

The Price: The End of Iraqi and Syrian Woes and the Vanishing of ISIS

Fadi Elhousseini

When entangled elements make it hard to reach sound analyses, conspiracy theories appear to be a good tool to explain the unexplained. This applies perfectly to the situation in the Middle East. Many observers are not yet ready to cede their *de facto* approach, albeit every single regional development shows the clear marks of a crucial role by foreign powers (either super or regional), not only in what has been taking place, but for a debacle that has been erupting in the region for decades, perhaps centuries. Such indicators lead to a strong understanding that dramatic changes might be within striking distance.

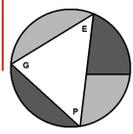
For a start, the unity of the Arabs cannot be benign for foreign powers who have interests in the region. If the Arabs were united, they would be a power that would not let others use them or have imperialist dreams in such a geostrategically important region. Iran's growing role in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon is the starkest example of how division, failed-state scenarios and weak governments are nothing but a steppingstone for other powers to sneak in, penetrate and then dominate.

This hypothesis is not limited to the old definition of powers in the form of states; it also includes those novel trans-border actors such as terrorist groups. That said, it should not be surprising to see Al-Qaeda—and then Daesh (so-called 'Islamic State')—appear and flourish in Iraq, following the chaos resulting from the US invasion and occupation. The same concept of chaos and failed-state-scenario applies to Afghanistan, Syria, Libya and Yemen.

History is a good starting point to ascertain how major powers intervened in this region in order to secure their own strategic interests. The examples are numerous, but perhaps the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement was the most evident case of major powers agreeing to divide the Arab world into competing states. Although the Arabs have never lived in one single state, they have lived in particularly large, interconnected regions such as the Levant covering what is now Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and occupied Palestine and the kingdom of Egypt and Sudan (now divided into two states).

Foreign intervention and the fragmentation of the Arabs took a sharper line with the United States' occupation of Iraq. This occupation not only meant the fall of a state, a president and a dictatorship, or even an end to the Arab nationalism that Saddam Hussein was one of the last Arab leaders to embrace; it also meant a geopolitical earthquake in the whole regional order, with a far-reaching change in the balance of power that prevailed in the Middle East at large.

Intriguingly, the collapse of Saddam's regime meant that Iraq would become prey to Iran. It also meant the stirring up of sectarian strife between the majority of Iraqis who are Shia



living for decades under a Sunni ruler, and the minority of Sunnis who were privileged under the Ba'ath regime of Saddam. This ignited the separatist tendencies of the Kurds in the north. The possible repercussions should have been worthy of much more consideration before the US occupied and then withdrew from Iraq.

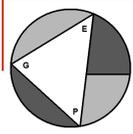
History aside, these developments take us to the emergence (or creation by certain powers, if we want to be honest) of a new regional actor known as Daesh (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria). This so-called "Islamic State" presents a bizarre manifestation of an extremely radical interpretation of "Sunni Islam".

Noteworthy in this context is that Daesh did not exist before the US occupation of Iraq and its roots can be traced to Al-Qaeda affiliated Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi in 2004. In response to the chasm of mistrust between the various sects and the immense danger that this group posed, the other sects became more anxious to protect themselves, and at times retaliate. As a result, the role of sectarian militias increased and, to add insult to injury, the separatist tendencies have been justified more than at any time in the past. The calls by Iraqi Kurds for independence have resonated in other countries and encouraged the Kurds in Syria and Turkey to follow suit; we are likely to see another such call from Kurds in Iran sooner or later.

Apparently, like their predecessors in the Sykes-Picot era, the superpowers have found that re-fragmenting and re-dividing the region further would better serve their strategic interests. The Kurdish element is critical in the Middle East regional equation, particularly because the separatist tendencies by Kurds in one country have led to others in neighbouring states. In a surprising move, the US has put its strategic relationship with Turkey at stake with the Trump Administration striking a novel partnership deal with a number of Kurdish groups in Syria.

Walid Faris, who served as Middle East affairs adviser during the Trump election campaign, told *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* London-based newspaper on March 22, 2017 that Damascus fully acknowledges that the US Administration would not allow the Syrian/Assad regime to move its forces to the east of Syria, neither toward Al-Hasaka nor toward the anti-Daesh combat zones. This, according to Faris, explains why the US dispatched additional US Marines to north-east Syria. In other words, Washington is yearning to become the backbone of the forces that will advance and liberate the swathes of territory controlled by Daesh, the areas over which Washington would not allow the Syrian/Assad regime to regain control.

The latest movements in the field lead to a similar conclusion. In fact, with the mounting presence of major powers in the Syrian conflict, these developments show that the role of other actors (militias like Hezbollah, Daesh and Al-Nusra, or states like Iran and Turkey) will come to an end. In other words, such transformations (especially the growing role of the Russian forces) may usher in the end of the Iranian presence in Syria. The departure of the



other militias appears to be just around the corner, at least in areas controlled by the Syrian regime. The deployment of the Russian forces near the Lebanese border is a case in point, where Hezbollah's role has ended, mainly after achieving a demographic change and consolidating a sectarian structure for the various regions inside Syria.

Similarly, the remarkable presence of the US and growing numbers of its troops on the ground has led to parallel scenarios within Sunni areas (currently occupied by Daesh) or Kurdish zones. It looks as if an agreement was reached between the two major powers Russia and the US to divide Syria into spheres of influence based on sectarian or ethnic parameters.

As Syria was previously an exclusively Russian domain, the significant role and interests of Iran were not always well-received in Moscow. Dividing Syria between Moscow and Washington and eliminating the role of other actors appears to be a win-win situation for the Americans and the Russians. Lest there be any misunderstanding about this outcome, since the outbreak of Arab revolts in 2011, Syria and Bashar Al-Assad himself were not the sole cards held by Russia in the Middle East.

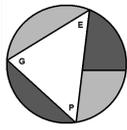
Moscow has been developing strategic relations and forging broader interests in several other Middle East states, including Israel, Egypt and even Turkey. On the other hand, it is obvious that the new US Administration has a clearer vision on what can be done in Syria, when compared to the Obama Administration.

In this context, Dr Faris says that despite the political quarrels, a meeting between US President Donald Trump and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin could happen soon. Their publicly agreed-upon solution in Syria passes through one gate: the withdrawal of all foreign armed forces and militias, namely Hezbollah, the Iraqi militias, Al-Basdaran, Al-Qaeda, Daesh, Al-Nusra and all of those who reached Syria with the assistance of the Iranian regime. Faris adds that Washington and its NATO allies on the one hand and Russia and its international allies such as China on the other can agree on this solution.

Furthermore, all of those parties also agree that the first stage that can lead to a solution in Syria begins with the "disappearance" of Daesh. Following this, a moderate Arab Sunni authority must assume power in the areas currently controlled by the militants.

The logic behind such a step is that if Daesh is replaced by the Syrian regime—like what is happening in Iraq—this may create a sectarian problem in those areas. Hence, according to Faris, the role of a number of moderate Sunni Arab countries would be important because there is a need for an alliance on the ground, as the US is not ready for a major troop deployment.

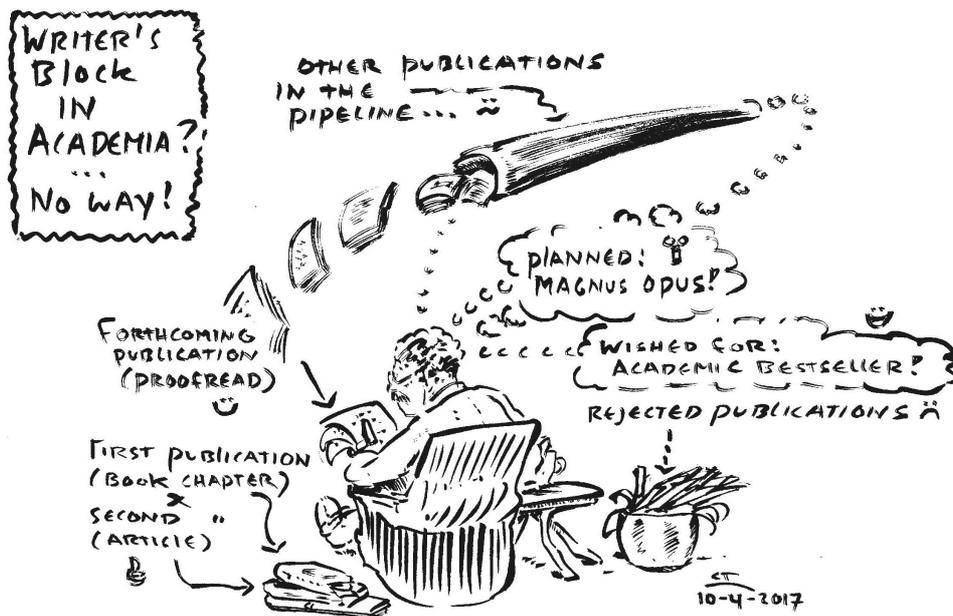
We might argue that Syria is thus heading toward a tripartite division: a Russian sphere of influence, wherein the Syrian regime and its Alawi (Shia) Arab sect lives; a US sphere of influence, with the Sunni Arab opposition and its groups; and another US sphere of influence, for the Kurds. Needless to say, we can easily see a mirror image in Iraq, which is



mired with sectarian and ethnic traps and a horde of uncertainties, and its divisions are clearer than ever before.

As such, it would not be outlandish to see the end of the Syrian war soon and in a similar way the disappearance of Daesh, especially after it has almost fulfilled its sinister mandate and purpose for which it was established; that is, the cementing of regional sectarian strife. Daesh cannot have any future in the agreed-upon scenario and thus its disappearance becomes inevitable.

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