

The Middle East quasi-state system

By Ariel I. Ahram Updated: May 27

Many of the challenges of the Middle East appear to stem from the region's artificial, misshapen and ill-conceived borders. Beginning with the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 and the subsequent San Remo conference (1920), European powers delineated (however [roughly](#)) the political boundaries of Fertile Crescent. Designing a "better" map, revising or reversing Sykes-Picot and its siblings, has served as a [political rallying cry](#) and something of a [parlor game](#) ever since. In a recent Monkey Cage article, [F. Gregory Gause III](#) offers a compelling case for the continued durability of the colonially-imposed territorial system. But some of the very points Gause makes about the persistence of "quasi-states" and juridical borders in the Middle East actually highlight the reasons why Sykes-Picot and San Remo died many years ago. The European powers did not just inscribe new political borders, but, more importantly, elevated and implanted local rulers within new polities. In this respect, Sykes-Picot and San Remo have already been upended, at least partially. The problem is that the region is still struggling to find a coherent system to replace them.

The colonial arrangements began to break down when a series of coups in Syria unseated the urban Sunni elites and ushered into power military regimes that drew increasingly on the ethno-sectarian minorities of the periphery. The last of these coups, in 1968, brought Hafez al-Assad and the Alawis, a heterodox Shiite sect from the hinterlands, definitively to power. Lebanon came next. Conceived by the French as a Levantine Christian homeland, the unwritten National Pact of 1943 guaranteed the Christians the republic's presidency and with it, the preponderance of political power, while Sunni Muslims got the secondary position of prime minister. At the time, the Shiites were so inconsequential that they did not even warrant a seat at the confessional table. Decades of civil war, invasions and foreign occupations finally dispensed with this gentlemen's agreement. Now Hezbollah and the Shiites, who hold a clear demographic preponderance, maintain effective hegemony over the state. In Iraq the reckoning began in 1958, when a coup overthrew the Sunni Hashemite monarchy, longstanding British protégés. It was not until 2003 and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, though, that Sunni dominance was conclusively replaced by a Shiite-sectarian government, an eventuality that would have been inconceivable to Sykes, Picot and their ilk.

Overturning of foreign designs has come about through protracted civil wars, external intervention and repressive dictatorship. It is thus no coincidence that Syria, Iraq and Lebanon have difficulty maintaining effective control within their own territories. Political instability revolves around two diametrically opposed political impetuses: on one hand is the desire on the part of the dethroned to return to power. On the other hand, newly-ascendant groups, like Hezbollah, Maliki's Shiite alliance or Bashir al-Assad's Alawi core, have an equally powerful drive to defend their newly-won prerogatives to rule. As Gause correctly assesses, Syria, Iraq

and Lebanon (plus the nascent state of Palestine) are all, to varying degrees, quasi-states. They enjoy *de jure* international standing as sovereigns but lack the functional requisites that sovereignty entail in the ability to maintain a monopoly over force across their territory. Yet, the term quasi-statehood can also denote the exact opposite [phenomena](#): a polity denied international recognition but possessing effective *de facto* control over territory, for instance, Somaliland or Nagarno-Karabkh. The faltering of one type of quasi-state provides the impetus for the appearance of the other. The Kurdish Regional Government that separated from war-ravaged Iraq in 1991 and the PLO-controlled “Fatahland” enclaves in Lebanon in the 1970s are cases in point.

The last five years have provided opportunities for a new crop of quasi-states to emerge, each articulating alternative visions of governance and regional order. Consider the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), [a splinter group](#) originating as al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia. Many observers see ISIL at best as an organized crime syndicate, at worst a terrorist group so viciously [anti-Shiite](#) that even al-Qaeda has [disowned](#) it. Both descriptions are correct, but incomplete, as they overlook ISIL’s ambition to be a state (and the extent to which all states [resemble](#) organized crime rackets). ISIL explicitly rejects the political divisions inherited from Sykes-Picot. At the same time, though, ISIL’s self-description as an Islamic state (*dawlah*), instead of merely organization, movement or army, is [important and controversial](#). Indeed, despite a rocky beginning, ISIL today in many ways [looks and acts like a state](#). In Mosul, according to [reports](#), ISIL enforced taxes on a variety of commercial activities, including telecommunications companies that had relay towers in ISIL-controlled zones. Those who refused to pay risked abduction or murder. In Syria’s Raqqa province ISIL imposed the [jizya \(poll tax\)](#), the same tax the prophet Muhammad placed on non-Muslim communities in return for protection.

In addition to taxation, ISIL has also asserted itself in two domains that have long been critical to successful state-making. First, it has [sought out alliances](#) with tribes on the Syrian and Iraqi sides of the Jazeera desert. Extending a territorial foothold from [Deir Ezzor in Syria to Fallujah in Iraq](#), ISIL has resuscitated demands made during the French mandate in Syria for an [autonomous, and perhaps even independent, Jazeera](#). Second, ISIL has become, in its own way, a [hydraulic state](#). After seizing control of Fallujah with the help of tribal allies, ISIL has used dams, canals and reservoirs as a [weapon](#), denying water to areas outside of its control and flooding areas to block the encircling Iraqi army. Yet ISIL’s progress has been hampered by its rivalry with the al-Nusra Front, al-Qaeda’s designated champion in Syria, and other Islamist factions, as well as by general antipathy from the Syrian opposition.

Farther north, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat, PYD), a Syrian affiliate of the Turkish PKK, unilaterally announced the enactment of a [Kurdish autonomous zone](#) near the Turkish and Iraqi borders. Like ISIL, PYD took steps to assume state-like administrative [functions](#), including subsidizing fuel and seed crops, restoring electricity and most importantly, deploying a militia that pushed back encroachment from Islamist rebels and essentially established a monopoly over force. The Kurds were among the main losers at the post-World War I negotiating table. Again, though, infighting more than external pressure hem in the effort to establish a broader Kurdish base, as other Syrian Kurdish factions and Iraq’s [Kurdish Democratic Party](#) oppose PYD.

The prospects for the territorial re-division of the Middle East and conclusive territorial rectification of Sykes-Picot appear slim. As has long been the case among the perennially [weak states of Africa](#), none of the relevant regional or extra-regional powers at this point have an interest in changing European-installed boundaries. But political boundaries are just the skeleton of Sykes-Picot and San Remo. At the levels of governance and political authority the colonial system has already been substantially gutted. The outstanding question has been what will emerge instead. In contrast to “real” states of questionable capacity, quasi-states represent possible answers to these questions, however miniscule in scale, amorphous in territory, or thuggish in rule. [Territorial change](#) and much less the outright [demise of a state](#) are rare. But they are not impossible – take the examples of Crimea, South Sudan, Eritrea, East Timor, and the former Yugoslavia. These changes almost always come about bloodily. Still, the option of territorial realignment appears improbable at the onset of violence. As violence drags on, though, even outlandish notions gain credibility. If and when realignment does come, quasi-states will offer important instruction for how to fashion political boundaries that more closely map to political aspirations.

Ariel I. Ahram (@ariel_ahram) is an assistant professor in Virginia Tech University's School of Public and International Affairs in Alexandria, Va. He is the author of [Proxy Warriors: The Rise and Fall of State Sponsored Militias](#) (Stanford University Press, 2011).

© The Washington Post Company