

The Syrian Predicament

Written by Nadav Morag

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NADAV MORAG, MAY 9 2013

The civil war playing out in Syria is an extreme manifestation of a common problem: the creation of independent states based on boundaries that did not reflect social and demographic realities. Of course, there are many successful nation-states that are multi-ethnic, multi-religious, etc., and have also managed to create stable societies with a strong degree of national cohesion. This is usually because they have created a strong civil society and an alternative national identity, and a narrative that pulls people away from more narrow sectarian identities, particularly as the generations that were present at the genesis of the state, or who arrived later as immigrants, gave way to new generations that were born and bred in the new society.

Identity and Politics in the Middle East

In the Middle East however, this process never really took place in any meaningful way. With the possible exception of Egypt (which has a considerably more homogeneous society and a history of millennia as a political and social unit), all Arab countries suffer from the quandary, albeit to different degrees, of sectarianism and the absence of a truly unifying identity and common historical narrative, and even Egypt has its challenges in this regard (particularly with respect to its significant Coptic minority). One reason, and perhaps the primary one, for the high degree of sectarianism in Arab societies lies in the fundamental building block of identity and loyalty in the Arab World: the family.[i] While the family is the basic social building block, it is a small unit that is often incapable of defending its interests on its own and hence forms part of larger extended families, clans, and/or tribal groups. In countries, such as Syria and Lebanon, where strictly tribal identities tend to be weaker (Syria) or non-existent (Lebanon), larger family blocs often come together in the form of ethnic minorities (often based on their own discrete religions though sometimes, as in the case of Kurds, Assyrians, and Turkmen, centered also, or primarily, on a distinct language).[ii] Given that familial, tribal, and/or ethnic structures are so central to the Arab experience, it is not surprising that Arab states are either dominated by one ethnic or tribal community, often in alliance with others (Saudi Arabia provides a good example of this, as does Jordan), or else they are weak and hollow structures (as in the case of Lebanon and Iraq). In either case, these countries have never enjoyed strong national identities that have been able to circumvent the powerful ties of blood, in the first instance, and religion and/or language in the second, in order to create a common identity and historical narrative. To take one emblematic country in the region as an example, depending on how one looks at it, when Lebanon was created there were either never any Lebanese or the only "real" Lebanese were the Maronite Christians for which the country was formed by the French after the First World War.[iii] Of course, over the years of the existence of the respective countries of the Arab World, people have become accustomed to these structures and to thinking of themselves *also* as Lebanese, Yemenis, or Jordanians, but this has not meant that these new identities have been able to break down the power of these primordial social bonds, and in times of trouble, people have tended to gravitate, quite naturally, to what they know best and to where they feel safest.

Syria, like its immediate neighbors, was created by the British and French in the wake of the First World War (achieving full independence in 1946). Like its Arab neighbors, it was created as an amalgamation of different families, clans, and ethnicities and, like its neighbors, the positions of power in the government and military were disproportionately held by members of ethnic minorities who were keen to take advantage of British and French favoritism towards minorities by securing a position of influence and domination over the majority community. The colonial powers often fostered and cooperated with these objectives because they viewed minority groups as

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inherently more supportive of European rule due to minority fears of majority domination should these countries achieve independence.[iv]

Consequently, when Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan became independent, each country was dominated by one or more ethnic minority (Sunnis, Maronites, and Bedouin respectively), often in alliance with still other minority groups (such as the minority Sunni community in the case of Lebanon or East Bank Palestinian communities in the case of Jordan) and elements within the majority community. The leaders of these countries duly provided lip service to the effect that all their citizens were equal and that they were committed to fostering strong national identities, but the reality was that these countries were designed to serve more narrow communal interests.

Syria: State vs. Ethnicities

For close to two decades following independence, most of Syria's leaders came from the majority Sunni community, but minority groups such as the Alawis, Druze, Christians, and Kurds, were often ensconced in powerful positions in government and the military and thus were able to dominate Syrian society. With the rise of Hafez al-Assad in 1963, the Syrian state came to be based around his minority Alawi community in alliance with Druze, Christian, Ismaili, and other minorities as well as influential elements from among Syria's Sunnis. Syria was thus, first and foremost, a state by and for Alawis, that also benefited many other minority groups (who were, and are, equally afraid of the majority Sunni community, particularly the more radical Islamist elements), and some Sunnis who derived economic or other benefits from the status quo. Since the Sunnis comprise nearly three-quarters of Syria's population and the Alawis only constitute, at best, ten percent of the population (with the remainder being Christians, about ten percent, and Druze, three percent), this system could only be viable by an adroit playing off of various communities and factions against each other coupled with unforgiving violence against regime critics alongside economic benefits for those willing to support the regime or at least not actively campaign against it.[v] Hafez al-Assad proved largely equal to the match of keeping Syria together and keeping his beloved Alawis on top, and he also lived during a time when it was easier for dictators to control the flow of information and to brainwash people. Moreover, Hafez al-Assad was able to deflect criticism by holding aloft the twin banners of Arab nationalism and the Palestinian cause, thus effectively portraying Syria as the core of a future united Arab state that would encompass the region rather than a dictatorial state run for the benefit of narrow sectarian interests.[vi]

When Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father in 2000, times had changed politically, economically, socially, and technologically, and, to make matters worse, Bashar lacked the political skill and cunning of his father. The combination of these factors eventually led to the outbreak of strife in Syria in the spring of 2011 that gradually took on the shape and aspect of a full blown civil war. The international community is presently grappling with the question of what a post-Assad Syria can and should look like. Of course, it is unlikely that any external power, Arab, European, or American, will be able to impose a system on Syria. Such attempts failed miserably in Iraq and, in any case, there are no volunteers to invade, occupy, and pacify Syria. Nevertheless, it is possible to contemplate potential structures under which Syria's people can potentially enjoy future security and stability (and even perhaps democratic rights).

A political outcome of the conflict that does not take into account the basic sectarian nature of Syrian society is, however, unlikely to succeed, and the idea that some sort of common Syrian civil identity can be created, especially in the wake of such bitter and bloody sectarian warfare, is highly misguided. It is clear that nearly seven decades of independence have not created a durable common Syrian identity and consequently attempts to create one now are not likely to succeed. The basic political unit of a post-civil war Syria is almost certainly likely to be the ethnic community, and this regardless of whether the ethnic community is a desirable point of departure for a political system or not. Questions of what is best are immaterial here as the only important question to ask is: which outcome will ensure the least degree of violent conflict and foster the greatest degree of stability?

Options for Syria

Essentially then, if things are to improve, the inhabitants of Syria must somehow achieve one of three options: a federal state, a confederation, or the partition of the country into a number of independent states. One might argue

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that the best possible outcome is a stable federal state in which each ethnic minority achieves representation (based on geographic region or ethnic background, or both) and power is shared by the various communities with a strong system of checks and balances that both empowers the majority but also safeguards minority rights. While it is not the place here to delve into the mechanics of what this would look like (as there are a range of options for building a federal system in Syria), the idea of a federal system presupposes that the various ethnic communities can put aside their enmity and agree to share power, and that the Alawis and other minorities be prepared to accept the fact that the Sunnis, as the overwhelming majority, will necessarily have more power and influence in this system.

A second option is confederation. A confederal system devolves most power onto regional entities. In this context, Syria could be divided into ethnically-based states that share a common, but weak, central government that only has authority over some aspects of foreign, trade, economic, and monetary policy and may have some vague role with respect to national defense. In many ways, the Kurdistan region of Iraq has this sort of relationship with the central government in Baghdad, and it has allowed the Kurdish region to thrive while much of the rest of Iraq is plagued by sectarianism and terrorism.[vii]

Finally, if even confederation proves too much for Syria's dueling sects and they are unwilling to share power, even within the limited scope of a confederation, then a partition of the country into a series of ethnic-based nation-states may produce stability and peace in the medium to longer-term.

Of course, there is still the possibility that the Sunni majority will gradually take the country by force, extinguish pockets in which minorities rule under their own militias, and then wreak revenge against the Alawis and other minority groups to the degree that these will be cowed into accepting Sunni domination. That option, however, will require both Sunni unity (which has not been forthcoming thus far and is not likely to be so) and the spilling of a great deal more blood.

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[i] Sandra MacKey, *Mirror of the Arab World: Lebanon in Conflict* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2008), Kindle Edition, Location 639.

[ii] Hassan Hassan, "Why Tribes Matter in Syria," *The Guardian*, July 25, 2012, available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/jul/25/syria-tribal-rivalries-shape-future> (accessed April 29, 2013);

[iii] Asher Kaufman, *Reviving Phoenicia: The Search for Identity in Lebanon* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), pp. 5-8.

[iv] R. Stephens, *Cyprus, A Place of Arms: Power Politics and Ethnic Conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1966), pp. 107-108.

[v] Voice of America, "Syria's Religious, Ethnic Groups," *VOA News*, December 20, 2012, available at: http://www.voanews.com/content/syria_religious_ethnic_groups/1568679.html (accessed May 3, 2013).

[vi] Moshe Ma'oz, *Syria's Role in the Region: Mediator, Peacemaker, or Aggressor?* (New York: The Century Foundation, 2007), pp. 6-11, available at: http://tcf.org/assets/downloads/tcf-maoz_syria.pdf (accessed April 30, 2013).

[vii] see Lydia Khalil, *Stability in Iraqi Kurdistan: Reality of Mirage?* Working Paper No. 2, Saban Center Working Papers (Washington, D.C.: The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, 2009), available at: http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2009/6/kurdistan%20khalil/06_kurdistan_khalil.pdf (accessed May 3, 2013).

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