

Sykes-Picot and the New Middle East: Time to Reconsider the Region's Affairs

Introduction

It has become commonplace to speak of the map of the Middle East as being re-written, and regional politics undergoing an ongoing radical transformation since the so-called 'Arab Spring.' Contemporary geopolitical commentaries often endorse a new language to describe the perplexing state of affairs, tethering it to such concepts as 'the new Middle East.'

Whether they are in Washington, Ankara, Irbil or Geneva, "It's the end of Sykes-Picot," Middle East experts and politicians often argue in discussions about the region's future. Seeking to redraw the map of the Middle East, Sykes-Picot's challengers are also quick to pronounce dead the post-World War I order. Ironically, both DAESH's claim to caliphate and Kurdish nationalists' dream of an independent state rest on the core premise that the Sykes-Picot agreement has become obsolete.

Those who disagree with this assessment, too, invariably know deep inside that the Middle East will never be the same. Nowadays, American decision-makers looking to fight terrorism, regional powers fighting proxy wars and Russian generals bombing civilians all have something in common: They are updating their playbooks and reconsidering traditional alliances.

At a time when superpowers and regional players seek to dictate the new rules of the game in battlefields across the Middle East, the main problem is that hardly anyone can guess what exactly will replace Sykes-Picot.

Rather than focusing on whether Sykes-Picot order comes to end, we need first of all to understand the changing nature of ongoing transformation in the Middle East.

Characteristics of the new regional order

What is the debate about?

There are many different, conflicting arguments though, concerning the nature of the transformation in the Middle East. Most of these arguments are directed by two models of explanation: spatial and temporal models, respectively, that seek to lay bare the sources of the said transformation in Middle East politics. While the first model directly refers to outside forces or external actors with their putative influence in the region (Sykes-Picot model), the second model draws a parallel between the past and the present, or an analogy between history and contemporary Middle East politics.

The first model focuses on political transformation –the border changes and ideological divisions– and mainly blaming American interventions in the region. On such bases, this model claims the dissolution of the Arab nation-state and accordingly the degeneration of political identity in the Middle East. The resulting vacuum has been predominately filled by sectarian divisions, which have plunged the region into total anarchy.

Another argument, focusing mainly on the impact of external actors in the region, is the so-called post-Ottoman syndrome. It is argued that history is going backwards and the roots of the current conflict may be found in the post-1918 peace settlement which was further evoked following the Arab Uprisings. The argument shifts the onus mainly onto Britain and France, through the Sykes-Picot agreement, which demolished the old Middle East political order, the consequence of which is the contemporary chaotic state of affairs.

Considering the second model, which aims to make sense of the perplexing political context of the Middle East by way of finding historical antecedents, the prominent argument is Hass' The New Thirty Years' War. Explicating the Middle East's current political imbroglio, Hass draws a parallel with one of the most

devastating periods in Europe's history, namely the Thirty Years War, to contemplate the future of the Westphalian order in the region.

Transformation on the level of state sovereignty and border

Considering the three pillars of the Westphalian international order (sovereignty, territoriality and secularism), it can be said that it is these very foundations of order that seem to have collapsed the 'new Middle East,' hence challenging the main contours of modern statehood and regional order.

The initial, complex nature of the region began to manifest itself after the 9/11 attacks. The emergence of the Pentagon's "New Map" made a clear division between the Core and the Gap, and defined the latter as an inevitable threat, helping to legitimize the Iraqi War in 2003. The U.S. intervention in Iraq contaminated what the Sunni leaders of Ba'athism had tried to hide behind the curtain of civic identity. As the façade was exposed, sectarianism became unavoidable, not only within Iraq but also in neighboring countries. Through a domino effect, stability was jeopardized in other states as well, such as Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. It is within this milieu that one of the striking features of the ongoing transformation in the Middle East becomes apparent: the changing character of state sovereignty. To capture the dynamics of the latter, it is necessary to problematize the transformation in the whole region in relation to Westphalian subjectivity and its foundations.

The turmoil in the Middle East challenged the Westphalian political order as the states started to dissolve along religious or ethnic lines, to the degree that a 'balkanization of identity' (mostly between Sunni and Shia) occurred. The existing state borders were disputed, mainly as a result of the civil wars, leading to so-called 'failed states.' These events led to a new border politics challenging the existing geopolitical space.

On the one hand, a re-bordering process is taking place –as in the Kurdish case– while, on the other hand, a re-territorialization process is concurrently

underway –as in the case of ISIL. Further challenging the Westphalian set is the mass migration out of Iraq and Syria towards neighboring and European states, in particular from the conflict areas dominated by ISIL, which in turn is attracting an intriguing reverse migration, the hijrah of people flocking to join the so-called Islamic Caliphate in the form of foreign fighters

As many pundits have pointed out, the Arab Uprisings have significantly shaped the ongoing transformations in the Middle East.

The foremost impact has been on the nature of universal “state sovereignty” that came into existence in the region following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. Particularly after the sudden rise of ISIL as a politico-military entity claiming successful control over considerable parts of eastern Syria and western Iraq, the decline of state sovereignty became prominent. The rise of ISIL helped to transform a homogeneous and absolute understanding of sovereignty into multiple sovereignties. The decline of state sovereignty is not limited to the emergence of ISIL however; many sub-state military organizations had already challenged it, making the region’s state structures more complex and hybrid to begin with. During the first half of the 20th century, many Middle Eastern countries took pride in identifying themselves as successful nation-states (Iraq, Egypt, Jordan, Turkey, etc.) within the framework of territorial integrity and national unity.

The expansion of the European state system and the idea of territorial integrity along with it legitimized state control over a specific territory, while nationalism aimed to create a meaningful fusion of the state and society with reference to variants of context-specific nationalist ideologies and ideologues. The state as the main apparatus of the Westphalian political order in the international system was gradually transferred to the Middle Eastern society of states; a society of states based on the principle of territorial and sovereign equality. It was during the 20th century that various Middle Eastern states consolidated their power, a power conferred in part through international recognition of their nominal, ‘negative sovereignty.’ However, the Arab Uprisings dramatically shifted the political imagination, questioning the suitability of the classical idea of Western

preference of state-centered order over societal and individual concerns regarding justice in the Middle East.

Considering the current situation in the Middle East, it can be said that state sovereignty has been challenged both internally and externally. Internally, it is obvious now that the economic, political and security matrix of the region has been suffering from erosion. Externally, tasked with exerting influence in conflict resolution efforts functioning as a constraint on states, regional security organizations (such as the Arab League, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the GCC and so on) have become ineffective in the face of states that are differentially impacted by conflicts, and hence, support incompatible responses to these conflicts. As a result of regional disorder and fragmentation, regional organizations have become dysfunctional and unable to address regional security challenges in Syria, Libya, Egypt, Iraq, and Gaza. Such conditions are dismantling the mechanisms required for constructing regional order, forcing actors to turn to unilateral preferences or short-term alliances, themselves deepening rather than alleviating the existing predicaments. It is also obvious that sovereignty in the region is frequently punctured by international military interventions.

Changing nature of Regional Affairs

Back in December 2010, when the Arab Spring had just begun, more than a few observers believed that the time for a Middle East of popular preferences had finally come. With the wave of change turning into a bloody civil war in Syria, the Spring came to a halt. Israel and the Gulf nations, meanwhile, became the counter-revolution's chief sponsors. Gen. Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi's military coup in Egypt, coupled with the rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria as well as the capture of Sana'a by Yemen's Houthi Movement, turned the Spring into the darkest of winters. At this point, even the world-famous common sense of the people of Yemen might stop short of preventing years of chaos and divisions. In the meantime, experts suggest that instability and a large number of refugees could spill over to Saudi Arabia in case of a bloody civil war in the country.

Washington's post-Arab Spring foreign policy, a combination of U.S. reluctance and more power to local partners, fostered a geopolitical environment where regional powers and sub-state actors could exert greater influence over Middle Eastern affairs. While the sectarian polarization between Iran and Saudi Arabia turned into a proxy war, the 2013 military coup rendered the possibility of counter-balancing the sectarian tensions through an alliance between Turkey and Egypt beyond reach. Meanwhile, the rise of foreign fighters, who are affiliated with sub-state actors including ISIS and al-Qaida, brought the war to Fortress Europe. Tehran's new emphasis on hard power, which translates into training Shiite militias across the region, granted the country access to an unprecedented level of influence over the Middle East. At this point, Iran-backed militants remain among the most active participants of the anti-ISIS campaign in Syria and Iraq. Having used the ISIS threat as leverage to reconcile with the United States and expand its reach, Iran has become arguably the most influential country in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen among others.

In light of the above developments, there are two paths that remain available to the region: The first scenario means that an issue-based power struggle will continue between regional powers and turn civil wars into a chronic problem - i.e. a cycle of violence in the region. The other option involves the emergence of a new balance of power to minimize, and eventually eliminate, clashes between regional powers - for which Iran will need to become familiar with the limits of its power and harsh policies against the Muslim Brotherhood have to end.

The greatest downside of proxy wars has arguably been the redefinition of national interest with reference to religious rhetoric. At a time when state organizations are falling apart, the discriminatory language of armed groups deepened divisions and polarization within the Islamic world. While Islamist discourse could assume a more liberating role, in opposition it tends to promote conflict amid the present challenges - not to mention that most people fail to grasp that Israel is the invisible victor of proxy wars in the region.

Conclusion

Borders- Sykes-Picot? Version 02,

Sovereignty

Security governance in the regional level?

Geopolitical competitions in the strategic level?