Levantine no-go zone

BY STASH LUCZKIW

The sheer complexity inherent in the Syrian Civil War makes it seem insoluble. It also raises the distasteful prospect of having to deal with other such pockets of mayhem for the foreseeable future.

Kobani, also known as Ain al-Arab, Syria. June 20, 2015.

The current situation in Syria has been described by policy makers and press alike as "layered" with complexity. This might just be a euphemism for unmanageable chaos – an all-against-all scenario in which neighbors continually weigh the least worse option while the Syrians themselves can only pray that the worst might finally be over.

What started as an uprising in 2011 during the wave of Arab Springs, when protesters called for the ouster of Bashar al-Assad, quickly morphed into a protracted civil war. Syria plunged into an unprecedented cycle of violence that has caused at least 250,000 deaths and created nearly 10 million internal refugees, with an additional 3.8 to 4.7 million in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, Egypt and dozens of other countries. It is easily the worst humanitarian crisis of the 21st century.

Had this catastrophe occurred in some geopolitical backwater (the Congo, for example, which experienced two brutal wars around the turn of the century, killing millions) policy makers and press could have safely ignored it. But Syria is in the heart of a region that has been the world's powder keg for decades. It's a short boat ride to European shores and sits on a fault line between two regional powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia, which aspire to influence the political future of the Middle East and its oil resources. Consequently, the Syrian Civil War has drawn the keen interest of at least three nuclear powers: the United States, Russia and Israel, which all have a stake in the outcome.

AHMET SIK/GETTY IMAGES

A Syrian family lives in their destroyed home, June 20, 2015.

Yet Syria is more than just the focal point for tactical moves in a broader geopolitical strategy set against the backdrop of spheres of influence. What we are witnessing in the Levant today is the direction in which the future balance of power among nation-states may be headed. Namely, some nation-states – particularly those built according to almost arbitrary criteria of convenience and/or held together by monolithic dictatorships – will disintegrate. Iraq and Syria are perfect examples. In their place we will see the establishment of chaotic "no-go zones," areas of fluid control with blurry contours and friable political structures. These no-go zones are especially taking hold in areas with a tribal-based society steeped in the transcendent principles of Islam and a historical memory of Caliphate rule – because Islam serves as a fallback tradition and structure offering an alternative to the nation-state system.

On the ground, various military forces have carved up the country's territory. The Syrian army loyal to Assad controls Damascus and a corridor that stretches in the west of the country from Jordan, along the Lebanese border, up the Mediterranean coast to the Turkish border. Much of this territory is the heartland of the Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shia Islam that accounts for about 12% of Syria's population. Assad is an Alawite, and the minority had been running the country through the Baath Party and the army since the 1970s. At the outset of the war, it seemed just a matter of time before the opposition defeated Assad. However, thanks to military help from Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah, as well as political support from Russia, which has a naval base in Syria (though another has already been evacuated), Assad has managed to survive.

A key to Assad's survival has been the disarray among the forces bent on overthrowing him. Initially there was the Free Syrian Army, an opposition force of Sunni secularists and moderate Islamicists, which hoped to benefit from Western support. That support turned out to be too little, too late – although there is a debate as to whether or not any amount of support would have been enough to allow the moderate rebels to prevail over the Syrian Army.

As predicted by many observers, not least of whom Assad himself, radical Islamic forces took over the ranks of the rebels. Early in the conflict the al-Nusra Front, an al-Qaeda affiliate, was the most prominent and effective rebel force. In April 2013, al-Nusra merged with the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and the name of the new group became the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Al-Qaeda's leaders, however, rejected the merger, and ISIL rebranded itself as the Islamic State (IS), declaring the establishment of a new Caliphate in June 2014. It now controls the entire eastern part of Syria and most of Iraq's Sunni-populated regions.

The Islamist forces that refused to merge with IS now control territory in the south, near the Jordanian border, and in the north around Idlib, including much of Aleppo, Syria's most populous city before the war with more than two million inhabitants. As the only Sunni Arab alternative, the countries that insist on Assad's ouster – Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the US and Jordan – initiated a process of vetting opposition rebels before they receive training and aid on the Jordanian side of the border. But this process has complicated matters, since it is nearly impossible to determine to what extent rebel commander and fighters are sympathetic to IS and the type of sharia law they have imposed in the eastern part of the country.

Adding to the already insoluble mix are the Kurds, who control a swath of territory in the northeast, which is contiguous with Iraqi territory they already control. The Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) have proven to be a cohesive, motivated force, willing to fight against IS; but it is unlikely they would be welcome in territory where the population is primarily Arab.

BULENT KILIC/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Syrian Kurds at Turkey's Sanliurfa refugee camp near the border with Syria, June 27, 2015.

The political problem with any support for Kurds lies with Turkey, which is extremely wary of its own restive Kurdish population (about 14 million in Turkey alone according to the CIA World Factbook, though the Kurds claim more than 20 million). In his first public statement following the June 7 general elections that saw his Islamic Party lose its majority, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan blasted the Syrian Kurds and their American allies after they defeated IS in the northern Syrian town of Tell Abyad. "Look at the West that is striking Arabs and Turkmens in Tell Abyad and regretfully placing the terrorist groups PYD [Democratic Union Party, of which the YPG is the military wing] and PKK [Kurdistan Workers' Party] in their place… How can we consider this West to be honest?" Erdogan said, referring to the air support the US was giving to the Syrian Kurds fighting against IS.

Several weeks later on June 27, Erdogan insisted that Turkey would not allow any attempts to establish a Kurdish entity in northern Syria: "We will never allow a state to be established in northern Syria and in the south of our country. No matter what the cost, we will continue our struggle in this regard."

Some reports even claim that Turkey has been preparing to intervene militarily. But retired Brigadier General Armagan Kuloglu, a commentator on military matters, is among those who see no advantages to an operation in Syria. In an interview with the *Al-Monitor*, a Washington-based news and media site specializing in the Middle East, he said: "Three objectives are mentioned for such an operation: to prevent IS or the PYD from gaining control of areas bordering Turkey, and to establish a safe haven for refugees. But we have multiple enemies here, and it is not clear who we are supposed to fight."

Nevertheless, other commentators who hold sway over Erdogan have taken a more bellicose stance. Ibrahim Karagul, the editor-in-chief of *Yeni Safak* and often considered the Prime Minister's unofficial spokesman, believes that the PYD is more dangerous than IS and that there is a grand design to establish a Kurdish corridor to carry oil from Kurdish northern Iraq to the Mediterranean through Syria. "The aim is to make a lasting change to the map of the entire region and to restrict countries like Turkey, which have an extraordinary power to influence developments… If successful, this will be the biggest trap set for Turkey since the invasion of Iraq," Karagul claimed.

In the context of Turkish history, the Kurds now pose a rather paradoxical problem. The early 20th century saw the Turks shift from an empire to a successful nation-state. The success of the nation-state was arguably contingent on there being one predominant ethnicity: the

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A member of the tribal groups fighting along with the Iraqi government security forces takes a position behind sandbags during clashes with jihadists in the Hosh district of Ramadi.

Turks. Hence, one of the pretexts behind the systematic massacre of Armenians in 1915. The large presence of Kurds has always posed a threat to Ankara. It knows that if the Turkish nation-state is to be based primarily on ethnicity and language (as the most stable nations in post-imperial Europe tend to be) then it would have to relinquish all of southeast Anatolia and roughly 15% of its population. This is unacceptable to Turks.

Turkey, of course, is not the only country that wants Syria's Sunni Arabs to prevail. Saudi Arabia sees the war against the backdrop of Iran's nuclear aspirations. When sanctions are lifted, the reasoning goes, and Iran moves closer to developing nuclear weapons capabilities, then the Shia Crescent – which extends from Lebanon through Iraq to both sides of the Persian Gulf – will be strengthened. Consequently, Iran will become the dominant power in the region. For Saudi Arabia, such a scenario is less desirable than having IS control most of Syria. In the end it is a matter of choosing between the lesser of two evils. Riyadh obviously understands that the type of Caliphate proposed by IS, if it should ever come about, would mean the demise of the House of Saud. But Saudi Arabia's ultra-conservative Wahhabis feel more affinity with IS's fundamentalist strain of Islam than they do with Iran's Shia variety, which the Wahhabis considers heretical. Moreover, such an affinity might enable Riyadh to control and co-opt any Caliphate, whereas a strengthened Iran would by definition pose a threat economically, militarily and religiously. In short, there would be no hope of co-opting the ayatollahs.

To prove the platitude that geopolitics make strange bedfellows, Israel is now developing a subtle new alliance with Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Arab states opposed to cutting any sort of deal with Iran. Long considered an ally of the Kurds, Israel has been quietly aiding the more moderate Syrian rebels near the Golan Heights, mostly in the form of bringing their wounded to Israeli hospitals. "We know that Israel is providing medical services to wounded rebels; the priority seems to be on mainstream groups, but it is possible that al-Nusra members are also benefiting," Noah Bonsey, a senior analyst with the International Crisis Group, whose work focuses on Syria, told Al Jazeera.

As recently as June al-Nusra was accused of killing members of Syria's Druze minority, an Islamic sect throughout the Levant considered heretical by mainstream Sunnis. Israel also has a Druze minority, and its leaders in the Golan Heights warned that they might storm the frontier to save their relatives, fearing a sectarian massacre. In mid-June Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he had given "instructions to do what is necessary" to help Syria's Druze, warning Syrian rebel groups operating in southern Syria not to attack Druze settlements.

Amid all the shifting sands and worrisome alliances, the various strategic approaches to the war in Syria and its spillover in Iraq are largely based on the answer to a simple question. Which is the greater threat: a resurgent Iran or the establishment of a Caliphate? Of course, the ostensibly simple question is "layered" with innumerable contingencies.

If you are a devout Sunni Arab who believes the anti-Shia bias you've been fed all your life, then IS would be appealing. If you are an Alawite or Christian Syrian, then you would obviously prefer an Iranian-backed state – especially since Iran has been acting in a mature and reasonable manner since former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad left the scene compared to IS's bloodthirsty fanatics bent on eradicating anything that contradicts their narrow vision of Islam. For Saudi Arabia, a Caliphate that can be influenced and manipulated with financial largesse is preferable. For a Shia in Baghdad, Iran looks like a savior.

The contingencies get more complicated the further removed one is from the core Sunni-Shia divide. For the Turks, who have ethnic as well as religious differences to consider, any scenario that might strengthen the Kurds would be frowned upon. So the occasional IS victory might be welcomed. Israel is also involved in a complex strategic calculus. On the one hand it does not want to see Iranian-backed Hezbollah grow in strength; on the other hand, IS has already begun clamoring for the destruction of Israel from their redoubts in the Sinai Peninsula and hope to take over in the Gaza Strip.

AHMAD AL-RUBAYE/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Iraqi Shia fighters from the Popular Mobilization units guard a position on the northern outskirts of Fallujah, July 15, 2015.

As for the powers beyond the Middle East, the US wants to have its cake and eat it: that is, it wants to maintain a good relationship with Saudi Arabia and Israel while facilitating Iran's reentry into the international community. In addition, there is the patent contradiction of working *with* Iran in Iraq – where the Iraqi Army composed mainly of Shia militias has just launched an attack on the predominately Sunni Anbar Province, now controlled by IS – and *against* Iran in Syria, where the US is supporting the moderate opposition in the hope that it will prevail over both Assad and IS.

Meanwhile, Russia seems to be unequivocally on the side of Assad and, by extension, Iran. Yet in Russia's efforts to help end the sanctions regime imposed on Iran, Moscow might be shooting itself in the foot, at least in the short term, as any deal with Iran would almost surely keep oil prices low for the foreseeable future. And low oil prices are the primary cause for Russia's faltering economy.

Europe, for its part, is concerned about the growing refugee crisis on its doorstep and might accept any solution that could restore a modicum of stability to the region. And Europe is not alone in striving to quell the upheavals around the Mediterranean. Yet in this very desire for stability there may be the seeds of a willingness to accept an alternative to the nation-state system that has been the foundation of European politics since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 and of world politics since the end of colonial empires in the 20th century.

Specifically in Syria, a begrudging acceptance of IS controlled territory – for lack of any viable alternative – might bring a form of stability. The chaos could be contained in no-go zones that are simply too difficult to pacify absent the political will to accept and create enormous casualties.

An analogous situation would be the Taliban-controlled areas straddling the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. No country has the political will to occupy Afghanistan, so all that can be hoped for is enough of a military and political presence to influence the Taliban, which, despite a 14-year effort to dislodge them, are still a force to be reckoned with.

Similarly, no regional or international power has the political will to occupy the wild Sunni-dominated desert regions where IS has its support base, stretching from Aleppo to Baghdad. The US experience in Iraq when it tried to pacify Anbar Province, where IS was originally formed, is still a fresh memory and will serve as a disincentive for a long time to come.

So given a clear absence of political will to intervene on the ground militarily, what can be done to stabilize the region, or at least keep it from metastasizing throughout the Muslim world? A range of approaches can be taken, and they generally stem from a spectrum whose extremes can be described as "realist" and "humanitarian."

The realist approach, or "Machiavelli-lite," has as a clear strategic goal: maintain US hegemony throughout the Middle East. The idea is to identify

MOHAMMED HUWAIS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Site of a Saudi air strike against Houthi rebels near Sanaa Airport, Yemen, on March 26, 2015, which killed at least 13 civilians.

America's closest allies in the region – Israel, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Turkey and Egypt – and make sure they are structurally sound enough to withstand the ongoing earthquake in the Middle East. This can be done through political means as well as military aid. It is just as important to identify potential enemies, or at least governments that could create problems in the future for US hegemony. This would include Iran – notwithstanding the recently signed nuclear deal – because Iran can and does try to undermine US influence in the region, most visibly in Iraq. Another enemy to consider is jihadism. Any state, political party or organization that espouses holy war in the name of Islam should be viewed as a serious threat. The classic Machiavellian solution would be to have potential enemies fight among themselves, thereby bleeding them so they are too weak to pose a threat to the West – much as is happening between Iran and IS at the moment.

According to the realist approach, this upheaval within Islam cannot be "solved" or influenced significantly from without. It is a symptom of an ongoing process of evolution within the Muslim world as it redefines itself in a post-colonial context. All the West can do is pressure allies like Saudi Arabia and the Gulf emirates to rein in various fundamentalist groups. Military intervention would be a last resort, and it would have to be decisive.

The humanitarian approach also has a clear strategic goal: facilitate the establishment of governments based on the arguably universal values of democracy, self-determination and social justice. This can be done by identifying those governments that have either well-established democracies – such as Israel and Turkey – or have made progress toward creating democratic institutions – such as Tunisia, Jordan, even Iran. With respect to stable friendly governments that resist the Western conception of democratic rule, most notably Saudi Arabia, a hands-off approach that is sensitive to cultural differences would be combined with political cajoling and economic incentives to open up the market. The strategy would be based on the premise that stability and prosperity empower populations, and those populations will gradually demand more say in how they are governed.

In the humanitarian approach, military intervention would be avoided unless there was a direct threat to Western interests, or to prevent an imminent humanitarian catastrophe.

In the current context – apart from a few differences about how to specifically deal with dictatorial governments that might be preferable to democratically sanctioned Islamic law and/or chaos (here, of course Egypt is the prime example) – there is not such a wide gap between the realist and humanitarian approaches when it comes to Syria. Neither realists nor humanitarians

ABDULLAH DOMA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

A member of the Libyan army during clashes against Islamist gunmen in the eastern Libyan city of Benghazi.

have any stomach for boots on the ground. The US and its coalition partners are content to use air power and limited special forces operations to simply degrade IS. And for now, the degradation of IS might be the only viable solution, because there does not seem to be any substitute for them should they be destroyed (which would come at a great cost). Shia militias from Baghdad have lost all credibility in the Sunni-dominated Anbar Province; Assad and the Alawites are unacceptable to Syria's Sunnis after so much death and destruction; and the idea of "moderate" Islamic forces in Syria with the military and organizational wherewithal to hold territory is probably a mirage.

Like it or not, the West may have to accept a no-go zone in the Middle East. The alternative is a protracted war that would almost certainly be unwinnable (much like Afghanistan). The no-go zone would represent if not the antithesis of a nation-state circumscribed by ethnicity, language and/or shared culture, then a cancerous simulacrum of it. Ultimately, IS might simply have to be treated as one would a tumor: keep it from spreading, weaken it, excise it where possible – but always with the full awareness that it can metastasize almost anywhere.

Despite policy makers' aversion to such "layered" solutions, there is little alternative. In fact, we might see no-go zones cropping up not only in the Islamic world, but elsewhere. Even within well-established and prosperous nation-states. Since end of the Cold War, any alternative to the nation-state has usually sprung from a "failed state." And the general consensus is that radical Islam thrives only in these failed states. But however misguided and monstrous they may be, what IS and its sympathizers throughout the Muslim world drive home is that there is a deeply rooted desire to go beyond national divisions and strive toward a world order based on a common vision of the supremacy of transcendental values. Hence the quasi-mystical nostalgia for a new Caliphate.

For the West, it may be time for a conceptual shift that would afford those who wish to preserve their nation-state the necessary cognitive flexibility. Instead of seeing IS and similar phenomenon as a no-go zone, they might recognize that such zones are very welcoming to a growing number of people. Perhaps this would rouse the West from its complacency and kindle an inconvenient discussion about why any nation-state is even worth the trouble and sacrifice required to defend it.

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