

The Borders in the Middle East are Changing.
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A century ago, the First World War broke out and at its conclusion, the political geography of the world changed. The Ottoman Empire fought on the wrong side of that war and it dissolved tumultuously, with all its colonies \223liberated\224 and the Turks reduced to a new and exclusively Turkish country. At that empire\222s height (15th - 20th centuries), it ruled over Arabia, Mesopotamia, the Levant (Syria), Egypt, and across North Africa all the way to the Atlantic. Its European holdings included Greece, Albania, Bulgaria, and part of what was to become Yugoslavia.

The Austro-Hungarian Empire also fought on the losing side of the war and its cosmopolitan control over Eastern Europe, Central Europe, and at one time Spain, dissolved, giving birth to a slew of new states.

The Russian Empire, although on the winning side of the war, fell to an internal Communist Revolution that also changed borders, temporarily giving freedom to former colonies (Central Asia, Poland, the Baltic States), but they forced them back into the new USSR empire.

These border changes gave rise to new nation-states, with hopes of democracy: hopes that soon failed. Most of the European new nations fell eventually to the rising Nazi empire and, after the Nazi defeat, to the USSR. They all had to be freed again after the fall of the Soviets.

The Turks did best, establishing an impressive Republic and modernization, becoming a secular state and dethroning Islam. But the former colonies of the Ottomans failed both modernization and democracy because both Islam and their cultures played a smothering cultural role. All of these former colonies became dictatorships or, like Lebanon, was constantly divided in sectarian strife. And all of these new states were the result of the British and French mandates drawing borderlines with little regard for ethnic or tribal identities, a blueprint for later troubles.

However, artificial as those new borders were, these new nations did enjoy a century of national identity, an improvement over identity based on tribe or clan. Multiple ethnicities lived within national borders and, for the most part, dictatorships kept the lid on. They all did better than they will do now.

The borders are changing again, and where that will stop, nobody knows. The border between Syria and Iraq has melted. On both sides of that former border, the Sunnis are unhappy. In Syria, they are an oppressed majority, ruled by a Shiite dictatorship; and in Iraq, an oppressed minority ruled by a Shiite thug, Maliki, the winner of a \223democratic\224 election.

If Maliki is not removed and replaced by another leader who is willing to share power with the Sunnis and Kurds, the country will fall into the three pieces that they once were under Ottoman rule: Shiites, Kurds, and Sunnis. This will have dire consequences.

If the Kurds become a sovereign state, there will be a movement for Kurds living in Turkey and Iran to join them, something that Turkey and Iran will fight to prevent.

If a Sunni state emerges in Iraq, it might join with the Sunnis of Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan---possibly resulting in a brand new country containing all three.

The fallout from all this will affect the tottering Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. Shiite Persia will try to absorb all the Shiite areas, from western Saudi Arabia to the new Shiite state in the former Iraq, and even possibly try to absorb the Shiite region of Turkey.

US policy will try to support stability wherever it can. Our major issue is to see that the entire region does not fall to crazy Islamist thugs, not as difficult a task as it might seem. The Islamists alienate civilians wherever they go; not much longevity there.

We must keep cool and use our considerable armory of sharp sticks, clandestine mischief, and persuasion. And we need to be unified politically on this! Foreign policy arguments should be behind closed doors and stop at our waters. As horrible as the world\222s villains are, they all want to send their children to the US for school. We are still the world\222s hope.

680 words

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