Shia's dominant position in the political system, in coalition with the Kurds who, e. g. secured the presidency. Sunnis boycotted the 2005 elections and their exclusion fed the sectarian violence that followed.

The new regime started with a very low level of institutionalization. On becoming prime minister in 2006, al-Maliki's office was so constitutionally weak he could not even direct his cabinet, divided up among rival parties demanding their share of spoils. The vague division of official powers among the president, prime minister, cabinet, and parliament became the foci of on-going power struggles in which, as Harling (2013) put it, everything had to be negotiated and renegotiated and the rules were arbitrarily manipulated. Power was built by patronage practices in which rival politicians competed to construct clientele networks, often on the basis of misappropriated US or Iraqi funds. Iraq ranked as the third or fourth worst country in the world for corruption in 2006-2009. It was extremely difficult to prosecute officials for corruption since ministers had a veto over investigations and corrupt figures were protected by their militias; the MPs supposed to hold the executive accountable voted themselves extremely high salaries and perks; indeed, access to office was sought in order to acquire such resources (Kadhim 2010).

In this context, al-Maliki, through dubious constitutional means, declared himself commander in chief of the army and inserted his personal followers into paramilitary and intelligence agencies and as regional military bosses, by-passing the defence ministry headed by a Sunni politician. The bloated army of 650,000 men was turned into Maliki's personal fiefdom and instrument of his power consolidation and repression of Sunni political forces. Al-Maliki forged a hybrid regime – an electoral authoritarianism, with fragmented neo-patrimonialism at its core. Freedom House put Iraq under Maliki, despite relatively free elections, into the “Not Free” category, its rating on “civil liberties” the same as Iran. Governance, as compared to Saddam's rule, was less repressive but more corrupt and with less bureaucratic capacity, territorial control and governmental monopoly of violence (Kadhim 2010).

A neo-patrimonial leader had re-emerged, with the potential to check Iraq's centrifugal forces and for a period Maliki used his predominance to advance state strengthening. He used the Iraqi army against the Shia militias in Basra who had alienated the population by their protection rackets. He also opposed the decentralizing agendas of the Kurds and pro-Iranian Shia militias in Basra. He broke with his former Shia partners, who resented his monopoly of power, and promoted himself as an Iraqi nationalist, naming his coalition ‘State of Law’ to appeal to a population hungry for law and order. Indicative of his popularity, his party won a plurality in the 2009 provincial elections (Dodge 2012).

Indeed, Iraqis professed to abhor sectarianism, which they blamed for the civil war and the debilitation of the state, with 79 per cent of poll respondents wanting inter-sectarian reconciliation and cooperation. In the 2010 parliamentary elections two coalitions promoting nationalist over sectarian agendas emerged as the main vote-getters. The secular Shia politician, Iyad Allawi, put together a cross-sectarian coalition based on Iraqi nationalism, al-Iraqiyya to contest Maliki's "State of Law" party, which mobilized the Sunnis who had a particular stake in reversing the sectarianism that kept them a minority. Yet, on the eve of the elections, Maliki, fearing al-Iraqiyya's cross-sectarian appeal, demanded that the de-Ba'athification Committee set up under the US occupation ban al-Iraqiyya candidates who had been Ba'ath party members; this, however, only rallied Sunnis to the party. The voting therefore tended to break down along sectarian lines between the two main coalitions, diluted only by loose local alliances, tribal and Islamist, that reflecting the deeper fragmentation of Iraq. Allawi won more votes and his list emerged with a two seat (91-89) advantage in parliament, but the de-Ba'athification committee disqualified two successful Iraqiyya candidates and the Shia parties, driven together by the fear of Ba'athist and Sunni resurgence, backed al-Maliki. The Kurds, who saw the Sunni al-Iraqiyya politicians as hostile to their separatist aims, especially in Kirkuk, also threw their support to him. When Maliki managed to coopt two key Sunni politicians from Iraqiyya by offering them posts in his cabinet, he was able to form a government despite coming second in the elections. Moving toward Shia sectarianism and away from Iraqi nationalism, he re-forged his frayed connections with Shia militias. He then moved against the Sunni Vice President Hashimi, who was accused of involvement in terrorism and who took refuge in the Kurdish region where the writ of the central government did not run. Iraqiyya ceased to be a political force and Iraqi politics fell back into ethno-sectarian moulds. Thus, despite elections, the tendency of Shi'a demographic majorities to translate into a permanent Shi'a monopoly of power and the authoritarian power consolidation practices of the Nouri al-Maliki government together alienated the Sunnis and led to a resurgence of the sectarian conflict that had briefly receded (Dodge 2012; Hiltermann 2010a, 2010b; ICG 2013).

In March 2011, demonstrations inspired by Arab Uprising spread to Iraq demanding reform, protesting the hated separation walls and also the Green zone complex of government buildings, which the US had made the nerve centre of the occupation, and was now a well secured place of privileged political elites. The slogans of the protestors included: "The people's oil is for the people not for the thieves"; Iraqis expressed anger over poor infrastructure and lack of reliable power supplies ten years after the invasion, despite all the money spent, and in striking contrast to the ability of the Saddam regime to quickly restore services after the Kuwait war. Nevertheless, cross-cutting ethno-sectarian cleavages prevented the protests from gaining the traction they did in less fragmented societies. Moreover, the Maliki regime increasingly used the army against Sunni protestors, inflaming them against the government. Key Sunni politicians were arrested. Elections went ahead in 2014 in spite of significant parts of Sunni provinces having fallen to ISIS control. Shia dominance was confirmed, with Shia parties winning 160 seats to 38 for Sunni parties and 21 for Allawi's secular Wataniyya. The con-

tinued replication of sectarian majoritarianism reconfirmed Sunni marginalization, a major explanation for the appeal of ISIS.

## 5.5 Iraq in the Maelstrom of Regional Power Struggle

This fragmented Iraqi state could neither articulate an agreed national interest nor a foreign policy position that would make it an effective actor in the regional power struggle, as it had been under Ba'th rule. Rather, it became a battleground of regional politics. External actors sought to penetrate Iraq via their local proxies who sought to manipulate or draw them in on their side in a way quite indicative of a weak penetrated state, similar to Lebanon and to Syria before 1963. Indeed, Iraq, along with Lebanon, was the main battleground of the 2003-11 regional struggle between the rival US/Saudi-led (moderate/Sunni) and Iran-led (resistance/Shi'a) axes. The Sunni powers did not accept Shi'a rule in Baghdad. The Saudis perceived Maliki as an Iranian proxy, backed his rivals among the Sunnis and financed Sunni Islamist proxies to counter Iranian influence, thereby driving Shia politicians into greater dependence on Iran. Similarly, Turkey also developed intimate ties with Iraqi Sunni politicians and the Iraqi Kurds, pulling them away from the influence of Baghdad (Arun and Abeer 2010). The formation of the Iraqi government after the 2010 election was a pivotal opportunity for outside powers to affect Iraq's tangent. Turkey helped in the formation of Allawi's trans-sectarian *Iraqiyya* coalition to contest Maliki's premiership, while Iran tried to broker a Shi'a majority bloc to keep it out of power. While the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) was aligned with Turkey, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) supported Iran. The ISIS seizure of Mosul further deepened the sectarian fragmentation and external intervention in Iraq. Although Maliki was replaced, under US pressure, by a new Prime Minister, Haidar al-Abadi, who spoke the language of inclusion, with the failure of the professional military to stand up to ISIS, the Shia militias were re-empowered to fight it, with ever increasing Iranian support.

## 6. State De-Construction in Syria

### 6.1 Regime Vulnerabilities

In Syria, a similar outcome to the state de-construction in Iraq unfolded almost a decade later, albeit owing to a somewhat different combination of external and internal forces. The regime's special vulnerability had always been its dominance by Alawi military officers in a Sunni-majority society. This was initially overcome by the Ba'th party's organizational penetration of the countryside. The nationalisation and land reform programs that broke the dominance of the Sunni oligarchy gave the regime the means to win over popular constituencies, especially peasants; via a populist social contract and a nationalist foreign policy it also won a measure of support. However, the exhaustion of the public sector as an engine of development after 1980 meant the regime could only be sustained by rent accessed through foreign policy, at which Hafez al-Assad was very adept.

Bashar al-Asad came to power at a particularly dangerous time for the Arab republics – when the West was simultaneously exporting neo-liberalism as the only legitimate economic course, which in MENA meant favouring investors and de-constructing the populist social contract by which the republics had legitimized themselves; at the same time the West’s democracy promotion discourse tended to de-legitimize authoritarian regimes, particularly once they departed from their initial social contract. Asad followed, if belatedly, on the same neo-liberal course, favouring crony capitalists and dismantling the welfare state. At the same time, the regime’s defiance of the US in Iraq and Lebanon brought isolation from the West, making the regime dependent on Gulf investment, which drove a boom in tourism and real estate in big cities, while the regime’s original constituency, a countryside suffering severe drought, was neglected. Population growth drove the numbers of unemployed youth well beyond the capacity of the declining state to absorb. At the same time, in order to establish his authority within the regime, Assad purged prominent Sunni politicians and concentrated power in his family clan, sacrificing the former’s clientele networks in society. He also curbed the role of the party and peasant/worker unions, where opposition to neo-liberal reforms were concentrated, thereby debilitating the regime’s organised social base to Sunni rural society.

## 6.2 From Uprising to Civil War

The opposing sides in the Syrian Uprising reflected the regime’s reconfiguration of its social base. It began in the deprived rural towns and suburbs, and then spread to medium sized cities, for example Homs, where small manufacturers were victims of trade liberalization, and Hama, the traditional bastion of Sunni notables long resentful of the “Alawi regime”. The main cities, Damascus and Aleppo, where investment and consumption were concentrated, remained largely quiescent months into the uprising (Hinnebusch and Zintl 2014; Wieland 2012).

The conflict in Syria began with mass protest against the regime and deteriorated into sectarian-tinged civil war in a failed state divided into warring zones. When the Uprising started, Assad’s security solution, the brutal repression of peaceful demonstrators, caused what had been localised protests demanding reform to spiral into a major uprising calling for the overthrow of the regime. In parallel, Assad deployed a sectarian discourse aimed at generating minority solidarity behind his regime, denouncing protestors as jihadi terrorists and relying on Alawi militias to brutalise protestors. Also driving escalation of the conflict were the maximalist demands of the opposition: the “fall of the regime” – a ‘rush to confrontation’ with the regime while the latter still retained significant support (Hinnebusch 2012; Mandour 2013). A compromise political settlement between the two sides soon became impossible. The regime, made up of hardened Machiavellians, was prepared to fight to the end to survive, whatever the cost to the country; constituted along neo-patrimonial lines, it would find it very hard to share power or to remove the president without risk of collapse. The opposition was dominated by ideologues, whether demanding a democratic or Islamic state, who could not accept compromise with an “evil” regime.



The opposition strategy was to de-stabilize the regime through interminable mass civil unrest, in order to provoke defections from the security forces, undermine the economy, and break the regime alliance with business. For this strategy to succeed, external constraints had to deter the regime's use of full-scale repression for fear of provoking outside intervention. The regime, however, was not deterred from resorting to a 'military solution' that did not spare civilians. While the Asad regime's increasing use of lethal force against non-violent protestors alienated wide swaths of the public, the opposition was constructed, among the regime's constituency, notably minorities but also parts of the urban bourgeoisie, as a jihadist 'other', and society rapidly became polarized. Nevertheless, this mass punishment of populations merely intensified opposition and provoked Sunni defections from the army – specifically to the anti-regime 'Free Syrian Army' – and later encouraged the rise of jihadists. Although the protests began with a cross-sectarian discourse, they took on an ever more Sunni Islamist cast, partly in reaction to the regime's sectarian strategy (Hinnebusch et al. 2016).

As the conflict was militarized, each side hoped to win by *further escalating* the level of violence, even after victory for either seemed increasingly less likely. As more and more blood was shed, powerful animosities were generated and neither side could imagine continued coexistence. As order broke down, the 'security dilemma' kicked in and each side resorted to defensive tactics that made both feel more insecure. Extremists who advocated pre-emptive violence against other communities were empowered and people began to be treated according to their communal identity. In fact, something approaching ethnic cleansing took place in certain mixed areas.

As the normal economy collapsed, a 'war economy', in which people deprived of a normal life and income sought survival through spoils and flocked to militant groups with access to largely external funding, gave extra life to the conflict despite the damage it was already inflicting on all sides (Abboud 2014; Turkmani 2015). Warlordism filled the security gap as rival factions arose across opposition-controlled areas. Trans-state refugee flows, funding by Diasporas, identity groups crossing borders, and transnational arms trafficking embedded the conflict in wider regional struggles that made it all the harder to resolve. A de facto partition soon emerged, with the front lines fairly stabilized but authority on both sides, even the government side, de-centralized and localities "militiaized". While the regime controlled Damascus and a corridor north to the Alawi areas, the various opposition factions controlled much of the north and east, with the far northeast falling under Kurdish control, and parts of the east under tribal control with links to Sunni tribal areas of Iraq.

### 6.3 External Meddling

While the uprising was essentially indigenous, external forces also increasingly sought to use the uprising to their advantage. Qatar used its Pan-Arab TV channel Al-Jazeera to amplify the uprising, while the Saudis funnelled money and arms to the tribes and jihadis who flooded in from across the region to fight the regime. Turkey gave save haven to anti-regime activists and fighters and allowed foreign

Jihadists to transverse Turkey for Syria. The regime's only chance of slipping out of this tightening stranglehold lay with its links to Hezbollah to the west and Iran to the east. It increasingly relied on Hezbollah, whose fighters helped it stabilise itself and on Iran, which supplied financial support, training in counter-insurgency, and arms. Iraq was the pivotal connection with Iran and its decision to stay out of the anti-Assad coalition was decisive. It acted as a transit link from Iran and provided the regime with cheap oil after its oil fields came under opposition control. Iraqi Shia militia soon joined the battle on the regime's side. For Sunnis, it was obvious that a defensive Shi'a belt had been constructed to turn back a Sunni Islamist revolution (Kinninmont 2014). At the global level the US and Russia backed the warring sides.

This external intervention, by global and especially regional powers was decisive in keeping the conflict going at ever-higher levels of violence. Each side believed that, if only its external patrons provided it with more resources or increased their intervention on its behalf that the balance of power would shift, allowing victory. Yet external players continued to provide their clients with enough support to keep fighting and avoid defeat but not enough to defeat their opponent. External funding also fuelled the war economy that incentivized players to continue the conflict and, in multiplying spoilers, obstructed any political settlement. Thus, Syria became a regional battleground, framed in Sunni-Shi'a terms, quite similar to Iraq. This failed state became a breeding ground of trans-state jihadist and salafi Islamic groups, in particular various al-Qaida avatars that spilled over from Iraq to fill the power vacuum, most famously, the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Shams (ISIS).

Paradoxically, Western intervention in the Syrian crisis made things worse. First, the West's discourse of democratization (and financial support for dissidents) had helped generate exile groups that, at an early stage, promoted the uprising; the discourse of humanitarian intervention encouraged the opposition to think that the regime could not bring the full force of its repressive capabilities against protestors without provoking foreign intervention, an expectation that kept alive both their resistance and their unwillingness to compromise. By mid-2011 the regime, isolated from the West and under Western sanctions, appeared to be an international pariah. Western sanctions helped debilitate the regime's capacity to fund state institutions and to maintain its control over wide swaths of the country. As the same time, as the West raised the discourse of the international criminal court, regime elites realized that, their bridges burned, there was no way back: they would have to stick together and do whatever it took to win. In parallel, Russia and China, antagonized by the West's use of a UN humanitarian resolution to promote regime change at their expense in Libya in early 2011, moved to protect Syria from a similar scenario (Joya 2012).

Finally, while the West proved unwilling to directly intervene militarily to end the war on Western terms (exit of Asad), the US and European states, either directly or via the Gulf monarchies, provided large numbers game-changing weaponry, notably anti-tank weapons, much of which was transferred to militant Islamist groups (The Guardian 2016). They seized control of significant parts of Syrian territory and prevented the regime from recovering territorial control; the

stalemate and failed state thus produced would otherwise have been quite unlikely. Thus, Western policies were decisive in creating two failed states in Iraq and Syria. These failed states (as earlier in Afghanistan) then became the sites of “blowback”, posing considerable threats to the West – in this case the dual threats of terrorism and mass migration.

#### 6.4 The Iraqi Government and the Syrian Uprising

Iraq’s government initially attempted to balance between competing demands on it over Syria, taking a minimalist non-partisan stand so as not to inflame the cleavages within its own population. The government of Nuri al-Maliki had only recently accused the Assad regime of involvement in terrorism in Iraq, but its fear that the rise of a Sunni-dominated government in Damascus would strengthen the already alienated Sunnis in Iraq’s western provinces soon became its overriding consideration. In Maliki’s words, “I’m not defending the regime. Change must take place. But if Bashar is toppled and salafis come to power, Iraq will face a sectarian war”. Iraq abstained from the Arab League vote in 2011 to suspend Syria’s membership, rejected the US call for Assad to go, opposed further sanctions and the overthrow of the Syrian regime by force and argued that the crisis should be resolved by political reforms. While other Arab states downgraded ties with Assad, Iraq moved in the opposite direction. It hosted official visits, expanded business ties and provided material support. Particularly remarkable was Iraq’s willingness to evade US and EU demands to cut Iranian arms deliveries transiting Iraqi airspace to Damascus. To ward off these pressures and over-dependency that the US could use as leverage over him, Maliki signed a 4.2bn USD arms deal with Russia. Having invested so much in Iraq, the US could not readily cut off aid without sacrificing its remaining positions in the country (Ruhayem 2012).

#### 6.5 Trans-state Spillover

The Syrian and Iraqi conflicts rapidly became intertwined. This was symptomatic of the trans-state shared identities between the two states. Public opinion in the western Sunni-majority provinces of Iraq was supportive of the Syrian uprising. Fighters and supplies crossed from Anbar province, an arms supply route from Saudi Arabia. The Euphrates River Valley intimately connected Syrian and Iraqi tribes; during the US occupation of Iraq, the tribes and mosques of Deir al-Zur had provided support to insurgents in Anbar province; now Iraq tribes sent money, weapons and fighters to support their Syrian cousins. With historic familial and financial links to ruling elites in Gulf States, they were conduits of the latter’s anti-Assad and anti-Iranian policy. Iraqi Sunnis from Mosul joined Syria’s Jabhat al-Nusra and transferred their technology of car bombings and IUDs learned in the Iraqi insurgency (Knights 2012; Wieland 2012, S. 206; Abeer 2012; Abbas 2012; Harris 2013).

In time, the Syrian conflict was increasingly internationalized as Sunni jihadists flocked to the two trans-state al-Qaida avatars, Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS. By 2015, around 27,000 foreign fighters from 86 countries were fighting the regimes in Iraq

and Syria, with 16,000 from MENA, 5,000 from Europe, and 4,700 from former Soviet republics (The Guardian 2015). In parallel, not only was Hizbollah increasing active on the regime side in Syria, but Iraqi Shia militias also travelled to Syria, initially to protect the Sayyida Zaynab Shia mosque near Damascus against rebel attacks. However, they soon became involved in defence of the Syrian regime, with some 5-10,000 fighting alongside Hizbollah and contributing materially to altering the power balance, particularly at the 2013 battle of Qusayr. They were mainly from the Badr organization, but also splinters from the Sadrists, such as the Iranian financed *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* (AAH), despite Muqtada al-Sadr's refusal to endorse it; some had been involved in fighting against the US occupation and/or sectarian cleansing against Sunnis. Some were seconded from Iraqi army units, especially Shia special forces units, suggesting the complicity of al-Maliki's government. New fighters were recruited in Iraq, via a discourse of martyrdom, to defend the Shia mosques and neighbourhoods from attacks by the *taqfiris* – Sunni jihadis who consider Shiites heretics liable to be killed. They were recruited via the internet, from pilgrims to the holy cities of Karbala and Najaf, trained by the Iranian Quds force and flown to Syria via Iran (Tamimi 2015; Smyth 2015). Thus the top down instrumentalization of sectarianism by the rival regional powers intervening in Syria soon translated into social movements that saw themselves engaged in a sectarian conflict – a certain “bottom-up” sectarianization.

## 7. State Re-Making in Iraq and Syria?

The merging Iraqi and Syrian conflicts had potential state re-making implications (Stanfield 2013). In Syria, with the collapse of order, many Syrians sought protection in sub-state or trans-state identities, such as Syrian Alawi vs. Sunni Islamist. In Iraq, the growing exclusion of Sunnis from the al-Maliki regime propelled them into the hands of radical Sunni Islamists. Owing to a combination of the displacement of persons by fighting and deliberate policies of ethnic or sectarian cleansing, many areas are becoming more homogeneous. Minorities have fled or been killed in areas under IS rule, such as the Yezidis, leaving these regions more Sunni Muslim in composition. There has been ethnic cleansing of Arabs in areas under PYD Kurdish control along the Turkish border. The Asad regime has prioritized keeping control of minority-populated areas and minorities have fled to government controlled regions. Regime bombardment and sieges have sought to drive Sunnis out of strategic contested areas (Balanche 2015; Cockburn 2015). Similarly in Iraq, Shia are much more concentrated in government held areas while Kurds have been settled in Kirkuk at the expense of Arabs. In predominately Sunni areas outside central government control, an intense fragmentation along localistic and tribal lines has taken place in both states (Khaddour and Mazur 2013). This ethnic/sectarian “unmixing” is preparing the way for possible territorial re-design.

At the same time, Syria and Iraq became, to an extent, a single arena of political contestation, with rival sectarian-constituted trans-group groups, both Sunni and Shia, moving back and forth between them as the balance of power dictated. Moreover, the debilitation of the states' territorial control provided a unique op-

portunity for armed and proactive movements to advance alternative boundary busting projects. To be sure, only minorities in either state wanted a re-drawing of the boundaries of their states, most retained some identification with them, and even trans-state groups remained focused on the struggle over power in their own states of origin (e.g. Iraqi Shia militias backing Asad returned to fight in Iraq after ISIS seized Mosul). But two powerful forces, in particular, the Kurds and ISIS, posed a formidable challenge to the territorial status quo and in the name of two identities that had been violated by “Sykes-Picot”, the “Kurdish nation” and “Islamic umma”.

The weakening of the two states greatly strengthened the Kurds’ national and separatist ambitions. Syrian Kurdish regions became effectively autonomous of Damascus under the PYD in parallel to the fully consolidated autonomy of the KRG in Iraq. Iraq’s Kurds took advantage of the defeat of the Iraqi army by ISIS to seize Kirkuk and raise the specter of independence, which, combined with possible demonstration effects among Kurds in Turkey and Iran, could be a first step toward carving a new Kurdistan out of the state system that a hundred years ago denied Kurdish national aspirations. As Barkey (2012) points out, Syria and Iraq are both at the ‘cusp’ of Arab-Kurdish, Persian-Kurdish and Turkish-Kurdish divisions: “Before it has run its course [the Syrian uprising] could [...] even alter the region’s post-World War I territorial boundaries”.

In parallel, the ISIS movement, which seized control over wide areas of western Iraq and eastern Syria, declared the abolition of the Syrian-Iraq border a part of the construction of a transnational “Caliphate”. ISIS exemplified the spiralling interaction of US intervention and state deformation in the Levant space. ISIS was an offshoot of al-Qaida, which had roots in the US/Saudi aid to the mujahidin fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan; this US proxy was however so antagonized by the basing of US forces operating against Iraq in Saudi Arabia that it engineered the 9/11 attack on the US; the US response, the invasion of Iraq, created an anarchy in which al-Qaida flourished and where it provoked a sectarian war with Iraqi Shiites. When Al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) was defeated in Iraq it found safe-haven in Syria and the collapse of Syrian state control over eastern parts of the country allowed it to seize Raqqa and other parts of the West of the country. ISIS now combined the remnants of AQI, disaffected Sunni tribesmen (many of whom had been trained and armed by the US against AQI) and ex-Iraqi Ba’thists (originally displaced by the US 2003 invasion) and its forces were heavily armed with US weaponry captured from the Iraqi army. In 2014, ISIS seized Mosul and proclaimed a caliphate straddling western Iraq and eastern Syria. It rapidly acquired some of the attributes of statehood including heavy weaponry, oil resources, control over cities, the ability to enlist wide Sunni disaffection, and, most remarkably, the defeat it inflicted on the Iraqi army at Mosul.

In Syria, after having been weakened by attacks from more Syria-centric elements of the Islamic opposition, including al-Qaida avatar, *Jabhat al-Nusra*, ISIS turned the momentum acquired in Iraq to surge back across the border and put its rivals on the defensive. It benefited from a bandwagoning effect, as many disparate groups pledged fealty: ISIS had superior material resources, financial and military, provided by Gulf donors or seized from the failing Iraqi and Syrian states. It had a

powerful religious message, a claim to protect Sunnis, and to provide a modicum of order and welfare where it governed. Many also submitted out of fear of ISIS's murderous reputation. Indicative of the high level of inter-state permeability was the penetration by ISIS fighters as far west as Lebanon. ISIS's ambitions went beyond mere terrorism as it sought to seize, hold and expand territory and in these areas established the rudiments of state administration, providing employment, Islamic "justice" and undertaking surveillance and taxation.

The ISIS increased the dependence of the Syrian and Iraqi regimes on Iran, the power most immediately threatened by radical Sunni Islamism. The Iraqi and Syrian regimes have also benefited from the international interventions against ISIS (and other jihadists) by both the rival great powers, the US and Russia. Ultimately, however, the Iraqi and Syrian states can only recover from the jihadist challenge by much greater inclusion of the disaffected Sunnis, a task that in 2014 seemed beyond their capability. If the unmaking of the Versailles imposed-Westphalian system is still unlikely, it is no longer unthinkable.<sup>3</sup>

## 8. Conclusion

The fateful interaction of identity-fragmented states arbitrarily carved out of a preexisting Islamic space by Western imperial powers across the Levant had, almost a hundred years on, nearly uniform consequences: failed states and rampant sectarianism. Ultimately it goes back to Sykes-Picot – to what Fromkin (1989) perspicaciously called the "peace to end all peace".

Different regime-building formula were used by would-be state-builders to get beyond this inauspicious starting point ranging from Lebanon's consociational democracy, which accommodated and encouraged identity pluralism, to the Ba'athist authoritarianism of Iraq and Syria which sought to assimilate citizens into a common Arab nationalism. In the latter cases, regimes became vulnerable to a reemergence of sub-state identities when the initial formula was dismantled – the cross-identity party organization weakened or destroyed and the Ba'athist ideology debilitated by economic troubles and/or military defeat. While there is no doubt that the often brutal and insufficiently inclusive power consolidation strategies of the neo-patrimonial leaders – Saddam, Asad – was bound to provoke opposition, this, itself, was in part a function of the poor hand state-builders had been initially dealt in which legitimacy, the key substitute for coercion, was always precarious.

Once the ruling bargains, based on nationalist performance and material benefits, collapsed, leading to intractable conflict, the rival parties were enabled, in these easily penetrated societies to call on support from "kindred" trans-state actors. These divided societies were also highly vulnerable to the "competitive interference" of rival regional powers, making them sites of their proxy wars. Yet state failure has been, in significant measure, a function of renewed intervention by global powers: in Iraq US invasion unleashed sectarian civil war across the region

<sup>3</sup> For analyses of the roots and development of ISIS see Lister (2014) as well as Caris and Reynolds (2014).

and in Syria the arming of both sides by the US, Russia, and European states together with regional Sunni powers and Iran drove an inexorable escalation of the violence. Russia's intervention has driven a further escalation in violence in Syria. As such, global powers and indigenous MENA forces – whether collaborating with or resisting the former – “co-constituted” state deformation and state failure.

Flawed analyses and bad policies are intimately linked: analyses of what went wrong in Syria and Iraq that failed to put it in a historically long term context or to appreciate the co-constitution of the conflicts, were highly likely to exaggerate the role of immediate agency: the “bad guys” – authoritarian leaders, Islamist extremists – who need only be removed to allow Western interventionists to remake MENA in their own image. This has proven a prescription for turning local conflicts into world crises.

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