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Iraq, Syria and the death of the modern Middle East

The nations of Syria and Iraq today are little more than political fictions, crushed underfoot by foreign intervention.

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"The recent Israeli airstrikes perpetrated with impunity on are yet another illustrative example of the depths of turmoil to which Syria has sunk," writes Murtaza Hussain
As Syria continues its descent into an anarchic civil war and Iraq is increasingly ravaged by

sectarian infighting, a terrifying vision of the future of the Middle East is increasingly coming into view. In his 2008 book "*Israel and the Clash of Civilizations*", the veteran British journalist, Jonathan Cook, cites a 1982 policy paper by former Israeli foreign ministry official Oded Yinon which seems to presciently forecast the monumental events gripping the region today:

"The total disintegration of Lebanon into five regional localized governments is the precedent for the entire Arab world... Iraq can be divided on regional and sectarian lines just like Syria in the Ottoman era. There will be three states in the three major cities."

The **Sykes-Picot Agreement** - which divided the Ottoman Empire after World War I and created the Middle East as we know it - is today violently breaking apart in front of the eyes of the world. The countries of Syria and Iraq; formerly unified Arab states formed after the defeat of their former Ottoman rulers, exist today only in name. In their place what appears most likely to come into existence - after the bloodshed subsides - are small, ethnically and religiously homogenous statelets: weak and easily manipulated, where their progenitors at their peaks were robustly independent powers.

Such states, divided upon sectarian lines, would be politically pliable, isolated and enfeebled, and thus utterly incapable of offering a meaningful defence against foreign interventionism in the region. Given the implications for the Middle East, where overt foreign aggression has been a consistent theme for decades, there is reason to believe that this state of affairs has been consciously engineered.

The end of Iraq

Away from the focus of major news media - numbed as it has become to stories of unconscionable Iraqi suffering - Iraq this past April recorded its deadliest month in five years, with over **700 killed in sectarian violence** throughout the country. Describing the aftermath of a deadly car bombing in his neighbourhood, school teacher Ibrahim Ali gave voice to the dread and foreboding **felt by many Iraqis** for their country:

"We asked the students to remain inside the classrooms because we were concerned about their safety... [they] were panicking and some of them started to cry.... We have been expecting this violence against Shiites due to the rising sectarian tension in the country."

The unacknowledged truth behind the past decade of bloodletting in Iraq is that the country itself effectively ceased to exist after the 2003 US invasion. The northern province of Iraqi Kurdistan is today an **independent country** in all but name and is increasingly moving towards formal recognition of this fact - while Sunni and Shia Iraqis have come to see themselves more as distinct entities than as part of a cohesive nation. Iraqi Sunnis, a once-empowered minority, have **taken up arms** in recent months against the Shia-dominated government of Nouri al-Maliki and have staked their terms in a manner which acknowledges the irredeemable nature of a continued Iraqi state. In the **words** of Sunni cleric Mohammad Taha at a rally in Samarra:

"Al-Maliki has brought the country to the abyss... this leaves us with two options: Either civil war

or the formation of our own autonomous region."

There is evidence to suggest that this state of affairs was not an unintended consequence of the 2003 invasion. The American architects of the Iraq War - while couching their justifications for war in the rhetoric of liberation - had for years previously openly acknowledged and predicted that an invasion would result in the death of Iraq as a cohesive state. In a follow-up to their 1996 **policy paper** "A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm" - a report published by leading neoconservative intellectuals, including Richard Perle, Douglas Feith and David Wurmser, which advocated a radical reshaping of the Middle East using American military power - the report's authors acknowledged the inevitability of Iraq's demise post-invasion.



Predicting that after violently deposing the country's government: "*[Iraq]... would be ripped apart by the politics of warlords, thieves, clans, sects and key families*" - the same individuals would nonetheless become the leading advocates of just such an invasion. The post-invasion decisions by the occupying authority to **dissolve the army**, patronise sectarian militias and **death squads** and destroy Iraq's **civilian infrastructure** viewed in this light are far more comprehensible. The chaos which has enveloped the country since 2003 has not been an unintended consequence, but rather the one which was predicted years earlier by the war's architects and then perfectly executed. Today the **partition of Iraq** is mapped out by American think-tanks seeking put a final end to that country and divide it into its contingent ethnic and religious parts.

In this light it is worth contrasting the sectarian powder-keg Iraq is described as today with Iraqi attitudes during the early days of the American invasion. A 2004 *New York Times* **article** entitled "Sunni-Shiite Cooperation Grows, Worrying US Officials" described the broad-based support provided by Shia Iraqis to their Sunni co-citizens under siege by American forces in the country. In the words of one Iraqi regarding the supposed religious bifurcation in the country:

"These [sectarianisms] were artificial distinctions. The people in Fallujah are starving. They are Iraqis and they need our help."

The need to counter and undermine such episodes of inter-religious national unity in order to achieve the objectives of the invasion was recognised early by US military officials. As stated by Lt General Ricardo Sanchez:

"The danger is we believe there is a linkage that may be occurring at the very lowest levels between the Sunni and Shia... we have to work very hard to ensure that it remains at the tactical level."

The handiwork of such efforts is evident today in the horrific charnel house into which the country has descended today. Where Iraqis once saw themselves as citizens of a contiguous nation, the unconscionable events of the past decade have given primacy to religious identity over all else. Iraq's once vibrant and influential Christian community has been nearly **driven to extinction**, while Sunnis and Shias are locked in a seemingly intractable sectarian conflict which appears ready to rip the country into its final pieces. In the words of one Iraqi man, who initially welcomed the invasion with its promises of liberation only to **watch in horror** as his own family was torn apart by American bombs and bullets:

"I wish the Americans had never come. They ruined our country. They planted divisions... They made us cry for the days of Saddam Hussein."

The dissolution of Syria

When Syrians, swept up in the once-transcendent spirit of the Arab Spring uprisings, undertook their own revolution against the corrupt, myopic regime of Bashar al-Assad, few had any idea it would lead to the dystopian reality of **massacres** and **foreign predations** the country faces today. The revolution - a legitimate, democratic uprising against a despotic government - provided a prize opportunity for the country's neighbours to violently exploit Syrian unrest to further their own venal interests.

The tragic result of this situation is the vicious proxy war playing out today in the streets of Aleppo, Homs, Deir ez-Zor and countless other cities and towns throughout the country. A once-proud nation - long recognised as the cultural and historical jewel of the Levant - has been reduced to a grim battlefield between the West and its Gulf allies on one hand and the Syrian government and its allies in Iran, Russia and Hezbollah on the other. The **Israeli airstrikes** perpetrated with impunity onto Damascus this past week are yet another illustrative example of the depths of turmoil to which Syria has sunk.

As analysts openly discuss the "**Somaliasation**" of Syria and growing factions within the country call for military intervention to break the state up into small ethnic and religious enclaves - **literally, "into pieces"** - the prospect of a united Syria grows more remote by the day. Again, just as in Iraq, the benefactors of Syria's dismemberment will be the external actors which seek hegemony in the region and have never hidden their desire to see the country collapse.

As early as 2011, a particularly frank prescription for the future of Syria was given by Lawrence Solomon, who called for a **radical redrawing** of the country's borders to facilitate Western

interests:

"There is a better end game... Syria's dismemberment into constituent parts. US and NATO countries... should confine Alawites to a state in the central Western part of the country where they are predominant... the West has no cause to favour appeasement... over the many gains to be had through a dismemberment of Syria."

As risible as Solomon's suggestions seemed at the time, the unfathomable reality is that today just such a situation is occurring - as analysts dispassionately discuss the possibility of an independent **Alawite state in Lattakia** and the fragmenting of the rest of the country into separate portions for Kurds, Sunnis, Shias, and the many other ethnic and religious groups which once made up the diverse tapestry of modern Syria.

In the background of this all echoes the policy plan for Syria illustrated in "A Clean Break", whose influential authors counselled open confrontation with Syrian interests throughout the region and explicitly called for menacing the country's territorial integrity itself.

I wish the Americans had never come. They ruined our country. They planted divisions... They made us cry for the days of Saddam Hussein.

An Iraqi man

Oded Yinon's prescription for dissolving Syria and Iraq - which at one time appeared arrogantly grandiose - today seems almost inevitable. The legitimate democratic aspirations of the Syrian people have been overtly hijacked by a foreign agenda which long predated their own revolution - and which increasingly looks ready to dissolve the country they sought to liberate.

Towards a new balance of power

In a 2007 **piece** for *The New Yorker*, the Pulitzer-Prize winning American investigative journalist, Seymour Hersh, reported on what White House insiders called "the Redirection" of US policy in the region. Seeking to reassert influence in the aftermath of the disastrous invasion of Iraq, the US deliberately became party to the fomentation of sectarian conflict throughout the Middle East.

In words that today seem utterly prescient, Hersh wrote:

"The US has taken part in clandestine operations aimed at Iran and its ally Syria. A by-product of these activities has been the bolstering of Sunni extremist groups that espouse a militant vision of Islam and are hostile to America and sympathetic to al-Qaeda."

The extremist groups fighting today in Syria - many of whom openly state their **allegiance to al-Qaeda** and who have terrorised not just the Syrian government, but also the **secular activists** who were the progenitors of the revolution itself - are the fruit of this explicitly sectarian policy.

Furthermore, as Hersh noted this policy has: "*brought Saudi Arabia and Israel into a new strategic embrace*", a claim widely viewed as impossible at the time but which over the

intervening years has become increasingly **acknowledged by both sides**. Indeed, official recognition of this new alliance appears to be increasingly imminent, as reports emerged this week of a US-brokered **defence pact** between Israel, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the UAE to guarantee mutual interests in the region.

These changes represent no less than a sea change in Middle Eastern politics, as the old order experiences its final violent convulsions and makes way for a new Western-backed alliance to exert its hegemony over the region. In this new environment, once-cherished concepts of self-determination and independence will be suffocated under the financial, political and military might of an unprecedented new axis of control exerted from the centers of power in Washington, Tel Aviv and Riyadh.

The nations of Syria and Iraq today are little more than political fictions, crushed underfoot by foreign military and political intervention and devoured from the inside by politically-fomented sectarian hatreds. The same terrifying dynamic increasingly **threatens to envelop Lebanon** as well, as the former Arab states continue their fragmentation into innumerable weak and ethnically-homogenous political enclaves.

For the people of the region, the scenes playing out on the streets around them and being broadcast to the world at large represent nothing less than the end of Sykes-Picot borders and the dissolution of the Middle East as they once knew it. As war continues to spread from the borders of Iraq and Syria and into the countries beyond, the endgame for the regions upheaval - when it finally, mercifully, comes - looks increasingly as though it will entail the establishment of many of the "**Blood Borders**" which Oded Yinon and his ideological peers have long sought to create.