Syria and Iraq: The Long-Term Cost of Geopolitical Destabilisation

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INTRODUCTION

Writing in 2007 and addressing the question of why the United States (US) leadership headed by George W. Bush decided to occupy Iraq in 2003, the widely published Canadian journalist Gwynne Dyer argued that the end of the Cold War and economic globalization had fundamentally altered the calculus of great power politics in the Middle East: "The Cold War ended almost twenty years ago, and since then it really hasn't mattered from a strategic point of view whether Country A is 'pro-American' or 'pro-Russian.' There isn't going to be a military confrontation between the United States and Russia, and Country A will gladly sell its oil to the highest bidder regardless of ideology or alliances. By the same token, the U.S.-Israeli alliance no longer serves Washington's strategic purposes, especially since it comes with such a high diplomatic cost."[1]

Looking back at Dyer's assertions in 2015, one cannot help but think that his announcement of the end of traditional geopolitics was premature. With the exception of the first half sentence about the end of the Cold War, practically every other claim appears highly doubtful as judged from our current point of knowledge and interpretation. While it is true that there is no "war" between the US and Russia – such a war would mean the end of humanity due to mutually assured nuclear destruction – one must nevertheless observe that the self-dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 has not meant the end of geopolitical contestation between the US and Russia in the Middle East and elsewhere.

When reading Dyer, one should acknowledge that there is still no agreement about the factors that could "ultimately" explain the reasoning of US policy-makers behind the invasion of Iraq – nor is there ever going to be full agreement given that major sources of evidence will remain out of the public domain. On the other hand, much information has become public since 2003 and one can state beyond reasonable doubt that the official US and United Kingdom (UK) government claims, namely unfounded allegations about ongoing Iraqi programmes to develop weapons of mass destruction

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[1] Dyer, Gwynne, *The Mess They Made: The Middle East After Iraq*, Toronto, McClelland & Stewart, 2007, p. 41.

(WMD), did not motivate the attack. Moreover, the events of September 11, 2001 were in no way linked with Saddam Hussein.[2]

A sufficiently high number of Washington insiders have since gone on record to state with confidence that plans to occupy Iraq existed long before September 11, 2001. While the so-called "neocons" of the Project for a New American Century (PNAC) are usually acknowledged to have invented the doctrine of "regime change" in the Middle East and elsewhere in order to defend US global hegemony, one must immediately add that support for such plans did extend far beyond this group to include American nationalists in the mainstream of the Bush Jr. administration and the earlier Bill Clinton and George H. W. Bush (Bush Sr.) administrations.

Retired US general Wesley Clark, former CIA chief George Tenet and former Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill, who was also in the National Security Council between 2001 and 2002, among others, are all on record as having made statements pointing to the Bush Jr. administration's planning of the removal of Saddam Hussein prior to September 11, 2001.[3] Wesley Clark, who had earlier failed to become the presidential nominee of the Democrats in 2004 and was considering a second run in 2008, suggested in a speech delivered in 2007 that the US was engaged in regime change efforts on a large scale. He quoted a Pentagon official who, according to Clark, told him in person days after September 11, 2001 that "we're going to take out seven countries in five years, starting with Iraq, and then Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and, finishing off, Iran."[4] Although the timeline of five years has not been borne out by subsequent events, the list of countries has proved to be remarkably accurate.

Stressing the element of continuity in US power politics in the Middle East does not, in fact, require recourse to the accuracy of the personal memory of retired generals, administrators or policy-makers. Rather, it has been the official policy of the US administrations since the Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957 to consider any entrance of rival powers into the Middle East as a legitimate reason for the use of military force

[2] Cramer, Jane K. and Thrall, A. Trevor, *Why Did the United States Invade Iraq?*, Abingdon, Oxon., Routledge, 2012, ch. 1. The authors report that many US citizens still believe that Saddam Hussein was linked with September 11, 2001.

[3] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9RC1Mepk_Sw for the quote. See also Clark's speech at the Commonwealth Club of California, San Francisco, CA, on October 3, 2007, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TY2DKzastu8; for Tenet, see *Washington Post*, April 28, 2007; for O'Neill, see CNN.com, January 14, 2004. Numerous other sources could be added.

[4] Clark claims to quote the words of an anonymous Pentagon official who in turn is held to have quoted from a memo (see footnote 3). Some authors discussing Clark have in turn suggested that the quoted statement originated with Donald Rumsfeld, although the transcript of Clark's talk is hazy on this point. When pressed by the interviewer, Clark refused to state the name of the quoted official. See http://www.democracynow.org/2007/3/2/gen_wesley_clark_weighs_presidential_bid.

to fend off such competition.[5] The Eisenhower Doctrine continues to apply today. Its main theme of US willingness to use military power to achieve its geopolitical goal of regional dominance in the Middle East has been reinstated by virtually every US administration since then.

Most prominently, US President Jimmy Carter, then under the influence of his National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, declared in his State of the Union Address of January 23, 1980 that "[a]n attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force."[6] In a similar vein, President Barack Obama stated in his UN Security Council speech on Syria of September 24, 2013 that the US "is prepared to use all elements of our power, including military force, to secure our core interests in the region."[7] Briefly put, US regional power politics has relied since the US rise to dominance in the Middle East on privileged alliances with local client states – Israel and Saudi Arabia as well as Iran under the Shah until 1979 and, to a lesser extent, on Egypt since the country's shift back toward US patronage in the late 1970s.

It is in the context of continuity of US behaviour in the region, enshrined in the Eisenhower Doctrine, and escalated further after the end of the Cold War with the on-going expansion of the network of US military bases in Arab states, that this article will briefly discuss the cases of Syria and Iraq. To be sure, this analytical focus on US power is not the only valid approach. In addition, geopolitical inquiry in the age of the Internet suffers neither from a scarcity of sources nor from secrecy as such. Instead, there exists an abundance of plausible sources that allow for more than one equally plausible interpretation of the evidence.

The remainder of this article briefly sketches some geopolitical features of the Middle East (section 1) before providing a brief overview about Syrian and Iraqi geopolitical history until the most recent cycles of conflict (sections 2 and 3). Sections 4 and 5 discuss the most recent crisis cycle in Iraq since 2003 and in Syria since 2011. Thus, the article's purpose is to highlight why Syria and Iraq became targets of US power politics and how this destabilization has escalated pre-existing ethnic and sectarian tensions in the region, which could undermine the continuing existence of both states.

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[5] See http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=11007&st=&st1 for the full text of Eisenhower's "Special Message to the Congress on the Situation in the Middle East" [i.e., "the Doctrine"], delivered on January 5, 1957. Stressing his primarily geopolitical rather than ideological concerns, Eisenhower claimed that "Russia's rulers have long sought to dominate the Middle East. That was true of the Czars and is true of the Bolsheviks" (ibid.).

[6] See http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=33079.

[7] See http://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/68/US_en_0.pdf, p. 5.

1. The Geopolitics of the Middle East

Modern Syria and Iraq are essentially the product of the secret 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement between Britain and France about the division of the Middle East into a "Zone A" (the area designated as the French zone of influence comprising what became Lebanon and Syria) and a "Zone B" (the area designated as the British zone of influence comprising what subsequently became Palestine, Jordan and Iraq). This drafting of colonial border lines – subsequently approved at the request of both powers under the "Mandate" of the League of Nations – portended long-term structural problems for Syria and Iraq in the post-colonial period. In the Syrian case, the French handed over the north-western border region of the Mandate (the Sanjak of Alexandretta) to Turkey. In addition, Lebanon was parcelled off from Syria.[8] As for Iraq, the country was constructed with borders with six other states but with very limited access to the Persian Gulf. Its ethnic and sectarian composition was likely to trigger conflict with its neighbours.[9]

The history of post-colonial statehood in Syria and Iraq began in 1946 and 1958, respectively. In the Syrian case, the country became independent at least partially due to an informal coalition between the US and the UK, pushing for French withdrawal from the Middle East at the end of World War 2, which helped local Arab nationalists to achieve independence. In the case of Iraq, the revolution of 1958 destroyed the British-controlled monarchy and the country gained independence under the leadership of the local military. Both countries were made up of different sects (most prominently Sunni and Shia Muslims and Christians of different denominations) and included significant non-Arab ethnic minorities of Kurds and other groups.

It is, however, impossible to discuss the history of Syria and Iraq – territorial nations rather than nation states – without looking at the larger regional picture of power relationships in the Arab world, especially the emergence of modern pan-Arab nationalism in Egypt around the same time. Here, Gamal Abdel Nasser's Free Officer Movement removed the British-backed monarchy in 1952. Subsequently, Nasser skilfully played different outside powers against each other, gaining substantial political autonomy in the process, and Egypt quickly acquired a leadership role in the Arab world. Following his decision to nationalize the Suez Canal in 1956, a tripartite military attack from France, the UK and Israel tried to remove him from power.

[8] Seale, Patrick, *The Struggle for Arab Independence: Riad el-Solh and the Makers of the Modern Middle East*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 579-583.

[9] Musallam, Musallam Ali, *The Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait: Saddam Hussein, his State and International Power Politics*, London, British Academic Press, 1996, pp. 63, 68, 80.

Eisenhower sensed that the Suez invasion was a doomed effort of the declining European colonial powers to retain their position in the Middle East and refused to back it financially. Only eight weeks after the failed invasion, the Eisenhower Doctrine was issued and this date underlined imperial succession in the Middle East – the transition from UK to US regional dominance. Meanwhile, Nasser first asked the US for economic and military assistance and, meeting intransigence, turned to the Soviet Union, which quickly granted substantial support. These events ushered in a new regional system, namely the division of the Middle East into an US-backed camp (Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Iran under the Shah between 1953 and 1979) and a Soviet-backed camp (Egypt between 1956 and 1978, Syria between 1956 and 1961, and since 1963, and Iraq between 1958 and the 1980s).[10] Other Arab states, such as Jordan and Lebanon, were too weak to play much of an independent role in this regional conflict.

2. The Geopolitics of Modern Syria

Syria's leadership after independence in 1946 initially consisted of the traditional landed gentry of Sunni Muslim origin that did form a notionally democratic presidential republic. However, this group lacked the necessary resources to engage in modern mass politics and the country was short of regional or other external patronage to back up its independent position in the early Cold War period. Moreover, Arab nationalist discourse after WW2 focused on abstract calls for unity of the "Arab nation" when faced with the Zionist settlement project in Palestine. In reality, the Arab states were mostly engaged in infighting about regional leadership and threatened each other with hostile takeover.[11]

In the Syrian context, the short experiment with a deeply flawed democracy came to an end in 1949 when three military coups in a single year resulted in the rise of a series of strongmen who aspired to lead Syria, but each lasting only until the next coup. At least two of the three coups included some involvement of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), acting in the service of US oil companies keen to enforce the assent of Syria's leadership to oil pipeline projects intended to link US-controlled Saudi oil fields with the Mediterranean and West European markets.[12]

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[10] Stephens, Robert, *Nasser. A Political Biography*, London, Penguin, 1971, ch. 8.

[11] Seale, Patrick, *The Struggle for Syria. A Study of Post-War Arab Politics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1965.

[12] Dostal, Jörg Michael, "Post-Independence Syria and the Great Powers (1946-1958): How Western Power Politics Pushed the Country Toward the Soviet Union," Annual Meeting of the Academic Council of the United Nations System, June 19-21, 2014, Istanbul, http://acuns.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Syria-Paper-1946-1958-for-ACUNS-Conference-Website-12-June-2014.pdf.

The most sophisticated of the three Syrian military leaders of this period, Adib Shishakli, who remained in power from 1949 to 1954, appealed to the US leadership for backing and offered privileged access to Syria on the condition that the US would take a more balanced position in the conflict between Arab nationalism and Zionism – an offer subsequently vetoed by Israel and rejected by Eisenhower. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Syrian politics became defined by the rise of modern ideological politics – mostly represented by Baathists, Communists and Syrian nationalists – and by the increasing role of the army as the only working national institution that soon turned into the actual source of political power.

Ultimately, officers linked with the Baath Party gained power in a 1963 coup at the expense of the other forces. The Baathist ideology of pan-Arab and largely secular Arab nationalism – although the party's slogan "One indivisible Arab nation with an eternal mission" also refers to Islam – was originally developed by the Greek Orthodox Christian Michel Aflaq and the Sunni Muslim Salah al-Din al-Bitar. In 1966, the so-called "neo-Baath," which combined pan-Arab nationalism with leftist ideas, side-lined the founding generation of Baathism in Syria. This new collective leadership of military men was in turn replaced by Hafiz al-Assad (Syria's president between 1971 and 2000) during the so-called "Correction Movement" of 1970 that reintroduced a more centrist political line of the Baath and made efforts to expand the coalition running Syria to include more Sunnis, including sections of the traditional Sunni bourgeoisie.

Most crucially, different interpretations of Baathist ideology served to hide the actual conflict lines of Syrian politics derived from sect, family, region and social class. Over time, the Alawites, a religious minority to which the Assad family belongs and that is mostly settled around the Mediterranean city of Latakia, had gained the ascendancy in the command structure of the Syrian army. Since the army was the most stable institution, the Alawites – initially recruited by the French authorities into the local armed forces during the period of the Mandate – acquired influence in all other branches of the Syrian state too. However, one must stress that this authority was always managed in alliances with the other groups of Syrian society and Syrian politics cannot be reduced to issues of sectarianism.

Two major developments added to the increasing dominance of the military and the national security state in Syria. The first factor was the country's defeat in the 1967 war with Israel that resulted in the occupation of the Syrian Golan Heights by Israel. This occupation of Syrian territory is illegal according to numerous United Nations (UN) resolutions. Since 1967, Syria's leadership has made military efforts (recovery of some territory in the 1973 war) and engaged in diplomacy (failed negotiations of Syria's

President Hafiz al-Assad with Israel during much of the 1990s) to recover the Golan, and the issue remains at the core of the conflict between Israel and Syria.[13]

The second major conflict within Syria was the uprising of the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood against the Baath regime in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which amounted to a lengthy terrorist campaign against representatives of the Syrian state in general and Alawites in particular. Crucially, the Brotherhood, whose support in Syria was always very limited, received extensive sponsorship from neighbouring countries. In particular, Saddam Hussein was keen to bring down the Syrian leadership.[14] This episode highlighted the fact that the Syrian and Iraqi Baath regimes, although both notionally committed to pan-Arab nationalism and backed up by Soviet patronage, were for almost the entirety of their coexistence deeply hostile to each other. The conflict remained one of the most significant long-term features of Arab politics during the 1970s and 1980s.[15]

3. The Geopolitics of Modern Iraq

In Iraq, the development of the modern state shared some features with neighbouring Syria. After the 1958 revolution, General Abd al-Karim Qasim became Prime Minister and promoted an Iraqi nationalism that reached out to the Kurdish minority and relied at times on an alliance with the Communists whose stronghold was concentrated among oil workers who were mostly Shia Muslims. The new regime soon faced domestic opposition from Nasserist and Baathist forces. Uprisings and coups in 1959, 1963 and 1968 ultimately allowed the Iraqi Baath party to gain power, first under the leadership of Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr and then, officially since July 1979 but in reality earlier, under Saddam Hussein.

In order to further explain the regional role of Syria and Iraq, one must focus on two more levels of analysis. The first one is the military build-up of both states backed by Soviet assistance, which largely removed the two states from the direct reach of US regional power politics. The wars between Israel and some Arab states in 1967 and 1973 resulted in Arab defeats. Israel received much larger military assistance from the US than Brezhnev's Soviet Union was willing to grant its Arab allies. Nevertheless, the 1973 war appeared to show that Egypt, Syria and Iraq could possibly succeed in establishing strategic parity with Israel, since their military performance improved

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[13] Ghani, Jasmine K., "Understanding and Explaining US-Syrian Relations: Conflict and Cooperation, and the Role of Ideology," Ph.D., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2011, http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/348/1/Gani_Understanding%20and%20Explaining%20US-Syrian%20Relations.pdf, pp. 231-240.

[14] See the declassified US Defense Intelligence Agency file "Syria: Muslim Brotherhood: Pressure Intensifies," May 1982, https://syria360.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/dia-syria-muslimbrotherhoodpressureintensifies-2.pdf. The document describes the Brotherhood as a "Sunni Muslim Islamist fundamentalist organization" (p. iii).

[15] Kienle, Eberhard, *Ba'ath versus Ba'ath: The Conflict between Syria and Iraq*, London, I.B. Taurus, 1990.

significantly after lessons of defeat in the 1967 war had been learned. The US reacted to this development in two ways. On the one hand, Israel received even more military supplies and became the only country in the Middle East with a nuclear arsenal (the US had from the start acted as Israel's main economic supporter and had replaced France as Israel's major arms supplier in the 1960s). In addition, the US expanded its military supplies to the two other regional clients, Saudi Arabia and the Shah's Iran, significantly.

The Nixon Doctrine, issued in 1969, appeared to break with the earlier Eisenhower Doctrine in the sense that US client states were asked to take greater responsibility for their defence rather then rely on direct US military intervention. However, in practice both Doctrines mutually reinforced each other: the Nixon Doctrine provided for the recycling of petro dollars – oil dollars were turned into purchase of US military hardware – and "what began as an effort to build up and empower surrogates, client states in the Gulf that would do the bidding of the United States, proved instead to be the gateway for more direct projection of American military power."[16] For most of the 1970s, both superpowers maintained a regional balance of forces, with the Soviet Union acting in a junior role and certainly not receiving much by way of return for its regional engagement.[17] This situation changed, however, when the US managed to regain control of Egyptian domestic politics during the rule of President Anwar Sadat. Removing "the strongest country from the Arab line-up" after Sadat's unilateral turn toward negotiations with Israel in 1978 guaranteed, according to a prominent observer, "Israeli dominance for 30 years."[18]

The second important geopolitical level of analysis to explain US interest in the containment of Syria and Iraq during this period concerned economic affairs. Until the 1970s, the Arab states outside of the US sphere of influence essentially relied on Soviet military assistance for defence purposes and to contain domestic conflict. Yet their weak economic base did not allow for socioeconomic modernization. In the case of Iraq, the Iraqi Petroleum Company (IPC) had remained in the hands of a foreign consortium controlled by the UK, the US and France. In the early 1970s, this framework of economic control finally broke down. First, new oil discoveries in Syria – modest by Iraqi standards – allowed the country to join the group of oil states. Meanwhile, the Iraqi government signed a treaty of friendship with the Soviet Union on April 9, 1972 and then nationalized the IPC on July 1, 1972 without compensating western oil interests. This decision triggered in turn a move by the US to end diplomatic relations.

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[16]   Jones, Toby Craig, "America, Oil, and War in the Middle East," *Journal of American History*, 99, 1, 2012, p. 210.

[17]   The Arab nationalist regimes regularly repressed domestic Communist Parties (especially in Egypt and in Iraq) while Soviet economic assistance for the Arabs did not deliver direct rewards for the oil-rich Soviet Union.

[18]   Seale, Patrick, "The Syrian Crisis and the New Cold War," agenceglobal.com, February 7, 2012.

In fact, the nationalization of Iraqi oil wealth combined with rising oil prices after the 1973 war between Israel and the Arabs resulted in the most rapid expansion of government revenue in the country's history. Between 1972 and 1980, Iraqi oil revenue increased more than 30 times according to Iraqi government figures.[19] As a result, the Iraqi leadership started to enjoy considerable autonomy from outside influences and domestic pressures. The rising oil rents allowed Iraq and, to a lesser extent, Syria to become rentier states governed by powerful state classes.[20] Both regimes were now in a position to engage in socio-economic reform and a military build-up at the same time.

The expansion of oil wealth in Syria and Iraq allowed the shift from developing to transition country status. From the 1970s onwards, urbanization advanced quickly, the education system expanded, the status of women was raised and state revenue was spread in far enough a manner to improve general living standards. In Syria, oil revenue remained limited and much of the increase in government revenue was spent on the country's military in the ultimately overambitious effort to achieve strategic parity with Israel.[21] By contrast, Iraq's much larger oil rents enabled Saddam Hussein to engage in efforts to acquire a leadership position in the Arab world following Sadat's 1978 decision to sign a unilateral peace treaty with Israel (the Camp David Accord). Iraqi efforts to replace Egyptian leadership appeared at times rather successful, such as during a meeting in Baghdad in November 1978 in which all Arab states with the exception of Egypt participated to underline their joint rejection of Sadat's position.[22] In parallel, Iraq expanded its military based on French and Soviet supplies and modernized its economy by importing infrastructure from western countries other than the US.

Yet the rise of autonomous state classes in Syria and Iraq questioned from the US point of view the balance of power in the region. In particular, Saddam Hussein's aspiration for regional Arab leadership was considered a significant threat and, following the nationalization of the Iraqi oil industry, the Nixon administration turned to the Shah of Iran and, between 1972 and 1976, sold more weapons to Iran than any other country in the region. The Shah became the US's closest ally in its efforts to contain Iraq, and the US supported his request to finance Kurdish separatists in Northern Iraq

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[19] Such figures are quoted in Hussain, Abdul J. O., "The Oil Industry and Missed Opportunities in Iraq," *European Journal of Accounting, Auditing and Finance Research*, 2, August 2014, p. 8. All available data points to a large-scale expansion of revenue between 1972 and 1980, a major decline during the war years, and a near-disappearance of the oil rent in the early 1990s due to the sanctions.

[20] For the concept of the "state class" and its relative autonomy from western powers, see Elsenhans, Hartmut, *Abhängiger Kapitalismus oder bürokratische Entwicklungsgesellschaft: Versuch über den Staat in der Dritten Welt*, Frankfurt/M.: Campus, 1984.

[21] Seale, Patrick, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 1995.

[22] Lustick, Ian S., "The Absence of Middle Eastern Great Powers: Political 'Backwardness' in Historical Perspective," *International Organization*, 51, 4, p. 672.

to put pressure on the Iraqi leadership.[23] This move proved successful enough to force Baghdad to make concessions to the Shah regarding the Shatt al-Arab border disputes (the contested area between Iraq and Iran that made up Iraq's tight access point to the Persian Gulf). Saddam Hussein's subsequent signing of an agreement with the Shah purchased the Iranian withdrawal of support for the Iraqi Kurds (the so-called Algiers agreement of June 13, 1975). Following this agreement, the Shah ended support for Iraqi Kurds and Iraq and Iran both started to repress Kurdish separatist movements.[24]

The Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 led to the downfall of the Shah regime and appeared to dramatically weaken US power in the region. Saddam Hussein's decision to attack Iran in 1980 was an effort to take advantage of the domestic disorganisation in Iran that had weakened the country's military. The war goal was to improve Iraqi access to the Persian Gulf and to overturn the concessions that Iraq had made to the Shah's Iran with regard to the Shatt al-Arab border issues in the 1976 Algiers Agreement. There is not enough space here for a detailed analysis of the eight-year war in which Iraq repeatedly used WMDs (chemical weapons) in the trench warfare against Iranian troops and in the domestic conflict with Iraqi Kurds. It is sufficient to stress that Iraq received between 1980 and 1988 massive supplies of arms from abroad while Iran's external support was comparatively limited. When the initial Iraqi offensive nevertheless came to a halt and the war started to turn against Iraq in 1983, the Reagan administration became concerned about an Iranian military victory. In this situation, President Reagan dispatched Donald Rumsfeld as a special envoy to Baghdad and, following talks with Saddam Hussein, the National Security Decision Directive 139 of the Reagan administration instructed in April 1984 to prepare "a plan of action designed to avert an Iraqi [military] collapse."[25]

Although this effort at "rebalancing" on the part of the US did not result in massive direct delivery of US weapons to Iraq – this role was mostly performed by France and the Soviet Union – the US started to supply intelligence such as satellite pictures of Iranian military positions to the Iraqi military. The US and other western countries (West Germany, Spain and Italy) also delivered components to supply the Iraqi chemical weapons programme. While some of these deliveries were "dual use" (i.e., they could be used for civilian and military purposes), the concerned western states continued such deliveries even after it had become clear that the Iraqi army used chemical

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[23] Kiely, Patrick, "Through distorted lenses: Iraq and balance of power politics 1969-1979," in Ryan, David and Kiely, Patrick (eds), *America and Iraq. Policy-making, intervention and regional politics*, London, Routledge, 2009, pp. 44, 46.

[24] Kostiner, Joseph, *Conflict and Cooperation in the Gulf Region*, Wiesbaden, Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2009, pp. 39-41.

[25] "Measures to Improve U.S. Posture and Readiness to Respond to Developments in the Iran-Iraq War," April 5, 1984, p. 2, see http://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-139.pdf.

weapons for purposes of domestic reprisal against the Kurds and against the Iranian army on multiple occasions.[26]

While Iraq clearly received the overwhelming share of foreign arms supplies between 1980 and 1988, the "rebalancing" was flexible enough for occasional supplies to Iran too. The US and Israel delivered, for example, large quantities of anti-tank missiles to the Iranian military (some of it as part of the "Iran-Contra Deal").[27] Overall, the "rebalancing" served the purpose of keeping the war going and weakening both sides economically.

After the end of the inconclusive war with Iran, Saddam Hussein took the decision to occupy neighbouring Kuwait on August 2, 1990. This action was intended as a means to settle the Iraqi war debt with the richer Sunni Gulf states, which had financed Iraq's war with Iran from their oil revenue while much of the Iraqi production had been stopped between 1980 and 1988. The Iraqi occupation of Kuwait allowed the US administration of George H. W. Bush to assemble a coalition of western and regional powers (including Syria) that subsequently forced the Iraqi troops out of Kuwait in 1991 in what is termed in western accounts as the "First Gulf War" – although it was the Second Gulf War from the point of view of the Iraqis and Iranians. The western intervention of 1990-1991 "liberated" Kuwait (the pro-western family regime was restored) but stopped short of removing Saddam Hussein from power. Crucially, the US used the conflict to ask Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states to open their borders for what subsequently turned into permanent US military bases and installations.[28]

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[26] In this context, US authorities have only recently acknowledged (Chivers, C. J., "The Secret Casualties of Iraq's Abandoned Chemical Weapons," *New York Times*, October 14, 2014) that weapons of mass destruction were discovered after the occupation of Iraq in 2003. Yet these arms caches were not evidence of an Iraqi WMD programme after 1990 but consisted of deteriorating chemical weapons from the time of the Iraq-Iran war. The disclosure was delayed because the US military leadership was unwilling to acknowledge that US soldiers were exposed to harmful substances in efforts to dispose of the weapons by exploding them via open-air detonation. According to the same author, these actions could amount to offences against the chemical weapons convention (*New York Times*, November 22, 2014). The US authorities have so far refused to disclose site locations where chemical weapons were blown up. One can therefore only speculate about how Iraqi civilians might have been affected.

[27] See the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute website for authoritative data on arms exports during the 1980-1988 Iraq-Iran war.

[28] See Vine, David, http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2014/11/america-still-has-hundreds-military-bases-worldwide-have-they-made-us-any-safer for a recent narrative about US military bases and deployment in the Middle East and elsewhere. Since the 1990s, the US has expanded their permanent military presence in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Oman. Although officially moving away from combat operations, the US continues to maintain or has redeployed significant numbers of troops in Afghanistan and Iraq. The actual number of troops is subject to change but the facilities to allow quick deployment have stayed in place.

The war was followed by a UN economic embargo of Iraq, once again targeting Iraqi oil exports, to stop the country from rearming its military. However, the actual outcome of the UN sanctions regime was the devastation of the Iraqi health and education system, the rise of illiteracy and the destruction of the remnants of the Iraqi middle class.[29] According to two UN humanitarian relief coordinators, who both resigned from their Baghdad posting in protest over the sanctions, the effort to block practically all trade "destroyed society in Iraq and caused the death of thousands, young and old."[30] The sanctions were backed up by two US- and UK-policed no-flight zones in the northern and southern Iraqi air space which officially served to protect Iraqi Kurds and Shias from strikes by the Iraqi air force. In these two zones, US and UK air forces conducted more than 200,000 sorties between 1991 and 2003 and regularly attacked Iraqi targets. This unacknowledged air war only became reported due to the ad hoc collection of data by the UN security section in Baghdad, which pointed to a pattern of at least two attacks per week in 1999.[31]

Before turning to the most recent events in Iraq since the occupation in 2003 and in Syria since 2011, one should therefore stress that the current conflicts are the continuation of earlier escalations. Indeed, Iraq has now suffered from war or war-like conditions for thirty-five years.

4. THE CRISIS CYCLE IN IRAQ SINCE 2003

This section is not going to retell the story of the US and UK occupation of Iraq between 2003 and 2012, which is still part of recent memory. The usual criticisms, such as the failure of the occupying forces to maintain law and order; the mistake of dissolving the old Iraqi state and military without putting any working new structures in place; the failure to protect civilians in general and religious and ethnic minorities in particular; and the large-scale destruction of the infrastructure and cultural heritage, have been extensively covered elsewhere.[32] Instead, analysis is going to focus on three other crucial points in the context of Iraq's geopolitical role. First, the politics of Iraqi oil since 2003

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[29] Hashim, Ahmed S., *Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in Iraq*, London: Hurst, 2006, p. 111.

[30] Sponeck, Hans von and Haliday, Dennis, "The hostage nation," *Guardian*, November 29, 2001. There are various estimates pointing to large-scale deaths of Iraqis due to the sanction-induced breakdown of the country's health system and infrastructure.

[31] "Airstrikes in Iraq," UN Security Section – Baghdad, http://www.casi.org.uk/info/undocs/airstrikes1.html. In another instance, "Operation Desert Fox" in December 1998 involved large-scale officially acknowledged US and UK air strikes against the Iraqi military. From May 2002 onwards, the undeclared air war against Iraq was further escalated in preparation for the subsequent invasion.

[32] Cf. Dodge, Toby, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism*, London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2012, pp. 16-25. The author suggests (p. 25) that "after 2003, Iraq's position as a failed state might have been more destabilizing for the region than the rogue state run by Saddam." One cannot help but note similarities with the more recent Libyan case.

as the economic foundation of Iraqi statehood is briefly sketched. Second, the future geopolitical alignment of Iraq in the regional and global context is discussed. These two issues must be considered jointly since command over the national oil revenue and Iraq's political leadership mutually determine each other. In fact, these two points are most crucial in order to judge whether or not the US and UK achieved at least some of their intended political objectives. Third, this section considers the emergence of the so-called "Islamic State in Iraq and Syria" (ISIS) militia since mid-2014 in the context of the larger Middle East conflict.

Starting with the oil issue, one should stress that the occupation of Iraq was of course not *only* about oil. One can also disagree about the extent to which US economic and political goals were advanced by the militarily imposed political economy of oil in Iraq.[33] What is beyond doubt, however, is that the actual outcome of the reorganization of the country's oil industry constitutes the most significant single factor as far as the future viability of the Iraqi state and its institutions is concerned. Thus, it is an important observation in its own right that Iraq's oil production and exports post-2003 were in fact little affected by "failed statehood." Indeed, with the exception of a small dip in 2005, Iraqi oil production nearly doubled between 2004 and 2012 to reach a 30-year peak (and second-highest production level ever after 1978).[34] Subsequently, this upturn has been sustained and the latest available data on oil production from December 2014 pointed to the "highest amount on record."[35]

The protective attitude of the occupying forces toward Iraqi oil sources was already noticeable at the moment of the invasion and "of the fifteen hundred oil wells in Iraq's two major oil fields, only nine were damaged during the war."[36] Directly afterwards, the US political leadership might have misjudged the strength of its position, since the initial plans were little more than the suggestion that the Iraqi oil wealth should be directly appropriated by US construction and oil interests. However, this initial plan (the Executive Order 13303) of the Bush administration to exercise control over Iraqi oil revenue by means of a "Development Fund for Iraq" – which included earlier Iraqi oil revenue that had been put under UN supervision before the invasion under the "Oil for Food" programme – quickly fell apart due to large-scale irregularity in the management of the funds. Following the departure of the Paul Bremer-led Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) administration in June 2004 – after the signing of "Order 17" which granted immunity to the CPA and the US government from Iraqi law courts

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[33] Alhajji, Anas F., "The US and the geopolitics of Middle Eastern oil," in Looney, Robert E. (ed.), *Handbook of US-Middle East Relations*, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2009, pp. 121-122, 125.

[34] See "BP Statistical Review of World Energy 2014" for historical tables on Iraqi oil production.

[35] Graeber, Daniel J., "Iraqi oil production setting records," upi.com, February 9, 2015. The author notes that the "Islamic State insurgency wasn't having much of an impact on the overall oil sector in Iraq."

[36] Mayer, Jane, "Contract Sport, What did the Vice-President do for Halliburton?," *New Yorker*, February 16, 2004.

for unaccounted funds – the Iraqi government shifted back, since 2009, to a policy of contracting with oil companies from various countries.

From the point of view of interaction between oil production and Iraqi statehood, the 2003 occupation cleared some earlier barriers for the expansion of Iraqi oil production. In particular, the occupation allowed for new investment in the oil infrastructure and for expansion of the capacity of the Basra harbour terminals in the Shatt al-Arab. These terminals had been one of the "choke points" for Iraqi oil exports due to the conflict with Iran but are now the place from which almost all of Iraq's oil is shipped.[37] The largest southern oil fields of Iraq are most relevant for Iraqi government revenue while the northern oil fields in the Kurdish autonomous region, estimated at a tenth or so of Iraq's total, suffer from the lack of (reliable) export pipelines and disagreement about the distribution of potential revenue between the Baghdad government and the Kurdish regional government.[38] Another oil region, the area around Kirkuk, is disputed between the Kurdish authorities and Baghdad, and contracts between the Kurdish authorities and international oil companies have been declared unconstitutional.[39]

At present, the Iraqi central government continues to control the country's pipeline system and exercises allocation powers over oil contracts outside of the contested Kurdish oil fields. Most of the post-2009 contracts have gone to western companies, notably BP, Exxon Mobil and Shell, although one observer stressed that "they gave a little piece of the cake for China and some other countries and companies to keep them silent."[40] In summary, the oil contract game and the question of who has the authority to allocate the oil rent will decide the future of Iraqi statehood.

This directly leads to the question of who is going to control future statehood in Iraq. The major shift after the occupation was the replacement of the Sunni-dominated Saddam regime with a Shia-dominated post-Saddam regime in Baghdad. The Kurdish regional authorities were also keen to strengthen their autonomy and bargaining power.

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[37] "Iraq returns as world's fastest-growing oil exporter," reuters.com, March 5, 2014.

[38] See International Energy Agency, *Iraq Energy Outlook*, October 9, 2012, pp. 23, 36, 38, 55. The report asks "which entities should have the power to authorize and conclude [oil] contracts" and warns of "consequences that arise for Iraq from the absence of a consistent country-wide policy in such a strategic sector" (p. 38). The problem of who is entitled to sign contracts results from Article 109 of the Iraqi Constitution of 2005 stating that the federal government "shall undertake the management of oil and gas extracted from *current* fields" (emphasis added), leaving open the issue of how to administer new oil fields.

[39] Mills, Robin M., "Northern Iraq's Oil Chessboard: Energy, Politics and Power," *Insight Turkey*, 15, 1, 2013. Moreover, Baghdad and the Kurdish authorities disagree about how to contract with foreign oil companies. Baghdad favours technical service contracts, limiting the profit share of foreign investors, while the Kurdish regional government has signed (contested) production sharing agreements. The latter method favours international oil companies and is not frequently used. However, such contracts were in place before the nationalization of Iraqi oil in 1972.

[40] Abdulhay Yahya Zalloum, quoted in Jamail, Dahr, "Western oil firms remain as US exits Iraq. The end of the US military occupation does not mean Iraqis have full control of their oil," *Aljazeera*, January 7, 2012.

From the US point of view, the major unintended consequence was the strengthening of Shia political power, both within Iraq and in the Middle East region, based on a de facto alliance between the Baghdad government under Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and the Islamic Republic of Iran, still in place under Maliki's successor, the current Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.[41] In addition, sectarian conflicts in Iraq since 2003 triggered the rise of militias, mostly Shia, and the Iraqi army, equipped and trained by the US, also became Shia-dominated, not least because the earlier Sunni-dominated army had been dissolved.

The US reacted to this rise of Shia power with efforts to "rebalance" in favour of Sunnis in Iraq and in the Middle East region. This shift of US strategy included direct or indirect – via Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey – sponsorship of Sunni militants.[42] Notably, the US military tried to link up with Sunni tribal leaders in Iraq to use them as "force multipliers" during the so-called "surge" around 2007 in counter-insurgency efforts – often against other Sunni insurgents fighting the US occupation. In this context, the alienation of Sunnis by the new Shia-dominated Baghdad government was due to their large-scale exclusion from political influence for which the US and UK occupiers share responsibility with Iran. Overall, Shia-affiliated political parties and militias continue to dominate Iraq's central government. Only an adequate sharing of power between all groups in Iraq can in the long run stabilize the state.

In the meantime, Shia militias with embedded Iranian military advisors have provided the manpower for the recent advances of the Iraqi government against the ISIS militia since March 2015. Most adequately, one might interpret the emergence of ISIS as an "evolution" of earlier extremist Sunni militias with Al-Qaida affiliations.[43] The major analytical question concerns responsibility for the rise of ISIS. In order to answer this question, one must first of all stress the permanent mutation of Sunni-extremist insurgency groups in Iraq and in the Middle East.

Earlier rounds of the Iraqi conflict during the US-led "surge" in 2007 produced an alliance of US troops with Sunni tribal leaders in Anbar province and other Sunni regions of Iraq. These tribal leaders were in turn well-connected with fellow tribe members in Saudi Arabia and Syria. They accepted US military supplies to strengthen their hand against Al-Qaida and the Baghdad government. According to one tribal leader, the alliance was "a way to get arms, and to be a legalised security force to be able to stand against Shia militias and to prevent the Iraqi army and police from entering their

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[41] Nasser, Nicola, "Who Has More Influence? Rapprochement with US Reinforces Iran Hand in Iraq," *Sri Lanka Guardian*, October 3, 2013.

[42] Hersh, Seymour H., "The Redirection. Is the Administration's new policy benefitting our enemies in the war on terrorism?," *New Yorker*, March 5, 2007.

[43] Hashim, Ahmed S., "From Al-Qaida Affiliate to the Rise of the Islamic Caliphate: The Evolution of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)," *Policy Report*, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, December 2014, p. 11.

[Sunni tribal] area." The same informant compared the US position with "someone who brought cats to fight rats, found himself with too many cats and brought dogs to fight the cats. Now they need elephants."[44]

It is clear that the "success" of the US-led "surge" against Al-Qaida in Iraq in 2007 produced new security risks. The same apply to subsequent efforts by the US to train Sunnis in the context of the US-supplied Iraqi army. After the ISIS uprising in Iraq in June 2014, the weapons of Sunni units of the Iraqi army were largely abandoned and taken over by ISIS militants. In neighbouring Syria, ISIS also gained weapons from many other sources, such as anti-tank rockets that had earlier been transferred by Saudi Arabia to forces operating under the "Free Syrian Army" umbrella.[45]

In terms of overall responsibility for the rise of Sunni Islamist extremists, US Vice-President Joseph Biden said in an unscripted question-and-answer session with students at Harvard University on 2 October 2014, "our allies in the region were our largest problem." He argued that Turkey, the Saudis and the Emirates "were so determined to take down Assad and essentially have a proxy Sunni-Shia war…. They poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad – except that the people who were being supplied were Al-Nusra and Al-Qaida and the extremist elements of jihadists coming from other parts of the world."[46]

He added, "[T]his outfit called ISIL [i.e., another abbreviation for ISIS], which was Al-Qaida in Iraq … worked with Al-Nusra, who we declared a terrorist group early on, and we could not convince our colleagues to stop supplying them. Now all of a sudden…the President [Obama] has been able to put together a coalition of our Sunni

[44] Abdul-Ahad, Ghaith, "Meet Abu Abed: the US's new ally against al-Qaida," *Guardian*, November 10, 2007. Indeed, more recent press coverage underlines that US analysts, in efforts to "defeat the Islamic State by fostering Sunni resistance," demand "greater autonomy for Sunni provinces, like that granted to the Iraqi Kurds" to "persuade Sunnis to rebel against the Islamic State." See Pape, Robert A., "Getting ISIS out of Iraq," *International New York Times*, April 21, 2015. The idea that further division of Iraq will help to defeat ISIS deserves to be compared with the "elephants" quoted in the 2007 article.

[45] Conflict Armament Research, "Islamic State Weapons in Iraq and Syria. Analysis of weapons and ammunition captured from Islamic State forces in Iraq and Syria," September 2014, http://www.conflictarm.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Dispatch_IS_Iraq_Syria_Weapons.pdf, p. 6.

[46] For Biden's extraordinary Harvard statements, see in particular the section 53:24 to 59:12 minutes, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dcKVCtg5dxM. Referring to arms deliveries from US regional allies to the Islamist extremists, Biden asked the rhetorical question, "Where did all of this go?" He forgot to ask the necessary follow-up question, "Where did all of this come from?"

neighbours because Americans can't once again went [*sic*] to a Muslim nation and be the aggressor, it has to be led by Sunnis to go and attack a Sunni organization."[47]

Thus, the question of responsibility for the rise of ISIS requires acknowledging that the group's emergence is due to earlier rounds of failed intervention in Iraq. In addition, ISIS, the Nusra Front and other Sunni insurgency groups all have common roots in the regional Sunni regimes. In order to defeat ISIS and the other groups, the closure of borders to Turkey and Saudi Arabia would be most significant in cutting off the economic and logistical supply routes. Last but not least, one must highlight the fact that the large majority of Sunnis do not support ISIS ideology. In fact, most of the victims of ISIS violence are also Sunnis. In the medium term, the geopolitical significance of ISIS could be in assisting outside powers in efforts to divide Iraq and Syria into smaller "statelets." However, one should acknowledge that this is at present still geopolitical speculation. For the moment, ISIS has been kept safely away from the strategically significant oil fields in the region – other than the Syrian ones.

5. The Crisis Cycle in Syria since 2011

Finally, one needs to explain how the Syrian conflict since 2011 relates to the situation in Iraq. This section will first briefly highlight some features of the Syrian crisis and will then outline the major regional and global geopolitical factors that explain the step-by-step escalation until now. The most important observation is that "media bias in reporting remains a key challenge, plaguing the collection of useful data and misinforming researchers and policymakers regarding the actual events taking place."[48] There has been no conflict since the end of the Cold War that has been subject to such extreme media bias and misrepresentation. One must stress that practically all claims about the current conflict have been issued with an attached political agenda. The western media have been overwhelmingly fed by the "Syrian Observatory for Human Rights," a Coventry (UK)-based virtual organization represented by a single person

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[47] In the same context, Biden stressed that there was no group in Syria that they "could identify as moderate", adding, "by the way, I am serious about that" (ibid.). His statement of the fact that Turkey allowed Sunni insurgents to pass from its territory into Syria triggered a demand by Turkish President Erdogan for him to issue an apology, which was duly offered. In turn, a *New York Times* journalist suggested that Biden "apologized for telling the truth," http://takingnote.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/10/06/joe-biden-apologizes-for-telling-the-truth/?_r=0.

[48] Baliki, Ghassan, "1. Aspects of the Conflict in Syria," *SIPRI Yearbook 2014*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 17.

who is a long-term opponent of the Syrian regime. A large share of "facts" on the Syrian conflict issued in the western media is derived from this single source.[49]

This is no space to highlight more than a few exemplary contested issues. To begin with, the conflict in Syria has from the start in March 2011 been fuelled by arms, funding and logistical assistance from neighbouring countries, with Saudi Arabia and Qatar focusing on the former and Turkey focusing on the latter. The conflict quickly turned into a transnational war in Syria due to the presence of foreign fighters, initially only on the side of the insurgents, and the direct logistical support of invasions into Syria by insurgents from neighbouring countries. After regime change in Libya in 2012, large-scale delivery of weapons from Libyan arms depots to the insurgents – a development that required the extensive involvement of western intelligence agencies – triggered further escalation. In turn, the Syrian government could rely on its existing alliances with Hizbollah, Iran and Russia for support, while the insurgents received their supplies from Sunni states and western sources. Since then, "rebalancing" has kept the conflict going and escalating.[50]

Three points might serve as examples of western media bias in the coverage of the Syrian conflict. First, the western media have continuously downplayed the level of support that the Syrian government enjoyed and continues to enjoy. In 2011 and 2012, when political rallies were still possible, the largest mobilizations in the history of the country took place and hundreds of thousands of citizens expressed their support for the government in all major Syrian cities on numerous occasions. These rallies were underreported in the western media or were explained away as forced mobilizations of Syrian civil servants while much smaller opposition rallies were at the same time claimed to amount to a "revolution." In 2014, Syrian presidential elections took place under conditions of war. Bashar al-Assad faced for the first time in Syria's history two moderate opposition candidates, and the most significant message of this election was the high level of citizens' participation in areas under government control. This was particularly striking when compared with the presidential elections in Egypt under the military regime around the same time in which participation rates were very low. Thus, the coalition that backs up the current Syrian state and that enjoys high degrees of support from all minorities and from Sunnis has so far survived attack from Islamist extremists, who make up the large majority of the foreign-backed insurgency.

Most Syrians would of course like to see the conflict end as soon as possible and would consider political compromises to achieve this goal. However, the coalition backing the current government cannot realistically engage in negotiations with the "big three" armed extremist groups, i.e., the Islamic State (ISIS), the Nusra Front (the affiliate of Al-Qaida operating in Syria) and Islamic Front.[51] In this situation, the Syrian minorities, notably Christians, must hope that the Syrian government will continue to be able to protect them.

Second, most of the western media treats as fact the assertion that the Syrian military has used chemical weapons in the ongoing conflict. However, such assertions have not been proven. There is no conclusive evidence that the Syrian government has ever used chemical weapons. There are, on the other hand, allegations that appear to show that insurgents, particularly the Nusra Front, received and/or produced locally chemical weapons on a small scale and used such weapons on more than one occasion in the hope of triggering a Libyan-style military intervention by the US and other NATO countries in Syria that would break the Assad regime.[52] Once again, there is no conclusive evidence, although the *cui bono* question might suggest this to be much more likely than the former claim. For the time being, one needs to simply stress that conclusive evidence for any of the assertions is not available.

Third, there is underreporting of how extremist insurgents, such as the Nusra Front, enjoy direct logistical support from the Turkish government. In the case of the joint attack of Nusra and Islamic Front on the Syrian-Armenian city of Kessab, located close to the Turkish border, on March 21, 2014, the Turkish border post was opened for the insurgents to enter Syria, which allowed for a surprise attack on a town that consists largely of descendants of survivors of the Armenian Genocide of 1915.[53] The example of the Kessab attack (and it is only one example among many) underlines the fact that the extremist insurgency groups are directly cooperating with the intelligence agencies

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[51] For an analysis of the current Syrian situation, see the untitled paper by Arslanian, Ferdinand, February 19, 2015, http://media.wix.com/ugd/fb1673_b36489fb04a94dd191e1f0499c1ffe82.pdf.

[52] See Hersh, Seymour H., "Whose sarin?," *London Review of Books*, December 19, 2013, and "The Red Line and the Rat Line," *London Review of Books*, April 17, 2014. In addition, one must highlight the fact that the Nusra Front captured the only chlorine gas manufacturing plant in Syria. According to the owner of the plant, Mohammad Sabbagh, "[n]o one can know for certain, but if it turns out chlorine gas was used in the [March 19, 2013 Khan al-Asad] attack, then the first possibility is that it was mine. There is no other factory in Syria that can make this gas, and now it is under opposition control." See Baker, Aryn, "Syria's Civil War: The Mystery Behind a Deadly Chemical Attack," *Time*, April 1, 2013. Claims about the use of chlorine gas in fighting in Syria continue to circulate in the media in 2015.

[53] Ghazanchyan, Siranush, "The Telegraph reveals Turkish role in the attack on Armenian-populated Kessab," April 15, 2014, Public Radio of Armenia, armradio.am. Some Internet videos, issued directly after the attack and likely to be authentic, as they were carried by pro-Syrian government and insurgency websites alike, show the insurgents walking freely from the Turkish to the Syrian border post carrying black flags and other insignia. On June 15, 2014, the Syrian Army retook Kessab and the local population subsequently returned.

of Turkey and other states in the region that aim to remove the Syrian government at all costs.

How can one make sense of the all-out effort to remove Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and how does this campaign relate to the events in Iraq? Once again, it needs to be stressed that the US has been committed to regime change in Damascus for a long time. This was official policy during the presidency of Bush Jr., when efforts were made to isolate Syria in the region, although this policy did not proceed in any linear fashion. Following the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, Syria was blamed by US observers – the case remains unsolved – and efforts were made to further put pressure on Syria. At other times, the Syrian regime was invited to participate in regional diplomacy with western countries, such as during failed negotiations about a "Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Agreement" with the European Union.[54] However, one must stress that leading US politicians were always keen to "turn" Syria by replacing its current leadership.[55]

Once again, why Syria? The country currently has limited oil and gas resources and its share of Middle Eastern overall military spending is only around 1 per cent. It cannot be said to constitute any present direct threat to neighbouring countries – other than as a failed state. Without denying the role of Syrian internal conflicts as one of the drivers of events since the start of the crisis in March 2011, one must stress that Syrian domestic politics cannot be explained without focusing on the outside alliances of the domestic actors.

Most importantly, Syria and Iran were during the entire post-colonial period in a conflictual relationship with Iraq. Never before the US occupation of Iraq were the governments in Damascus, Baghdad and Tehran aligned with each other. Since 1980, Syria and the Islamic Republic of Iran had a mutual defence treaty against Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which only highlighted the long-term conflict between Damascus and Baghdad going back to the 1960s. The removal of Saddam, therefore, allowed for the first time in history for the emergence of an alliance between the three governments.

From the US perspective, the consolidation of this triple alliance – recently confirmed in a trilateral meeting of the deputy foreign ministers of Syria, Iraq and Iran in Tehran on April 22, 2015 – would clearly be the worst-case scenario due to at least five factors. First, a three-country alliance would continue to support Shia political movements in Lebanon, such as Hizbollah, and would strengthen the "Axis of Resistance"

[54] Dostal, Jörg Michael and Zorob, Anja, *Syria and the Euro-Mediterranean Relationship*, Bolder, Col.: Lynne Rienner, 2008.

[55] In this context, the Saban Center at the Brookings Institution might be singled out as a crucial long-term pressure group in favour of regime change in Syria, cf. Byman, Daniel et al., "Saving Syria: Assessing Options for Regime Change," *Middle East Memo 21*, March 15, 2012.

currently consisting of Hizbollah in Lebanon, Syria and Iran by adding Iraq. Second, survival of the current Syrian government would reconfirm the country's long-standing alliance with Russia, the successor state of the Soviet Union, dating back to 1956. Third, the territory of the three states could act as a barrier against oil pipeline projects linking Saudi and Qatari oil and gas sources with Turkey and western markets. Fourth, an alliance between the three states would conversely allow for alternative pipeline projects – out of reach of western or Gulf Arab control – linking Syrian, Iraqi and Iranian oil and gas with the Mediterranean or the Chinese market. Fifth, largely unexplored but apparently significant natural gas deposits on the Syrian coast line (and in its proximity) could be linked with emerging markets in Asia and would provide resources for the future economic rehabilitation of Syria. As discussed above, the geopolitical influence of pipeline projects on Syrian domestic politics goes back as far as the 1949 Syrian coups and has been a permanent feature of Syrian and Middle Eastern politics ever since.

In summary, the issue of who exercises effective geopolitical control of the Middle East once again points back to the Eisenhower Doctrine of gaining and defending US hegemony in the Middle East region.

Conclusion

In a speech delivered in 2007, retired US general Wesley Clark recalled a personal conversation with Paul Wolfowitz, then Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, which is alleged to have taken place at the Pentagon in 1991. Clark holds that Wolfowitz, when asked about his views on the "Desert Storm" military campaign that had just forced Iraqi troops out of Kuwait, replied as follows: "[O]ne thing we did learn (…) we learned that we could use our military in the region, in the Middle East, and the Soviets won't stop us. And we've got about five to ten years to clean up those old Soviet client regimes, Syria, Iran, Iraq, before the next great superpower comes on to challenge us."[56] The point in quoting this conversation is not to claim that it took place as reported.[57] Rather, it clearly *could* have taken place, and these words perfectly fit the Eisenhower Doctrine and, since the 1990s, many similar statements were issued by mainstream US policy-makers with regard to Middle East affairs.

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[56] See Wesley Clark's 2007 speech at the Commonwealth Club of California (full reference in footnote 3 above), at 4:17 min., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TY2DKzastu8.

[57] Indeed, the Islamic Republic of Iran has never been a "Soviet client" during the period that came to a close in 1991.

The thesis advanced in this paper is that the Eisenhower Doctrine of unilateral US control of the Middle East was conceived under another horizon, in 1957, and is both old-fashioned and utopian. Efforts at unilateral control on the part of the US – with the UK occasionally acting as a sidekick – are unlikely to succeed for at least two reasons. First, the Middle East has been, and continues to be, a deeply divided geopolitical theatre. The issue of Palestinian rights and of occupied Syrian lands (the Golan Heights) will not go away even if the US were to "clean up" the regimes that are currently resisting them. There has been virtually no movement on these two issues for many decades. There will always be a powerful line of thought in the Arab world that will react to what is seen as the unprincipled backing, on the part of the US, of policies that are unacceptable to most Arabs. Second, the issue of the emergence of a multi-polar world order in the 21st century is not going to go away. Indeed, one might ask whether US strategy in the region is speeding up rather than slowing down the growth in significance of competing powers. There are many interests at stake in the Middle East in the 21st century – and hardly any of them can be addressed in the context of US unilateralism.

As far as the Arab regional level is concerned, one might stress that the price for the policy of "rebalancing" is a never-ending chain of proxy conflicts in which "Sunni states" and "Shia states" are going to waste their potential and resources while strengthening the position of those who want to impose on them from outside. Besides, these concepts are equally dangerous since the underlying conflicts are much more geopolitical than sectarian. They certainly ignore the fact that Sunnis, Shias and many other groups have lived in harmony in most Arab societies most of the time. Today, it might sound naïve to ask why there is no Arab superpower in the 21st century. Until the 1980s, Arab public opinion expected a much larger role for Arab voices in international affairs. This never materialised, however. In addition, it is important to recall that divisions amongst the Arabs have in the past in the overwhelming number of cases been settled by restoring the status quo. Indeed, one might interpret the failure of the so-called "Arab Spring," as underlined in the maintenance or restoration of authoritarian regimes almost everywhere in the region, as another example of the existence of some underlying balance of forces that tends to be reinforcing.

Finally, when looking at Syria and Iraq, the crisis in the two countries is currently often cited as evidence for an alleged end of the "Sykes-Picot system" of 1916 and the breakdown of "artificial" border lines. This reasoning is, however, unlikely to carry the day. In fact, all border lines in the Middle East are artificial in many respects. Destroying Syria or Iraq as unified states is certainly not a recipe for future regional stability and would only produce new rounds of conflict. The US calculation that removal of the Syrian regime, in line with the Iraqi example, would constitute a way to win – in addition to sending messages to Russia and other powers – appears too risky to be sustainable. It also encourages the regional allies of the US, Saudi Arabia comes to mind, to engage in provocations that further escalate the situation.

In the end, the reasonable argument in favour of a multipolar world order is that it would potentially allow searching for agreements at the international, regional and local level to end the proxy wars and to deal with the underlying conflicts in ways that are less destructive than has so far been the case in the 21st century.

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