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# Syrian Separation: Why division is not the answer

by Florence Gaub

After five years of war and now a third round of peace talks there seems to be only one option left for Syria: to divide up the country. This could be done either according to federal principles, as Russia would like to see happen, or perhaps even by dissolving the country entirely in its present form – a measure viewed favourably by the United States. It is said that Syria, a country of 21 million people and 10 ethnic groups, is an artificial construct of French and British design, and it is tempting to believe this argument. If different ethnic groups no longer want to live together, a divorce might come as a relief. However, this approach is not just misguided, it is dangerous: separation would not solve the problem.

## Syria: not as artificial as some might think

First of all, Syria is not an artificial construct. Too often in the debate over the Syrian civil war, the secret Franco-British Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 is said to have created the countries of today's Middle East, thus laying the foundations for all the region's problems. This is factually incorrect in several ways: the Syria of the Sykes-Picot plan was considerably larger than the country is today, extending well into northern Iraq. It was the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 that placed the country more or less within today's borders. Furthermore, those borders were not completely artificial, as they were based largely on those of former Ottoman administrative districts.

More importantly, the fact that the state was formed by outside influence does not mean that the concept of Syria as a nation state was created *ex nihilo*. On the contrary, Syrian citizens see themselves and their country as the historical successors of various political ancestors. The earliest recorded mention of Syria was in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, but it reached its political zenith under the name Bilad al-Sham, as a province of several caliphates ruled by the first four "Rightly-Guided Caliphs" (or Rashidun), the Umayyads, and the Abbasids. From the 7<sup>th</sup> century well into the 16<sup>th</sup> century it was at times a highly significant political entity. Damascus was the capital of the Umayyad Caliphate in the 7<sup>th</sup> century and Raqqa had that status in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. When the Ottomans conquered Bilad al-Sham in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, they divided it into five districts named after local towns: Beirut, Aleppo, Jerusalem, Zor, and Damascus; the latter district was also called "Syria" and extended far into what is now Jordan.

With the fall of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, Syria saw itself as the successor to that previous entity. However, its territory was considerably reduced by the Treaty of Lausanne. Syria's borders no longer included what are now Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, or parts of northern Iraq and southern Turkey. At the same time, the term Bilad al-Sham began to fall out of use, and Syria, the original Roman name for the region, became increasingly used – possibly as a distraction from the shrunken territory. When today's Syria was split up even further under the French Mandate, it was the first time in Syrian

history that ethnic factors had been of any significance. Syria was to be divided into Druze, Alawite, Damascene and Aleppine substates. However, the people did not accept this, and there was an uprising which lasted several years, costing over 100,000 lives. Syria's borders are therefore not completely artificial, although it is true that they do not fully reflect its national identity: Syria would rather be bigger, not smaller.

## Understanding Syrian nationalism

Not only does Syria see itself as the political descendant of Bilad al-Sham, it has actively tried to recreate that land, especially under Hafez al-Assad, father of the incumbent president, Bashar. The expansive territorial identity of Greater Syria has shown through in many aspects of Syrian foreign policy. On several occasions, Syria has tried to merge politically with other Arab nations, including Libya, Yemen, and Iraq. Its union with Egypt lasted the longest, from 1958 to 1961. Furthermore, Syrian troops occupied Lebanon for over 30 years. Hafez al-Assad went so far as to refer to the Jordanians, Palestinians and Lebanese as part of the Syrian people. This is why Syria had no embassy in Lebanon until 2008: the Lebanese and Syrians were supposedly "one people". In addition, Syria still does not recognise Alexandretta (also known as Hatay Province) as belonging to Turkey. Historically, it was part of the Ottoman administrative district of Aleppo, but France handed it over to Turkey in 1937 during Atatürk's rule. Support for the concept of Greater Syria came not only from inside Syria: until the 1960s, the Lebanese *Syrian Socialist National Party* tried to join Lebanon with Syria, from which it had, in the party's view, been unjustly separated by a colonial power.

Syrian nationalism is based on this territorial identity. Because Syria has always had an ethnically and religiously mixed population, its nationalism has had to be a unifying force. It relied on two non-religious factors: the first territorial, the second cultural. The territorial factor is reflected in the name Bilad al-Sham. The name is a geographical reference derived from the Arabic for "land of the left hand", meaning to the left of Mecca and Medina when facing east. The fact that Bilad al-Sham is still a relevant political reference point after so many centuries is reflected in the Syrian flag, which recycles the colours of the country's political ancestor under the Umayyads (white), the Abbasids (black) and the Rashidun (green); while red symbolises the blood of the fallen. This is, incidentally, the same flag that Syria used during its union with Egypt.

Pan-Arabism was also an attractively unifying ideology for a multi-ethnic society like Syria's (although not for the Kurdish minority). It is no coincidence that Syria was the first stronghold of the Arabic unity movement – a deliberate counterpoint to pan-Islamism. The first attempt at pan-Arab unification was made under the Hashemite rebel leader Faisal, who founded the Arab Kingdom of Syria in Damascus in 1920 (although this was crushed within a few months by France). Even today, the Arab reference is present not just in Syria's national anthem, but in the country's official name: the Syrian Arab Republic. Perhaps because of this unifying ideology (which is often state prescribed), Syria has experienced little in the way of ethnic or religious violence in over 60 years of independence.

Nationalist identity can also be found among the rebels today. Among more than 150 insurgent groups, many are named in reference to Bilad al-Sham (for example Ansar al-Sham, Suqour al-Sham, Ahrar al-Sham oder Jaysh al-Sham) and to Syria (like the Free Syrian Army, and Ahrar Souriya). In contrast to the so-called Islamic State (IS) or the Al-Nusra Front, most Syrian rebels do not accept foreign volunteers for fear of losing their Syrian legitimacy. Even the flag of the Free Syrian Army bears the same Syrian national colours used by the Assad regime, albeit in a different combination.

Essentially, there are two groups that are opposed to Syrian territorial or cultural nationalism: the Islamic State, who want to return the country to its status of a medieval province within a caliphate, and the Syrian Kurds, who account for 10 to 15 percent of the Syrian population. IS-held territory in Syria is divided into several administrative districts (which to a large extent correspond to those of the Syrian regime); and in March this year, the Kurds declared their autonomy within a federal system – a claim rejected by both the Syrian regime and opposition. The division of Syria, whether on a federal or total basis, has never been

among the insurgents' demands. On the contrary, keeping Syria in its present form is the one thing Bashar al-Assad and Anas al-Abdah (president of the anti-regime Syrian National Coalition) and even Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah can agree on.

### **Misunderstanding the dynamics of the conflict**

Despite Syria's robust sense of nationalism and political identity, American and Russian negotiators still seem to view the territorial or political division of Syria as a solution. This is mainly due to a misunderstanding of both the general causes and specific conditions of the Syrian conflict. Religious or ethnic differences do not actually trigger conflicts, although this is a widespread belief. Studies show that civil wars are most common among societies in which levels of income are low and state institutions are weak. Conflict researcher Paul Collier has shown that ethnic factors lead to a slight increase in the likelihood of conflict only in societies consisting of three ethnic groups of comparable size, in which critical differences of income correlate with ethnic identity.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the more plural a society is (like India for example) the less violent conflict there is – presumably because no particular group is able to dominate another. On the other hand, it is also true that conflicts strengthen ethnic and religious identities. Political leaders often deliberately play the sectarian card in their rhetoric, and at times of conflict people increasingly identify with their primary group. The identity does not create the conflict – the conflict creates the identity.

However, since President Assad is a member of the Alawite minority, the Syrian conflict is widely believed to be a Sunni uprising against an Alawite dictatorship – although in fact the regime still contains a mixture of almost all Syrian ethnic groups. While Alawites may occupy senior leadership positions, the regime has had to at least pretend to be broadly representative over the years in order to be accepted; by Sunni trading families in Damascus, for instance. It can also be said of Syria that although at its outset the conflict lacked an ethno-religious dimension, Islamist groups in particular began to use a sectarian style of rhetoric and warfare. The preacher Adnan al-Aroor, for instance, threatened to “make mincemeat” of the Alawites and to feed their flesh to the dogs. In Adra in 2013, the al-Nusra front executed 40 Christians, Druze, and Alawites. The longer the war lasts, the more it will lead to displacement and ethnic cleansing of entire regions. The presence of Hezbollah and Iranian units feeds the perception that this is a fight between Shia and Sunnis.

But the Syrian conflict is not an ethno-religious one. Firstly, the demands of the opposition are purely political. Secondly, violence in Syria does not discriminate between particular groups. Islamic State militants in Raqqa executed several hundred regime soldiers despite the fact that they were Sunnis like themselves. Not only are Sunnis still represented within the Assad regime, they also make up the majority of the Syrian armed forces, and they, in turn, fight predominantly against Sunni militia. So although the conflict is developing more religious and ethnic overtones, the vast majority of rhetoric is still focused on branding the other side as tyrants or terrorists. Further evidence that this conflict is about more than just religious identity is provided by a recently released document in which representatives of the Alawite community (of which President Assad is a member) dissociate themselves from the regime. Syria's war is therefore not a war of secession, nor is it an ethnic or religious one, but rather an uprising against the government.

### **A territorial solution to a political problem**

For the reasons outlined above, a territorial breakup of Syria would not be a long-term solution to the underlying problems. On the contrary, it would actually encourage political sectarian tendencies, as happened in Bosnia and Herzegovina. There, the prospect of territorial division led to ethnic cleansing, which claimed many victims, and the internal displacement of over a million people. Bosnia's ethnic groups were scattered in pockets of settlement throughout the territory, so it was impossible to divide the population homogene-

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<sup>1</sup> Collier, Paul, ed. (2003): *Breaking the conflict trap: Civil War and Development Policy* (Washington, DC: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development), p. 59.

ously. In the 20 years following the Dayton Peace Agreement, only about one half of those displaced in Bosnia have returned to where they came from – and in some cases only because international forces were stationed there. More than a million people now live in ethnically homogeneous parts of Bosnia, with Serbian refugees living mostly in the Serbian republic within the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the final analysis, the de facto division of Bosnia has cemented the problem rather than solved it.

The crucial point here is that Syria – just like Lebanon and Bosnia – is largely mixed in terms of ethnic settlement (apart from ethnic concentrations in certain areas, like the Druze in the south of the country and the Alawites on the west coast). Christian communities, Alawites and Ismailis are spread out across the entire country. The Kurdish areas in the north of the country, too, are not contiguously settled, but separated from one another by predominantly Turkmenian areas. It would therefore be impossible to divide up Syria without resettling its people. This is exactly what sectarian leaders want, but not what the people themselves want. Ironically, it was precisely this same heterogeneity which saved Lebanon from disintegration after 15 years of civil war. Ultimately, most citizens rejected the militias' idea of breaking up the country into religious cantons, preferring instead a government of unity.

Dividing up Syria, then, would not be to solve the original political problem, but to manage its symptoms. The problem is not so much Bashar al-Assad, as the fact that the Syrian state has been operating an ailing economy and a repressive regime for years. Admittedly, this is a much more complex problem, but it needs to be solved before there can be long-term stability in Syria.

### **A dangerous regional precedent**

Finally, a divided Syria could have consequences for the wider region. Territorial separation here could be viewed as a panacea for solving political problems and encourage secession elsewhere. The Kurds, Iraq, but also Lebanon, Yemen, Libya, even Shiite regions of the Gulf would be tempted to solve political problems on a purely territorial level – not least because minority leaders are more focused on securing political sinecures for themselves than they are on providing state services. Wherever there has been territorial separation in response to political issues – be it in Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, or Bangladesh – it has often been more about securing short-term power and resources than about long-term stability, which has usually failed to materialise.

For precisely these reasons, Arabic media have reacted negatively to both Russian and American plans to divide Syria, seeing them as a way for foreign powers to draw borders once again – further weakening and fragmenting Arab states, just as the Sykes-Picot agreement did. If Syria were to remain unstable after its federalisation or division, such measures would be viewed in the region as a deliberate attempt to sow instability from outside, which is how the 2003 invasion of Iraq was viewed.

The only solution to civil conflicts of any kind is good governance: a state which provides its citizens with security, prosperity, and representation. The fact that this takes longer and costs more than political segregation explains why the latter is often the more attractive option to outsiders.

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This article reflects the author's personal opinion.*