



Dr. Roby Barrett's *The Collapse of Iraq and Syria: The End of the Colonial Construct in the Greater Levant* is a timely, scholarly work that helps explain the chaos in the news from the region. A day does not go by without Iraq and Syria as well as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) being in the news. Most of the news coverage deals with atrocities, factionalism, civil war, and cultural/ethnic strife. The value of Dr. Barrett's monograph is his thorough delve into history to help explain this complicated story. It is a story of creating states with artificial borders that have been ruled with iron fists to keep a lid on fractured societies. What we are witnessing and what Barrett explains is the dissolution of borders and the collapse of central governments in Iraq and Syria. In fact, the author contends that Iraq and Syria no longer exist as nation-states. Their ultimate fate is yet to be seen. Regardless, this monograph provides the reader with a historical review of the Greater Levant (Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon) that helps explain the reality on the ground today.

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The Collapse of Iraq and Syria

Barrett

JOINT SPECIAL OPERATIONS UNIVERSITY



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Roby C. Barrett, Ph.D.

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*The Collapse of Iraq and
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Greater Levant*

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On the cover.

Front: An Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant fighter waves an Islamic State flag in the streets of Raqqa, Syria. Source: Newscom

Back: Damascus, Syria. Source: Shutterstock

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Foreword

Dr. Roby Barrett's *The Collapse of Iraq and Syria: The End of the Colonial Construct in the Greater Levant* is a timely, scholarly work that helps explain the chaos in the news from the region. A day does not go by without Iraq and Syria as well as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) being in the news. Most of the news coverage deals with atrocities, factionalism, civil war, and cultural/ethnic strife. The value of Dr. Barrett's monograph is his thorough delve into history to help explain this complicated story. It is a story of creating states with artificial borders that have been ruled with iron fists to keep a lid on fractured societies. As Dr. Barrett posits, "The so-called nation-states were administrative mirages imposed on the myriad of smaller entities, political groupings, and conflicting sectarian and ethnic splinter groups held together by force." What we are witnessing and what Barrett explains is the dissolution of borders and the collapse of central governments in Iraq and Syria. In fact, the author contends that Iraq and Syria no longer exist as nation-states. Their ultimate fate is yet to be seen. Regardless, this monograph provides the reader with a historical review of the Greater Levant (Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon) that helps explain the reality on the ground today.

Barrett begins his analysis in the pre-1914 Greater Levant and the role that it played in the political structure of the broader Middle East region. He also focuses on the First World War, the collapse of the Ottoman system in the Greater Levant, and the interwar years of the League of Nations' mandates. Barrett contends that the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 still serves as the basis for current policies. The secret agreement between France and the United Kingdom was designed as a deal to divide the Arab territories of the former Ottoman Empire into spheres of influence. The arbitrarily drawn boundaries accommodated the Western powers and disregarded political, economic, social, cultural, religious, and sectarian realities on the ground. These artificial borders and colonially-created states have been kept in check by authoritarianism. The post-World War II years saw the rise of Arab Nationalism and the Ba'th Party as well as the rise of dictators Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Hafez al-Assad in Syria. Barrett's walk through history ends with Iraq and Syria's current predicament. Both are beset by collapsing

central governments and loss of state control of their borders. The division of Iraq and Syria into ethnic regions is taking place on the ground even though both are still treated as states. Add the ISIS threat to the mix and you get a “simmering brew of local and regional ethnic, sectarian, and social rivalries with various parts falling under the sway of autocratic rulers who, through patronage and fear, will establish an equilibrium that brings some order to the chaos.”

This monograph has value to the military and policy world. It is not only a good explanation of the history of the Greater Levant, but its greatest value is its succinctness in analyzing and presenting the current chaotic regional situation. It should be of interest to Special Operations Forces, strategists, planners, and leaders interested in the future of U.S. policy in the region, especially in dealing with ISIS.

Kenneth H. Poole, Ed.D.
Director, Center for Special Operations Studies and Research

About the Author

Dr. Roby C. Barrett is a senior fellow with the Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) Center for Special Operations Studies and Research. He has over 35 years of government, business, and academic experience in the Middle East and Africa. He is the president of a consulting firm specializing in technology applications and systems for national defense and security and has experience in space systems, nuclear issues, police and security systems, command and control, technology development, and weapons acquisition as related to U.S. and allied governments. His current research focus is strategic security issues in the Persian/Arabian Gulf, including Islam, Iran, the Arabian Peninsula, and the collapse of state structure in the Levant. He is a former Foreign Service officer in the Middle East with postings in Tunisia, Yemen, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the Arabian Gulf.



As a founder of the National History Center within the American Historical Association, Dr. Barrett specializes in the application of broad historical and conceptual paradigms to issues of ongoing political and military conflict and the projection of future trends. He is an area expert and fellow at the Middle East Institute in Washington, D.C. He provides domestic and international media commentary on a range of issues from the Palestinian territories to nuclear proliferation and the challenges of Russian policy in the Middle East and North Africa.

Dr. Barrett is the senior advisor to the board of directors of the Bilateral Arab-U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the lead panelist on Middle East and South Asian Policy, and participates in the Congressional Fellowship Program, American Political Science Association, and Johns Hopkins School for Advanced International Studies. He has been a featured panelist for the German Council on Foreign Relations on Middle East and Gulf Affairs. Dr. Barrett was an Eisenhower-Roberts fellow of the Eisenhower Institute in Washington D.C., a Rotary International fellow at the Russian and East European Institute at the University of Munich, and a Scottish Rite Research

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Dr. Barrett’s JSOU Press publications include: *The Arabian Gulf and Security Policy: The Past as Present, the Present as Future* (2009); *Yemen: A Different Political Paradigm in Context* (2011); *Oman: The Present in the Context of a Fractured Past* (2012); *Iran: Illusion, Reality and Interests* (2012); *Islam: Ideology and Conflict* (2014); and *Saudi Arabia: Modernity, Stability, and the Twenty-First Century Monarchy* (2015). He has published other books, chapters and articles in a number of publications. His commentary has also appeared in the U.S., Latin American, European, and Middle East Press, including Fox, CBS, ABC, National Public Radio, BBC World Service, Gulf News and more.

Dr. Barrett was a guest speaker at the Bahrain MOI Gulf Security Forum (2008), the SOF Conference at the opening of the King Abdullah Special Operations Training Center (Amman 2009), and the Bahrain SOF Conference (2010). Through deployment briefings and other forums, Dr. Barrett supported numerous military units including Army Special Forces and Naval Special Warfare. He was a visiting professor at the Royal Saudi Arabian Command and Staff School and also provides support to the Department of Defense, Department of State, and intelligence community.

Introduction

Since 1945, the United States' involvement in the political stability of the historical Levant and Mesopotamia—Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Palestine, and Iraq—has steadily increased. Because of the complexity, nomenclature describing the region can be confusing; as a result, this paper uses the term “Greater Levant” to describe Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, in their contemporary condition. The term Greater Levant is intended to drive home both a political and historical point: Syria and Iraq no longer exist as nation-states or even as imposed authoritarian administrative structures like the dictatorships of Saddam Hussein and Hafiz al-Assad. The so-called nation-states were administrative mirages imposed on the myriad of smaller entities, political groupings, and conflicting sectarian and ethnic splinter groups held together by force. They were not nation-states in the classical Western sense, but rather states arbitrarily created and delineated by European colonial powers and later dominated by a particular sectarian group—ultimately the Saddamist and Alawite dictatorships.

The issues of this region never resolve themselves but follow a cyclical pattern of tension, crisis, war, and back again. Little good has ever come from direct U.S. participation, particularly that involving a large military presence. Interventions have alienated far more people than they have helped, they have cost too much in lives and treasure, they have allowed the various groups of the region to blame outsiders rather than themselves for the problems they face, and the interventions never achieve their stated goals. Nevertheless, the U.S. has critical interests in the region that require the minimum effort necessary to protect those interests. With some exceptions, terrorism is a security issue to be dealt with by intelligence, special operations, and police, and does not constitute a strategic threat.¹

Historically, with regard to U.S. involvement, most significant accomplishments have come when acting as a semi-detached broker for negotiation and compromise, through proxy wars, or by using covert action at times, and always by exercising restraint and allowing the particular crisis of the moment to burn out, if it will. The region is so fractured that the centrifugal forces feeding the chaos usually are impossible for anyone to manage. The coming struggle between and within the radical jihadi movements in the

region will provide an example.² Large-scale military incursions have not fared well and have usually ended up with a problematic withdrawal—Lebanon 1958, Lebanon 1982, and Iraq 2003.³

In the Greater Levant, hysteria or euphoria about any given situation is almost certainly misguided because the situation is only going to change. Each defeat or accomplishment merely awaits the next round of the struggle because there is no ‘solution.’ Expectations have to be adjusted to one of containing chaos, protecting clear U.S. interests, and doing it with a minimum involvement—winning is most likely not an option. The more the West can do with the smallest footprint, the better. Persisting over the long haul is a requirement and this can only be done if the price of persistence is politically acceptable to the American body politic. That, of course, means that these conflicts belong overwhelmingly to the intelligence services, diplomatic corps, and Special Operations Forces (SOF).

In addition, achieving this equilibrium or balance in policy requires a change in perspectives on what actually constitutes the region. In an interview with Politico in 2014, John Brennan, director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), stated,

You’ve got to go back to Sykes-Picot, which created the modern Middle East. We’re still dealing with the aftermath of lines drawn in the sands. It’s taken a 100 years of sectarian turmoil to control for a good period of time, [that] ultimately broke through to get us to this point.⁴

In reality, it is not the last 20 years or even 100 years, but an even deeper, broader view that explains the problems in terms of a baseline reality that governs the present and will also determine to a large extent the future. Sykes-Picot certainly created the basis for the artificial states of Syria and Iraq, but the current situation reflects a far deeper, more complex reality to be explored.

The purpose of this study is to introduce that deeper, more complex reality. This discussion deals primarily with the former states of Iraq and Syria, but will include to a limited degree Lebanon—an extension of Syrian issues. Once again, the term Greater Levant as used in the paper refers to the area extending from Beirut to Basra and Latakia to Sulaymaniyah in the arc covering most of the historical Fertile Crescent.

From British indirect rule in Iraq to the creation of Syria and Lebanon by the French and the emergence of Israel and Hashemite Jordan, U.S. policy has pursued stability and political accommodation in the region based on the premise that all of these entities that emerged in the aftermath of World War II were in fact nation-states. These policies assumed that arbitrary lines drawn on a map by Western colonial powers in the aftermath of the First World War, and then the mandate system, reflected the ‘national’ aspirations of the peoples that fell within those lines. In other words, arbitrary boundary delineations drawn by and for the benefit of the Western imperial powers reflected the reality of the situation on the ground. Now in the second decade of the 21st century, the West—much to its consternation and confusion—finds itself confronted by the objective fact that these assumptions are at the very least no longer valid and more likely never reflected the political, economic, and social reality of the region.

In short, 20th century nationalists influenced by Western ideologies and theories concluded that the region had transcended the heterogeneous sectarian and social fabric of the region and they would form a secular state, i.e., an “imagined community” as Benedict Anderson would describe it, from Sinai to Basra and the Gulf. Borrowing from Ernest Gellner’s ideas, “Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness; it invents nations where they do not exist.” Across the Middle East nationalists were attempting to invent a nation that had never existed because, as Anderson puts it, “in the modern world, everyone can, should, will ‘have’ a nationality.”⁵ Having been subjected to Western power and imperial expansion, Arab and Turkish thinkers concluded they had to adopt Western concepts of patria and patriotism. In 1834, Rifa Rafi al-Tahtawi began to expound on the topic of *watan*, or nation, as it applied to the Arab world. Intellectuals in the region began to argue that ‘patriotism’ was the means by which the gap between the Middle East and Western powers could be overcome. This was attacked by traditionalists who saw it as a betrayal of Islam to the West. The Western concept was countered in the late 19th century by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh as a heretical and unnecessary assault on Islamic culture. In other words, the region could modernize without Westernizing. They blamed Turkish domination and corruption and pushed for a revival of Islam, Arabism, and Arab culture as the vehicle for restoration. This was more pan-Islamic than Arab nationalism. It was the defeat of Ottoman modernism in the First World War that left the Ottomanized elites of the Levant

and Mesopotamia no ideological option but to adopt Arabism and, later in the 20th century, Arab nationalism as the vehicle for political competition within the region and against Western intervention. The idea of nationalism or *patria* is a borrowed concept—even a foreign concept to the Middle East. It resulted from the Middle Eastern crisis brought about by the apparent success of European intervention in the 19th century and it accelerated with the defeat of the Ottomans by the Western powers in 1918. As Choueiri points out, it did not really exist as a dominant political movement until after World War II, and it fundamentally burned itself out by the 1980s.⁶

Its replacement claiming to be pan-Islamic is in fact an ethno-centric, Islamic sectarianism that has experienced some success in limited environments where pre-existing political, economic, and social ties can be exploited—the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is an example. ISIS has pan-Islamic appeal and thus constitutes a global security problem, but just like Communism or pan-Arab socialism, its ability to control or administer territory is limited by preexisting geographic, social, and cultural strictures. In the case of ISIS today, it is directly related to the alienation of the Sunni communities from the Shi'a and Alawite Iranian-sponsored political centers in Baghdad and Damascus—the subject of this monograph.

The Arab nationalist movements of the immediate post-World War I period, particularly the Syrian Socialist National Party (SSNP), used the term Greater Syria, Natural Syria, or *Bilad al-Sham*, to describe the lands from what is now Israel and Palestine to the Basra in Iraq. It is this regional mosaic that provides the backdrop for almost seven decades of frustrated U.S. policies and by the two most recent U.S. administrations inability to stabilize or even extract the U.S. from the quicksand of the Greater Levantine labyrinth. Beginning with the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and well-intentioned belief that the elimination of Saddam Hussein and the Ba'athist regime in Baghdad would bring increased stability and Western style democracy to the region, policymakers watched in consternation as the situation in Iraq spiraled out of control.

More than any other single event, the collapse of Sunnite Iraq created fissures that fractured the tenuous stability of Syria, leaving the colonial creations of Iraq and Syria in ruins. As the title suggests, the colonial structures created by the French, British, and Russians across the Fertile Crescent no longer exist; instead, the actual political structure of the region has reverted back to a pre-20th century era without the imperial control exercised by



Figure 1. Map of Iraq. Source: CIA World

Ottoman Turkey. In effect, the political structure of the region has moved to a situation increasingly in line with the fractured historical, economic, and social reality on the ground.

Steeped in the pedagogy of the nation-state, the foreign policy establishment finds itself stymied in its attempts to stabilize, or to borrow an old term, “Vietnamization,” and escape the situation. In fact, it is difficult for Western policymakers to even conceptualize what actually exists in the region. These policymakers are typically blind to the political, economic, and social co-dependency and conflicted inseparability of Iraq and Syria, and to the fact that the Saddamist regime in Iraq and the Assad regime in Syria were the way they were for a reason. Western and indigenous forces shattered the colonial construct of 1919 and with it any semblance of control from Baghdad and Damascus, leaving a political and security vacuum to be filled by others—ISIS, Shiite militias, Sunni jihadists, and sectarian ‘rump’ states in Baghdad and Damascus.

It was a predictable outcome with which policymakers are woefully ill prepared to deal with because it requires an understanding of the Levantine past, colonial policy, the rise of a Westernized elite, and Western concepts and constructs overlaying a deeply fractured and traditional culture, but not altering it. The artificial nation-states of Iraq and Syria are gone—like Humpty Dumpty, they cannot be put back together again. The new reality—best case—is that of Lebanon after the bloodletting of the civil war from 1975-1991, where the interests and autonomy of the various sectarian and ethnics groups will have to be recognized. The West will have to learn to operate effectively in that complex environment, but before any of that can occur, a broad conceptual understanding of what the Greater Levant is and how the current situation has emerged is an absolute necessity. This study approaches that issue in five chapters and the conclusion.

Chapter one introduces the pre-1914 Greater Levant and the role that it played in the political structure of the broader Middle East region. The region served as a land bridge, borderland, and battleground between the Mediterranean or Western centers of political power and those of Persia and the East. The ebb and flow of war and commerce deposited a multiplicity of ethnic and cultural traditions that have for millennia defied integration and found accommodation only through the application of autocratic political power. This chapter provides a snapshot of the political, economic, and social structure of the Greater Levant during the Byzantine, the early Islamic, and the Ottoman period as a backdrop to the rise of Arab nationalist thought and movements in the 19th century and the rise of elites wedded to Western ideas of nation-states and secular political identity, as well as the Islamic reaction to those ideas and movements. It is the foundational discussion of the challenges posed by the West, the modernization of heterogeneous traditional cultures resistant to change, and a perspective on the pre-World War I past, all of which provide an important window on the present and the future.

Chapter two focuses on the First World War, the collapse of the Ottoman system in the Greater Levant, and the interwar years of the League of Nations' mandates. For roughly 400 years, the Ottomans provided an overarching political structure that generally provided order and stability in the Greater Levant. There were periodic problems, but the Ottoman umbrella based on a Sunni elite established system in which most of the various ethnic and confessional groups had an officially recognized position and sense of security. The pressures of the global war brought a series of accommodations

involving the Middle East including the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement that not only undermined the aspirations of the Hashemites in the Greater Levant but also resulted in a mandate system that fractured the political structure of the region. It created the basis for nation-states with boundaries arbitrarily drawn to accommodate the ambitions of the Western powers and to show some gain from the calamitous financial and human costs of the war. The war and the treaties of Paris 1919 and San Remo 1920 fractured the controlling imperial political structure of the region and opened the door to a century of instability first as the Western powers and then Westernized Arab elites attempted to impose nation-state structures on the Greater Levant. David Fromkin's description of World War I as *A Peace to End All Peace* squarely hits the mark in discussing the Greater Levant.

Between 1920 and 1945, despite British promises made to the Hashemite family of Mecca concerning a united Arab state and the declaration by Feisal bin Hussein that he was King of Arabs and Damascus was his capital, the British stood aside and allowed the French to depose Feisal and use the League of Nations mandate system to impose a colonial regime on Syria. In Sunni-dominated Syria, the French system increasingly relied on pliable Sunni politicians and on minorities—Alawite, Christian, Shi'a, and Druze—to support its rule.⁷ This would have long-term consequences and contribute significantly to the ongoing conflict of today.

In combining the separate and distinctly different Ottoman provinces of Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul, the British precipitated a revolt and then narrowly avoided a mass uprising by creating a monarchy under Feisal bin Hussein, the former King of Arabs now relieved of his title by the French, in which the British established indirect rule through the Hashemites and the Sunni elite in a new state called Iraq. The British understood that for 350 years the Sunni elites under Ottoman administration had dominated Baghdad and Mosul and formed the principal support for Ottoman rule in Basra. By creating a Hashemite monarchy, the British believed that at minimal cost they had avoided a prolonged revolt and created a controllable substitute for the now defunct Ottoman system. Focusing on the educated and often Westernized urban elites,

... both the British and the French created systems in which the ruling elites in the now divided Greater Levant were minorities relative to their respective territories.

Chapter three discusses the period from 1945 to 1971, the rise of Arab Nationalism and the Ba'th Party and struggle for stability. Until 1958, the British approach to Iraq left a more stable political structure despite multiple coups. In Iraq, the Sunni-dominated military provided a cohesive national institution through which the Sunni elite maintained power. The military would remain the arbiter of power through the rise of the Ba'th Party in 1968. In Syria, the French had bequeathed a system that was far more fragile. First, they had created a state in Lebanon dominated by the minority Christians allied with the Sunnis. However, the Syrian system itself was deeply flawed. Beginning in 1949, there were six major coups in Syria and government changes too numerous to list. In 1958, Syrian nationalists turned to unification with Nasserist Egypt in order to prevent the disintegration of the state. Nasser ruled Syria for three years (1958-1961) before the Egyptians were driven from Damascus by the revolt of the Syrian military. Both Syria and Iraq then witnessed the steady growth of authoritarianism as the states attempted to cope with their fractious societies.

Chapter four first discusses the rise of the dictators and then examines the collapse of the state structure as an outgrowth of external and internal pressures. Between 1968 and 1971, the Ba'th Party succeeded in coming to power in both Iraq and Syria. After coming to power, both were subverted by Hafez al-Assad and Saddam Hussein al-Tikriti and transformed into a tool of the personal dictatorships. This chapter will discuss the 'inverted' similarities between the structure and rationalizations for the two dictatorships and their focus on secular rule. It would be the Ba'thist unification between Iraq and Syria and the Iran-Iraq War that would actually provide the catalyst for the visceral hostility between Baghdad and Damascus. Due to foreign policy miscalculations in Baghdad and the general weakness and corruption in the Syrian economy, both regimes would struggle into the 21st century. This path led to the string of events that brought the destruction of Saddamist Iraq, an event that ultimately created a significant part of the impetus for the collapse of Assad's Syria.

Chapter five discusses the somewhat inadvertent, but perhaps inevitable, destruction of Iraq and how the sectarian and ethnic political division contributed to the later collapse in Syria. It also discusses the objective given that since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Greater Levant has careened from instability to autocracy to dictatorship to chaos. The Arab Republics and their promise of secular stability and security no longer exist. They have

been replaced by a crude canton system based on ethnicity and confessional status in which various radical Islamic groups ruthlessly vie for power and control. This chapter will also analyze the inability of the West to face the reality that traditional state concepts no longer apply. The solution to the chaos cannot be found in regime change in Syria (although that might help) or support for the Shi'a sectarian government in Baghdad. The old colonial paradigm of artificial states has been replaced by a new structure that reflects a time that predates the Ottoman's imperial control. Iraq and Syria no longer exist.

Finally, the conclusion focuses on a strategic as opposed to a tactical response to the current chaos in the region. It discusses the reality of Sunni alienation from the Shi'a-dominated regimes in Baghdad and Damascus fueled by the scorched earth policies of the Assad regime and the lack of support for the Sunni militias from Baghdad. What would a strategic policy look like? There is already a *de facto* partition of the Greater Levant into a minority enclave still controlled by the Assad regime in Syria, the increasingly independent Kurdish regions, the emergence of a Sunnistan now dominated by ISIS, and a Shi'a rump state from Baghdad to Basra. While an overall regional policy is critical, it must be integrated into specific policies that recognize that Iraq and Syria no longer exist. Western, and more pointedly American, perspective must evolve to a broader, more holistic view of the Greater Levant if there are to be effective policies to contain and to mitigate the current chaos and instability. While no comprehensive solution to the problems of the region are feasible, a more strategic view would allow the West to better understand the context and to weigh the likely consequences of incremental, tactical actions aimed at restoring an equilibrium that will begin to restore order.

1. The Pre-1914 Order in the Greater Levant

Since ancient times, the political, economic, and even social configuration of the Levant has been remarkably consistent; political entities that have existed in the arc from Sinai to Basra have either been small states aligned with major powers or have been part of a larger imperial political structure. Attempts to form and maintain independent states in the region have fallen prey to two major problems. First, the heterogeneous nature of the Levantine political, ethnic, and confessional landscape has consistently undermined political cohesion. Second, pressure from larger, more powerful empires—in pre-modern times, Egypt, Turkey, Rome, or Persia—has made the maintenance of any semblance of autonomy dependent on an alliance. These alliances have always faltered at some point resulting in the Levantine political power being subsumed into a larger imperial structure. The Levant was a path and battleground between larger competing global or regional powers. This consistent theme is lost on contemporary policymakers because of a myopic view that something has changed about the region in the 21st century—it has not.

This chapter provides a snapshot into the past that provides glimpses or, in some cases, mirror images of the contemporary Levant. To even begin the process of thinking about the current crisis and chaos in the region requires a broader, deeper understanding of the Levantine context that repeatedly imposes itself on those that attempt to shape or control the region. This chapter will touch on the pre-Islamic period because it provides a solid backdrop to the argument that ideologies and empires may change, but the fundamental contours of political and social structure do not. It then looks at the earlier Islamic period—the Umayyad and Abbasid empires—to paraphrase Steven Humphrey: “when Damascus and Baghdad ruled the world.” Finally, it examines the Ottoman Empire and its collapse in face of Western intervention and the emergence of Arab nationalism.

The Ancient Empires

In the Middle East, ancient empires continue to resonate in the modern era—the past is very much a part of the present. In the case of Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq—the Greater Levant—political conceptualizations and ambitions in the 20th century were tied to the contemporary perceptions of ancient empires. Butrus al-Bustani's 'Natural Syria' geographically corresponded roughly to the neo-Assyrian Empire (911 and 609 BCE) that ruled an empire extending from the Tigris-Euphrates River valley in Mesopotamia in an arch that encompassed Syria and the Mediterranean coast. With the exception of Egypt, it roughly encompassed the area that SSNP, as well as others, described as Greater Syria. It is a geographical idea of nationhood.⁸ As Daniel Pipes puts it,

Historically, the name Syria refers to a region far larger than the one presently contained by the state called Syria ... Though universally recognized for more than two thousand years as a cohesive region, Syria is not a polity. It never acquired political form as a single state ... Its residents historically did not consider themselves members of a Syrian nation.⁹

Syrian and later Iraqi nationalists' views of what they saw as the legitimate Greater Syrian state drove their conceptions of its boundaries. These conceptions of nationality and the geographic Syria were to a significant extent Western creations of the 19th century. For organizations like the SSNP and other groups, some Syrian and some Iraqi, Greater Syria encompassed the Levant and Mesopotamia. The most interesting position, and perhaps the most significant of the SSNP, was that geographic boundaries were the natural delineators of what they perceived as the Greater Syrian state, not ethnicity or confessional allegiances but geography. In fact, political community under the ancient empires was far more fractured in reality than their admirers gave them credit for being. They struggled constantly to maintain political cohesion in the face of a multiplicity of ethnic, tribal, and religious groups as well as external competitors. By the early 7th century BCE, the empire had collapsed, done in by a combination of internal and external enemies.

After the Assyrian collapse, a succession of conquests and rulers (including the ancient Persian empires to more local Mesopotamian dynasties to



Figure 2. Map of Syria. Source: CIA World

Alexander the Great, the Romans, the Parthians, and others) ruled the region. All of these empires had two things in common. First, when in control of the region or part of it, the more successful empires basically sought allegiance or at least quiescence to their rule in return for a level of non-interference in their affairs in the individual communities that reside there. In other words, local mores and traditions were in most cases largely left alone to develop and function with their own particular tradition as long as they did not threaten stability or security. For the most part, rulers sought an accommodation as the more practical approach that avoided the often calamitous costs of resistance, revolt, and re-conquest. This meant the heterogeneous nature of the region was fostered at every level—diversity under an umbrella of political authority.

Second, as the fortunes of the various empires ebbed and flowed, the region became a battlefield—a ‘march’ between imperial powers seeking to extend their control. This further reinforced the impetuosity toward diversity.

Populations were increasingly dependent on local rulers or notables to navigate the labyrinth of obstacles that accompanied these shifts in imperial fortunes. In addition, the wars brought shifts in populations that tended to add an even more complex social and cultural mix to the region. It also promoted ‘march lords’ whose loyalty often became an important part of imperial security as they formed a buffer between empires but a barrier against more local forces of instability. To the point, stability and security required an imperial or overarching structure that enforced a more or less reliable political and administrative construct; however, underneath that structure there existed a highly diverse heterogeneous society.

One of the better illustrations of how these developments affected a long-term conflict was the struggle for control between the Christian Byzantine Empire, including what is also referred to as the Eastern Roman Empire (330-1453 CE), and the Persian Zoroastrian Sassanian Empire (224-651 CE). It was a long-term struggle that ebbed and flowed for centuries. The battleground was what this monograph describes as the Greater Levant. At any given point, it might appear that one side or the other would win the contest. It was a very complex struggle, and it also required empires to protect their southern flanks from each other and from tribal raiders originating in Arabia using semi-independent tribal vassals. The Byzantines employed the Ghassanids, originally a Yemeni tribal grouping of Azd that migrated into the Levant, became Christianized and formed a tribal buffer covering the southern and eastern flanks of the Byzantine Empire. The Lakhmids were another Yemeni tribe that migrated into the edges of Mesopotamia and the Sassanian Empire; while at times problematic for the Sassanians, their rivalry with Ghassanids made them a buffer against Byzantium to the West and the Arabian tribes to the south.

Despite the utility of the tribes, the Byzantines and the Sassanians attempted to impose a level of control over both that undermined the symbiotic relationship. Although Christian, the Ghassanids belonged to a Jacobite sect that the Byzantine Church viewed as heretical—the resulting persecution opened fissures in that alliance. The Sassanians became increasingly concerned with the military and economic power accumulated by Lakhmids, and in the early 7th century, the Sassanians annexed the Lakhmid buffer state. Thus, in an attempt to extend control, both empires stepped over the line with their vassals in attempting to impose conformity. It proved fatal to one and severely damaged the other.

In the mid-7th century, the tribes of Arabia united by the message of the Prophet Muhammad launched themselves against both empires. With the alliances undermined by imperial policies, the Lakhmids found Muslim policies regarding Christian sects attractive, and the Ghassanids openly welcomed the opportunity to strike back at their Sassanian conquerors. The Lakhmids cooperation accelerated the collapse of Byzantine control in the Levant. In the case of the Sassanian Empire, whose capital at Ctesiphon near present day Baghdad was on the edge of the border region, after the Arab victory at Qadisiyah in 637, the capital fell to the army of Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab. Although there is a new overarching dominant ideology—Islam—the nature of politics and society in the Greater Levant is still the same heterogeneous, fractured, factionalized mix of religious, ethnic, and class groups.

Early Islamic Empires and the Greater Levant

Contrary to conventional wisdom, the key to the Islamic conquest was accommodation. Muslim administration overlaid that fractured social and cultural landscape and adapted—even with regard to confessional issues. Jews, Christians, and others were accorded a place, albeit an inferior one in Muslim societies. For early Muslim administrators, Christians and Jews had legal status and were ‘protected’ and the additional taxes that they paid as members of the *dhimmi* in the form of the *jizya* tax paid by non-Muslims was welcome revenue. The conquest did not provide a solution but rather a new venue for political, social, and economic differences and tribal rivalries. Within a decade of the conquest, factions had arisen among the Muslims themselves that added another overlay of competing groups in the Levant and Mesopotamia.

By 661, disaffected Kharijites who were erstwhile allies of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Fourth Caliph of Sunni Islam and the First Shi’a Imam, assassinated him. An open conflict had broken out between Ali’s followers—the Shi’a or Party of Ali and the Qurayshi followers of Mu’awiya ibn Abi Safran, the governor of Syria and founder of what would become the Umayyad Caliphate (661-750). In 680 at Karbala in Iraq, Umayyad forces killed Hussein ibn Ali, who had risen in revolt. Based in Damascus, the Umayyad dynasty would oversee the expansion of their Caliphate across North Africa to Spain and France and to India in the east. Over time, Umayyad policies with regard

to taxation and status within the Islamic community brought revolt and the spectacular collapse of the greatest Islamic empire in history.

In 750, the Abbasid revolt destroyed the Umayyad Caliphate using the disaffection of various groups, particularly the Shi'a and Khurasanis to the east. Under the 'black flags' of revolt, Abu Muslim, the military commander, led a revolt and defeated the Umayyad army on the Zab River and marched on Damascus. Opposition quickly collapsed and the Abbasid Caliphate under the new Caliph Abu al-Abbas al-Suffah emerged as the new Islamic empire in the Middle East. The Abbasids decided to move their capital from Damascus to a new city that they built on the Tigris River—Baghdad. The new empire faced immediate difficulties in controlling its far-flung territory, but initially competent leadership held it together. The empire reached its apex in the early 9th century under Caliph Harun al-Rashid following a decline in which large areas obtained autonomy and the caliph came under the control of various competing factions. The point is that from the very advent of Islam, the great Islamic empires faced a process of disintegration and revolt.

Under the Abbasid Caliphate and the various groups that controlled it—Buyid Shi'a, Seljuk Turk, or other groups—more centers of power emerged in the Greater Levant. In the 10th century, Shi'a Fatamid Caliphate emerged in Egypt and the Shi'a Qarmatians took Bahrain and threatened Baghdad, Mecca, and Medina with their raids. In the 11th century, the Christian crusaders arrived from Europe to take Jerusalem and establish a series of Christian states in the Levant. In the 12th century, in the Ayyubid Dynasty, under Salah-ad-Din, a Kurd, emerged from the mountains of Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, retook most of the Crusader states of the Levant, and conquered Egypt and Hejaz. A century later the Ayyubids were driven from Egypt by the Mamluks, a slave dynasty, and would collapse in the 1260s in face of the Mongol onslaught. The Mamluks survived and defeated the Mongol and eventually took over Syria, ruling its part of the Levant from Aleppo.

In the Greater Levant (Basra to Beirut), the first 900 years of Islamic rule did nothing to change the social and cultural situation. Underneath the umbrella of differing imperial administrations the fractious reality remained. When imperial control loosened or revolts threatened the imperial power, the latent chaos in the region often bubbled to the surface and threatened the security and stability of the region.

The Ottoman System

Volumes have been written on the Ottoman Empire (1299-1923). The task here is to explain the influence of the Ottoman system on the Levant and Mesopotamia. For the first two centuries, it was principally a European empire despite the Central Asian Turkic origins of its founders. It was only after the destruction of the Byzantine Empire and the capture of Constantinople in 1453 that Ottoman policy began to focus on the East (in fact, one could argue that it was driven by the success of the Safavid Persian Empire particularly under Shah Ismail I). Ismail ordered the forced conversion of Iran from a largely Sunni to a Jafari or Twelver Shi'a state.¹⁰

The Safavid state now served as both a political and an ideological rival to the Sunni Ottomans. When Shah Ismail began to support policies that threatened Ottoman borderlands and then attempted to influence the Ottoman succession, a serious clash became a matter of not if but when. Sultan Bayezid II (1481-1512) had pursued a policy of compromise and accommodation with Shah Ismail. That ended with Sultan Selim I (1512-1520). Selim, also known as the 'Grim,' lacked the personality to suffer Safavid provocations. In a quick campaign in 1512, Selim decisively defeated Ismail at Chaldiran and ultimately captured Tabriz. A century of conflict over which the empire would dominate Mesopotamia ensued. During the struggle with Selim, Ismail had formed an alliance with the Mamluks in Egypt and Syria and, in 1517, Selim moved against the Mamluks, capturing Syria and Cairo and making their clients in Mecca and Medina vassals. While control of Cairo was historically problematic, the Levant—Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine—were firmly in the Ottoman orbit and would remain so for the next 400 years. The Levant also became the base from which the Ottomans would complete the conquest of Mesopotamia. From 1533 to 1918, the Ottomans would be the principle power ruling from Baghdad. Despite two brief reoccupations of Baghdad by the Safavids, the Ottoman Empire finally prevailed in 1639, confirming their position with the Treaty of Zohab in which all of Mesopotamia was ceded to the Ottomans.

By the mid-17th century, the Ottomans were firmly in control of the Arab Middle East, including the Greater Levant. For the next 350 years they would administer it through provinces (*wilayat*) and districts (*sanjuks*). These divisions tended to reflect economic, ethnic, confessional, and tribal ties. Approximately 10 provinces comprised the Ottoman administrative

arch from Sinai to Basra. Among the provinces were Jerusalem, Damascus, Aleppo, Beirut, Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra, and each was subdivided further into districts that at least in theory gave added granularity to administration and rule. In addition to better control, the system allowed the Ottomans to establish a pecking order among the subjects. For example, the “Ottomans tolerated all Christian communities as separate but unequal.”¹¹ Within the Muslim structure, they also differentiated between Shi’a, Druze, Alawite, and Sunni.

The Alawites (or Nusayris), in particular, raised the ire of Sunni Muslims. This sect was based on the teachings of a 9th century religious figure, Abu

... “Ottomans tolerated all Christian communities as separate but unequal.”

Shu’ayb Muhammad ibn Nusayr. Nusayr declared himself the *bab* (literally gate to) or representative of the 11th Shi’a Imam, Hasan al-Askari (d. 873) and the 12th imam who occultated Muhammad al-Mahdi. Nusayri

introduced ‘innovations’ to the Jafari, or Twelver Shi’a religious practice. Many of the rites of the tenets of belief are secret and others better known are deeply heretical. Medieval Sunni theologians claimed that Alawites altered the Muslim *Shahada*, or statement of faith, from “There is no God but God and Muhammad is his Prophet,” to “there is no deity but Ali, no veil but Muhammad, and no *bab* but Salman.”¹² The Ottomans gave special attention to the persecution of the Alawites because they were the only Shi’a sect that survived in Anatolia itself.¹³ Here is the point—the secretiveness of the Alawites allowed Sunni and even Shi’a Muslims to attribute all manner of irregularities to their religious practice—true or not, and as a result, they were branded apostates and social and cultural outcasts.

The Ottoman Empire was based on the Sunni Hanafi School of law, or *madhhab*. As a result, the Alawites and Druze actually suffered more persecution from the authorities than the recognized Christian communities because they were viewed as Muslim apostates who refused to return to the Islamic fold. They were involved in periodic revolts against the Ottoman administration that always led to more repression. This is not to say that other groups did not revolt against them from time to time against Ottoman rule, but most often there was a particular driving incident or action on the part of a rival sect, clan, or administrator that caused it. The Ottoman administration held a superior position over local Sunni Arab notables and yet they were intertwined with them because linkage allowed for the

effective administration and rule in a particular area. The interests of the Ottomans and the Sunni Arabs were often similar if not identical. Both groups wielded authority and influence with the goal of maintaining security and order necessary for a stable economy and society.¹⁴ Despite periodic unrest, the Ottomans created an umbrella political administration in which local minority Emirs and notables were responsible for their communities and from which each could appeal to Ottoman authorities for a redress of grievances. It was a Sunni Muslim dominated system replete with safety valves for the administration of justice and it functioned reasonably well into the 20th century despite the declining fortunes of empire.

The Ottoman Empire reached its apogee in the mid-16th century and from there began a gradual decline. By the 18th century, the empire that had once been on the cusp of conquering Europe fell victim to two separate but complimentary pressures that accelerated this decline. The first was that its reach exceeded its grasp. The periphery of the empire began to break away from the core. Ottoman rule in North Africa, the Persian Gulf, Arabia, and its European provinces receded in the face of revolt, external pressures, and simple neglect. Egypt is one example of this.

By 1805, the Ottomans had lost complete control of this valuable province. Istanbul's control in Mamluk Egypt had always been problematic, but the French invasion of 1798 led by Napoleon Bonaparte proved its total undoing. The invasion, the French collapse, and its aftermath resulted in the rise of Muhammad Ali Pasha (1769-1849), the Albanian commander of the Ottoman Army in Egypt. Muhammad Ali was the Viceroy of the Ottoman Porte in Cairo, but he used Ottoman weakness and the chaos to gain control. He modernized Egypt by exterminating the Mamluk class and instituting reforms that attempted to place the army and administration on par with modern European standards. Militarily he demonstrated his prowess by destroying the First Saudi State (1744-1818) and placing the Hejaz and Yemen under his control, although he did it ostensibly in the name of the Porte. He then conquered Sudan. He also supported the Porte's adventures in Greece that resulted in the destruction of the Egyptian fleet. In return, Muhammad Ali demanded control of Syria, or what he called *Bilad al-Shams*. The Sultan in Istanbul refused, and in the First Turko-Egyptian War (1831-1833), he not only defeated the Ottomans, but he also occupied the Levant. Although he maintained he was loyal to the Sultan, his real goal was the removal of the Sultan and a peace where he became the power behind the throne in Istanbul.

Recognizing this, the European powers, and particularly Britain, threatened intervention and demanded that Muhammad Pasha compromise. The Viceroy desisted but tensions continued; from 1839-1841, a Second Turko-Egyptian war left Muhammad Ali and his son and military commander, Ibrahim Pasha, on the verge of not only annexing Syria and engineering the defection of the Ottoman Fleet, but also taking the Porte for themselves. At this point, the European powers led by Britain intervened. Muhammad Pasha was forced to accept hereditary rule for he and his family in Egypt and Sudan and withdraw from the Levant, Hejaz, and Crete. The weakness of Ottoman rule was apparent, but so was the determination of the British to prevent the disintegration of the empire. Britain had become the protector of the Ottoman Empire because it served their interests by blocking Russia from the Mediterranean and possibly the Persian Gulf.

The European position in what should have been an inter-Ottoman conflict between its Egyptian Viceroy and the Porte illustrates the second problem faced by Istanbul. The powerful nation-states of Europe that had emerged in the 17th century now had the ability in the 19th century to move almost at will to undermine the far-flung empire. While the British offered protection against Muhammad Ali, they could also make demands at will, and the weakened core of the empire could not offer effective resistance. In addition to problems in the East, the 19th century witnessed the continued disintegration of the empire and the steady loss of territory in the West until it retained only a very small area of its one time vast European holdings. In general, it was only in the Arab Middle East, particularly the Mesopotamian provinces and the Levant, where it continued to maintain direct control.¹⁵

This situation resulted in what is referred to as the Tanzimat Era 1839-1876. Understanding their vulnerability to the Europeans and their erstwhile vassals like Muhammad Ali, the Ottomans announced a series of reforms to modernize the empire. It affected everything from the military and bureaucracy to a secularization of education and the establishment of universities on French models. Perhaps most importantly, modernization at the Ottoman War College resulted in Western ideas permeating the military. In the Levant, following the Egyptian occupation, the restoration of Ottoman control was now tempered by the previous Egyptian administration and by the intervention of the Western powers on behalf of their clients. This created acute instability at times, including the civil war of 1860 pitting the Christians against Muslim and Druze. In this case, local animosities got out

of control resulting in a violent series of confrontations between sectarian groups. It underscored two things: First, to rule the Levant, the Ottomans needed tough administrators and enough military to suppress any disturbance; second, any ‘trifling disturbance’ could turn into a calamity given the simmering animosities between confessional and ethnic groups.¹⁶ It was a hard but realistic lesson for any would-be ruler of the region.

As Ottoman fortunes continued to slide, two conflicting approaches emerged to combat European encroachment. On one hand, Istanbul called on Muslims to rally in defense of their religion and the Caliphate. Caliph Abdulhamit II invited the Muslim revivalist thinker Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani to make his home in Istanbul. On the other hand, the religious proclamations and pan-Islamic message flew in the face of the ideas now exposed by a group of army officers, the Young Turks, who saw Islamic ideas as part of the problem. In 1908, the Young Turk Movement, based on a secret organization founded in 1889, fomented a revolution. They wanted a Turkish state and empire and rejected the inclusive imperial umbrella that had provided cohesion to the Arab provinces of the empire and particularly in the Levant and Mesopotamia.¹⁷ When the Great War exploded in 1914, the Ottoman state stood with one foot in the traditional Islamic world and the other committed to European-style modernization and flirting with ideas that would seal its fate.

... to rule the Levant, the Ottomans needed tough administrators and enough military to suppress any disturbance ...

Summary

From the ancient empires of the Middle East to the rise of the Islamic empires, the region stretching from Sinai to Basra contained such a diverse concentration of ethnic and religious groups that cohesion of necessity had to flow top down from whatever empire dominated the region at any given time. The smaller states that emerged in the region of necessity aligned with at least one of the competing imperial powers—be it the Neo-Assyrians, the Hittites, the Egyptians, the Romans, Parthians, or the Persians. The communities in the region maintained diversity and found themselves linked together through the imperial structure as opposed to developing any sort of real grassroots bond. Even the Neo-Assyrian Empire (911-612 BCE), which the SSNP would hold up as the justification for a modern state based on

geography encompassing the Greater Levant, was in reality an imperial structure dominated by a core centered on upper Mesopotamia and the old Assyrian Empire. In the ancient world, the impact of imperial policies on the Greater Levant served to enhance its heterogeneous and heterodox nature.

The advent of Islam seemed to promise an alternative course of development for the Levant and Mesopotamia. Islam is a creed that preaches not only the unity or oneness of God, but also the unity of the community of believers—*al-tawhid al-umma*. However, in short order, the Islamic community is rent by ethnic, political, and doctrinal differences that complicate the political and social fabric of the Levant and Mesopotamia—the Greater Levant. The greatest Muslim empire that ever existed—the Umayyad Caliphate—survived in Damascus for less than a century before its spectacular collapse. The Abbasid Empire that replaced it survived on paper from 750 to 1258, but in reality within 75 years of its founding, it had fragmented and real control had fallen into the hands of groups and clans that ruled behind the Caliph's throne. In fact, Islam would leave even more groups vying for power—Sunni, multiple Shi'a groups, Sufi, Druze, Alawite—and the divisions would open the door to invasion from Europe. At one point in the 11th century, Andalusia (Spain), Cairo, and Baghdad would simultaneously claim their own Caliphates. In the Greater Levant, Islam provided ideological legitimacy that accented the existing ethnic and social differences, adding a layer of confession differences to the existing Christian, Jewish, and other sectarian communities.

It would be the Ottomans and their 350-year-old dominance of the Levant and Mesopotamia that would create a political, economic, and social landscape that provided stability and security. The Ottomans established a clear hierarchy with Turkish administrators at the top and the majority Sunni Muslims as the dominant group. Christians and Jews had status as *dhimmi* but were clearly a 'tolerated' group and other Muslim groups and offshoots—Druze, Alawite, and Shi'a—faced the discrimination associated with the official position that viewed them as heretical sects. There were revolts and uprisings, but by and large, the system worked as a top-down imperial administration. It also served to codify and harden the differences between ethnic, sectarian, and social groups. This situation raised a critical question—What if the Ottoman system collapsed and the umbrella of Istanbul's administrative control was removed? What would replace it and how would it function? The coming of the First World War would turn those questions into a problematic reality.

2. The World Wars and the Mandate System

When the world stumbled blindly into World War I, the Levant and Mesopotamia were part of the Sunni-ruled Ottoman Empire. Sunni notables dominated the various Ottoman provinces of the region and other groups were subordinate to them and the Ottoman Turk overseers and governors. Patronage flowed through the Sunni elites to their families, clans, and tribes. For centuries, this patronage defined the political, economic, and social system—the pecking order of power. The other groups in the region, the Christians, Jews, other Islamic sects, and offshoot groups held subordinate positions at the munificence of the Ottoman rulers. The Ottomans, in return, controlled the region through the Sunni elites. In areas where Sunni elites did not exist, then control and stability were problematic; Basra province was an example. Just as the Young Turks under Enver Pasha had pushed for the Turkification of the empire, there were various Arab nationalist groups who were enthralled by the rise of European nationalism and the emergence of the Italian and German nation-states in the 19th century, but their ideas were limited to relatively small groups of Westernized elites.

When the war began, there was little or no forewarning of the changes that were to come—even the contradiction between the secularist policies of the Enver Pasha regime in Istanbul and the call for jihad against the Allied powers, and particularly the British, did little to alter the nature of political, economic, and social relations—at least in the early years. Of course, no one could foresee that the war would destroy four of the five empires that entered it—Germany, Russia, Austro-Hungary, and the Ottoman—and leave the fifth, Britain, struggling with massive debt and a disillusioned population. In the Levant and Mesopotamia, the aftermath would be even more dramatic as the 300-year old system of administration and security was removed overnight and a new system of rule was imposed on the region: the League of Nations mandate system. The League of Nations, established in 1919, constructed a system whereby the former colonies and holdings of the central powers—the German, Austro-Hungary, and Ottoman Empires—were administered by the Allied powers. There were classes of mandates, the Class A mandates being Syria, Palestine, and Mesopotamia—all former

territories of the Ottomans. In this particular case, the Middle Eastern mandates corresponded to the previously secret Sykes-Picot agreement between Britain and France. Britain received Mesopotamia (Iraq) and Palestine, and France received Syria. There were guidelines, but fundamentally Paris and London were left to administer these territories as they saw fit.

World War I in the Levant and Mesopotamia

In August 1914, World War I broke out and, in something of a diplomatic *coup d'état*, the Ottomans allied themselves with Germany. The British had tried to prevent it, but Enver Pasha outmaneuvered opponents in Istanbul and entered the war on the side of the Central Powers. He was enamored with the nationalist message of Germany's rise, and German military support for Turkey had garnered them significant influence in the Ottoman military. The British were now floundering around for a Middle East strategy and allies, but their efforts were somewhat at cross-purposes. The Arab Bureau, based in Cairo, supported an alliance with the Hashemites in the Hejaz while British India needed the support of Abd-al-Aziz ibn Abd-al-Rahman al-Saud (Ibn Saud), the leader of the Third Saudi State in Arabia. In the early years of the war, both potential allies vacillated. Fearing that the West might abandon them to the Turks if things went badly—a reasonable fear if the central powers won the war—the Arabs wanted to make certain that they were on the winning side.

In January 1915, the Saudis were the first to agree in principle to support the British. Ibn Saud decided that the British were committed to defeating the Ottomans and that this would give him the best opportunity of dealing with his Arabian Peninsula rivals at some later date. He told the British representative, Major Captain William Henry Irvine Shakespeare, "We Wahhabis hate the Turks only less than we hate the Persians for the infidel practices which they have imported into the true and pure faith revealed to us in the Koran."¹⁸ In December 1915, he signed the Anglo-Saudi Treaty. The treaty, which promised British support in return for a kind of Saudi neutrality in the Gulf, was perhaps more interesting because of what it did not include. It did not oblige Ibn Saud to actively support the British, and shrewdly, Ibn Saud resisted British attempts during the war to press him into precipitous offensive action against the al-Rashid and their Ottoman allies. He also hedged his bet assuring the Ottoman governor in Syria by explaining the British

agreement as a tactical arrangement to protect Ottoman interests in the Gulf and reiterating that he would abide by his agreements with the Porte.¹⁹

The negotiations with Hussein ibn Ali al-Hashimi (1854-1931), the Grand Sharif of Mecca, were even more vexing for the British. There was a large Ottoman garrison in Medina, and Sharif Hussein had even more reason to be cautious about his secret negotiations with the British. In addition, between 1914 and 1916, the war in general and particularly in the Middle East was not going well for the British. The Ottoman system in the Greater Levant was proving more durable than anyone had anticipated. The Sunni Arabs of Mesopotamia and the Levant had remained for the most part loyal to the Porte and had accounted well for themselves particularly in defensive battles.

The Gallipoli campaign began in April 1915 against Istanbul ended in a humiliating disaster for the Allies in January 1916. What the British believed would be a lightning Mesopotamian campaign aimed at Baghdad was a study in incompetence. Their 1916 attempt to capture Baghdad met with disaster. In April, the invasion force surrounded by Turkish troops at Kut al-Amara was forced to surrender—most of the prisoners either died in a death march north or in captivity. Given the stalemate on the Western Front and missteps in the Middle East, it was unclear whether the British would win. From the point of view of the Arabs in the Levant and Mesopotamia, the lines of starving British prisoners streaming north up the Tigris valley put an exclamation point on the risks of revolting against the Turks.

The Ottoman system in the Greater Levant was proving more durable than anyone had anticipated.

Then there was the other war—the bureaucratic war being fought between the Arab Bureau in Cairo supporting the Hashemites and the Viceroy of India and his advisors, including Sir Percy Cox and Major Shakespeare, who believed that the Saudis were a far stronger candidate to upend the Turks and their supporters in the region. Officials in India believed that between the *jihad* declared by the Ottomans in Istanbul against the British and the prickly demands by Sharif Hussein for a new Hashemite Caliphate, a Muslim movement could be created that would threaten the British position in India. Fromkin summed it up succinctly:

As the war progressed, British officials who ruled India increasingly came to believe that their most dangerous adversaries were

neither the Turks nor the Germans, but the British officials governing Egypt; for despite India's protests, British Cairo went ahead with the intrigues in Mecca.²⁰

Arguably, it was less British entreaties than the Hashemite declaration of an Arab Revolt against Turkish rule that broke the stalemate in Arabia. Concerned that his position would be compromised vis-à-vis the Hashemites, Ibn Saud agreed to support the British. He attended a coordinating conference in Kuwait; then he returned home and did nothing.²¹

The issue between the Hashemites and the Saudis went beyond what the outcome of the war would be on the Arabian Peninsula. Both parties saw the Levant and Mesopotamia as the real prize to be gained in the conflict. The Hashemites, the protectors of the Holy Places and the descendants of the Prophet, saw a new Arab Caliphate in which they would take their rightful places as rulers. Sharif Hussein saw the potential to realize his dream of ruling the entire Ottoman Arab world.²² With regard to the Greater Levant, the contrasts provide an interesting point of departure. None of the notables or other groups from Basra and Beirut was particularly enamored with being ruled by anybody from Arabia. From that point of view, they believed that the issue had been settled when the Umayyads moved the capital from the Hejaz to Damascus. For the sectarian minorities, the Westernized elements, and most of the merchant class, the Hashemites were far more acceptable than the Ibn Saud's Wahhabi Ikhwan.

On the other hand, some among the Saudis saw the Arabian Desert and the tribes as a natural extension of what they had already accomplished in the Nejd. If they could consolidate their control in Arabia, then the logical next steps would be an expansion into the Western Mesopotamian and Syrian desert providing substantial leverage on the urban centers to the north. The prospect unnerved many of the British experts in the Arab Bureau who feared the potential of the Wahhabi Ikhwan to destabilize Hejaz.²³ Ever shrewd and methodical, Ibn Saud focused on the task at hand—conquest of Arabia and consolidation of his regime there.

The crisis of 1916 sparked other agreements that were to have far-reaching consequences. If the agreements with the Hashemites and the Saudis had indicated a growing desperation on the part of the British to secure allies in the Middle East, the Sykes-Picot Agreement of May 1916 was an attempt to preserve unity among the Allies. The agreement delineated; assuming the



Figure 3. Faisal, son of Hussain of Mecca, with his delegates and advisors at the Versailles peace conference in 1919. Behind him are (left to right) his private secretary and fellow delegate Rustem Haidar, Brigadier General Nuri Said of Iraq, Captain Pisani of France; Colonel T. E. Lawrence “of Arabia,” and Hassan Kadri. Source: Corbis

defeat of the Ottomans, a division of control in the Levant and Mesopotamia split between France and Britain. The agreement also included a Russian occupation. After the Bolsheviks took power in Russia in 1917, they made the agreement public. The Hashemites, Sharif Hussein, and his son and leader of the “Arab Revolt,” Feisal, were already aware of the agreement having apparently been informed by T.E. Lawrence, their British advisor. Nevertheless, they privately expressed their indignation and made it clear that they wanted no less than for Feisal to be recognized as King of the Arabs. The Balfour declaration concerning a “Jewish homeland” would further confuse the issue in 1917. The bottom line is that all of these agreements resulted from wartime desperation. In particular, the British needed help, and they were willing to promise anyone anything to obtain it—London earned the title ‘perfidious Albion,’ or the concept that the British never did anything for their colonial possessions unless it was to London’s benefit.²⁴ The Ottomans, of course,

used this as propaganda in the Levant and Mesopotamia to demonstrate the intentions of the infidel Allies to occupy Muslim lands.

The last 18 months of the war, 1917 to 1918, set the stage for dramatic change in the entire region but nowhere more so than in the Greater Levant. In Mesopotamia, the British finally captured Baghdad in March 1917. From December 1917 to September 1918, the campaign of Field Marshall Edmund Allenby managed to capture Jerusalem and then Damascus. The remnants of the Ottoman army retreated to Turkey proper. On the same day that elements of Allenby's army entered Damascus, a group of Feisal's tribal irregulars arrived with T.E. Lawrence.

The Greater Levant under the Mandates 1919-1939

When Feisal arrived in Damascus and attempted to set up an administration, he inadvertently learned from the British that the French intended to assert their claims in Lebanon and Syria to the utmost under the terms of Sykes-Picot. Feisal's reaction was to declare the creation of "absolutely independent constitutional Arab government" in Syria. Moves on the part of Feisal's government to consolidate control over Lebanon brought immediate appeals from the Maronite to Paris asking for protection. Following the Paris Peace Conference in March 1920, Feisal found himself assailed by radical Arab nationalists for compromising with the Europeans, and by the French for associating with dangerous radicals—Arab nationalists who were a part of his government. Amid mounting tensions, a Syrian Congress met and declared independence and made Feisal its leader. Independence was a high risk option driven by the increasingly radical demands of the Arab nationalists—Feisal was obliged to either get on the train or be left behind. The French reacted predictably. They occupied Damascus and unseated Feisal ordering him to leave the county. They appointed a new administration in place of Feisal's government.²⁵

The reality of an Arab nationalist state in Syria threatened all the agreements between France and Britain during the war. The French were determined to have something to show for the losses they endured on the Western Front. In addition, they acquiesced to British demands in Palestine and what would become Iraq leaving the British unwilling to challenge them over Syria. Feisal had become expendable. The French immediately proceeded to upend the 400-year-old Ottoman order. Their unsophisticated grasp of

Arab nationalism equated it with Muslim fanaticism, which they believed was intent on “obstructing the spread of Western civilization and progress ... whose animating force was France.”²⁶

The administration adopted general characterizations for the various communities, which it applied without nuance. They openly preferred Christians and Jews to Muslims and the “mountain minorities”—the Druze, Alawite, Maronite, and Turcoman over the majority Sunni Arabs. French opposition to Arab nationalism also flowed from their Anglophobia; they believed the British encouraged it to undermine the French position in the region. Lastly, they saw Arab nationalism as a disease that could threaten their prized possessions in North Africa.²⁷ The mandate system also destroyed the traditional connections across the region with artificial boundaries and divisions divided by French and British zones.²⁸ With these perceptions in mind, the French established a system that encouraged “factional, sectarian and religious disintegrative forces” by dividing Syria in four separate states from 1925 to 1936—Lebanon, Syria, Jebel al-Alawi, and the Jebel al-Druze.²⁹

The situation and the ineptitude of French rule resulted in revolts and a chaotic political climate in which national institution formation was impossible. The French simply could not match the British ability to find leadership through which it could exercise indirect control, but the most problematic move by the French was in the army. For example, the French attempted to institute indirect rule by granting a constitution to Syria in 1936, but opposition in Paris and from the Syrian minorities, particularly the Alawites, prevented ratification. The Syrian army under French control focused on recruitment from the rural hinterland. It had unusually high percentages of Alawites; there were also Druze and poor rural Sunnis. The French, in effect, placed the levers of power in the country in hands of minorities who did see themselves as Syrian—the result would play out three decades later as an Alawite-dominated officer corps emerged in the 1960s.³⁰

The British demanded and received the mandates for Palestine and Mesopotamia. This study focuses on the latter. Three Ottoman provinces composed Mesopotamia: Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul. These provinces were strategically interconnected in several ways. The British wanted the Gulf to continue as a British ‘lake’ that required the occupation of Basra. There was likely oil in the north that required Mosul, and for the security of both, Baghdad needed to be occupied. These were three very disparate provinces.

Baghdad was the Sunni heartland; Mosul with its Kurdish and Turcoman population looked toward Anatolia; and Shi'a Basra was tied to the east with Iran.³¹

At the Iraqi Congress of 1920, the British faced demands similar to those voiced in Damascus. Nationalists wanted an independent state. For the British, problems had been mounting as Arab opposition grew to substituting British for Ottoman rule. There was talk of armed opposition to the British. Sunnis and Shi'a called for a united front against the British occupation. Then, a general Shi'a uprising in the south confronted the British with a difficult choice. The British army in Iraq numbered 60,000 men, of whom 56,000 were Indian and most of those Muslim. The implications were clear—the revolt in Iraq had the potential to spread and threaten British India. As the cost of administration escalated, so too did British interest in Arab 'independence.'³² This threat caused the British to abandon plans for direct rule through a protectorate and opt for indirect rule by making Feisal king of an independent Iraq.³³

While the British would deny it—because it was in their interests to do so—Iraq under indirect rule was just as integrated into the British colonial system as formal colonies.³⁴ Politically the British allied with the Sunni elites in Baghdad because they had been the enablers of Ottoman rule—ever

As the cost of administration escalated, so too did British interest in Arab 'independence.'

pragmatic, the British had no intention of inventing an elite class when they already had one. The British did this with the clear understanding that favoring what under Ottoman rule had been

a Sunni majority in the region was now a minority in the newly created Iraq had the potential to create a real problem across the Sunni-Shi'a divide.³⁵

Indirect rule afforded the British some protection in their quest to manage Iraqi affairs for their own benefit, but the real nature of the situation was not lost on the Iraqi Nationalists or the elites. Then came Iraqi demands for independence and sovereignty with a twist. As oil discoveries multiplied and production increased, the British faced mounting criticism for the paltry share of the wealth that found its way to Iraqi coffers. Despite the fact that Britain terminated the Iraq mandate in 1932, the Hashemite and Sunni notables put considerable pressure on London to end its informal role and influence.

King Feisal died in 1933 and King Ghazi bin Feisal al Hashimi (r. 1933-1939) came to the throne upon Feisal I's death. An ardent Arab nationalist, he challenged the British and their longtime Iraqi political ally, Nuri Sa'id, by supporting a coup and military rule. He called for the annexation of Kuwait, another British client state, and criticized the British for not recognizing Palestinian rights during the Palestine uprising of 1936-1939. The British accused him of being pro-Nazi, which usually just meant that he was anti-British. Ghazi died in an automobile accident in 1939 that many in Iraq believed was arranged by Nuri Sa'id and approved by the British. King Ghazi was succeeded by his minor son, Feisal II, under the regency of Feisal's brother, Abd-al-Ilah bin Ali al-Hashimi, an Anglophile and political ally of Nuri Sa'id. Thus, the British maintained the position and influence in Iraq, but not without some difficulties. Their influence and informal presence was a provocation to Iraqi nationalists.

Syria, Iraq, and World War II

By 1939, Syria and Iraq had become hotbeds of Arab nationalist sentiment, but it was in Iraq, with its status as an independent state, where these ideas flourished more or less openly. The Palestinian war against the British and Zionist immigration from 1936 to 1939 had made Iraq the meeting place for Syrian and Palestinian opposition leaders. The Iraq press openly supported their causes and castigated the French, British, and Zionists for their policies. The nationalists tended to be pro-German despite the fact that the German racial theory gave Arabs a low standing—the Arabs were pro-German because the Germans were the adversaries of the French and British, but contacts were limited and discreet.

When war came, the catastrophes of the first two years caused the British to turn to the Middle East as the only theater of conflict where the Axis powers could be confronted with some hope of success. In fact, the one strategic advantage that the British had was that Germany lacked sufficient petroleum resources. This made the continued dominance of the British in the Middle East strategically critical to survival.

The fall of France in 1940 made the situation in the Middle East more complicated. After some vacillation, the French High Commissioner in Syria, Gabriel Pauau, indicated that he would not continue the struggle against the Axis but that French Syria would follow the orders of the Vichy government.

Alarmed, the British made it clear that any aggressive action from Syria would be met with force. In Iraq, Arab nationalists saw German victories as their opportunity to get rid of the British. A cabal of nationalist officers called the Golden Square supported the rise of General Rashid Ali al-Gaylani, who replaced Nuri Sa'id as prime minister. Rashid Ali and his supporters attempted to block British use of its bases in Iraq. The Iraqi government contacted Berlin on a number of topics including assistance in removing the British presence.³⁶ For months, the British and Iraqis maneuvered in an attempt to gain concessions without provoking a revolt.

In April 1941, Rashid Ali led a coup that took over the Iraqi government and moved to oust the British from their bases. It hit the British at a critical moment just as German Field Marshall Erwin Rommel launched a counter-offensive in North Africa and the Germans invaded the Balkans and Greece in preparation for Operation Barbarossa. The British decided that the only solution was to overthrow the Rashid Ali regime. At the same time, Berlin decided to support the Iraqi coup. Despite German air support supplied through Vichy-controlled Syria and being greatly outnumbered, the British successfully countered the Rashid Ali cabal and convinced the Iraqi Army that sitting on the sidelines was preferable to being destroyed. The British then turned their attention to Syria and permanently removed the threat of Vichy cooperation with the Axis there.³⁷

Essentially, the French were finished in Syria. True, a French administration remained until the end of the war, but the British controlled the area militarily. When the French attempted to militarily reassert themselves in 1945, the British issued French troops an ultimatum and then confined them to their barracks. French hopes of having a preeminent position in Syria to match that of the British in Iraq were dashed.³⁸ The Arab nationals had won, but what exactly they had won would be another matter.

Summary

The First World War unhinged a political and administration system in the Greater Levant that had functioned adequately, if not at all times, well for the centuries. The nationalist fervor spread from Europe, bringing with it ideas about what the political structure of a modern state had to look like. By attempting to transform the polyglot empire into a Turkish empire, the Young Turks actually fomented awareness among the Arabs that accelerated

their own movement toward a national identity. Then Enver Pasha took the entire empire over the abyss into a war that would destroy not only the Ottoman Empire but also the system that had allowed the empire to function in the fractured political and social milieu of the Levant and Mesopotamia.

Then came the mandate system where divisions were imposed that intensified differences, particularly confessional communities.³⁹ In Syria, the system elevated the minorities to preferred status and ultimately laid the foundation for a minority-ruled Syria under the Assads at the expense of the majority Sunnis. The division of the Greater Levant into Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon also undermined the perception of the actual situation on the ground. In the Ottoman system, the Sunnis were a clear majority and the key to administration and stability. In the Mandate system, the majority in Syria was sublimated to the minorities, and the Sunnis of Iraq became a minority in the artificially imposed system. The inability for contemporary policymakers to grasp the upheaval of the post-1918 world continues to undermine policy perceptions today and, as we will see, it unleashed forces that will undermine the stability of the region for the foreseeable future.

3. The Rise of Arab Nationalism

The period 1945 to 1971 in the Greater Levant is without doubt the most interesting period of political experimentation and foment that the region has seen. Political forces long pent up by the Ottoman system or by the mandate system installed by the colonial powers were suddenly unleashed, creating levels of instability that would rival anything witnessed today. In fact, the political fervor of the 1950s and 1960s against the backdrop of the Cold War was unprecedented and the scope and nature of the changes of this fervor was frightening to the West. The colonial Western powers had destroyed the Ottoman system without much forethought as to the actual ramifications. They assumed that behind the cloak of the League of Nations' mandate system, they would continue their colonial rule. The British, who attempted to the greatest degree possible to co-opt the Ottoman structure in Iraq, did better than the French, who because of cultural prejudices and ignorance, turned Ottoman Syria on its head. However, both struggled to maintain their positions in the region—positions that were completely undone by World War II.

In 1955, Nabih Amin Faris, an American-educated professor of history at the American University of Beirut, and Muhammad Tawfik Husayn, a graduate student at the university, coauthored a book entitled *The Crescent in Crisis*. The authors explain that divisions within the Arab world were been artificially created and nurtured by external powers for their own benefit, also pointing out that Ottomans fostered a system that encouraged sectarian and ethnic division; the Western colonial powers merely adopted to one degree or another those practices. The goals laid out by the authors summarize the Arab nationalist ideals that dominated Arab nationalist thought in one form or another during the 1950s and 1960s—“[Liberate] the Arab fatherland from foreign rule and domination in order to effect eventually some kind of unity; [achieve] economic, social and cultural progress throughout its lands; and [deliver] Palestine from the Zionists.”⁴⁰ The authors cite the problems, the rivalries, and the discord, but they argue these problems result from foreign exploitation of ignorance and self-serving leaders and venal politicians. It is a manifesto for two decades of struggle in Syria and Iraq to

find cohesion and stability. The failure of secular Arab nationalism by 1970 is a harbinger of the new more extreme sectarian ideologies to come.

Syria and Pan-Arabism: The Struggle for Stability

At the time of independence, the idea of Syria as a state had only existed for less than a century. In fact, the idea of Syria as a secular nation-state was conceived and received most of its support from Lebanese Christians. For obvious reasons, secular nationalism did not appeal as much to the Muslim population because confessional differences were the basis for the Ottoman pecking order giving them a superior position in the society. Muslim opposition to the French during the mandate period also developed a vested interest in seeing the emergence of a state called Syria. None of this changed the fact that the political, economic, and social landscape was completely splintered and loyalty remained focused on family, clan, tribe, and sectarian affiliation first and foremost. “The extended patrilineal still remains the basis unit of all Syrian society and family loyalty still transcend all other ties.”⁴¹ Independence changed none of this.

As a result of the wars, and particularly the policies of the mandate, the Sunni notables who had once ruled were severely weakened as a class and failed in their attempts to pull together a stable regime between 1946 and 1949. Syria’s ineffective participation in the war against Zionism provided Arab nationalists of all stripes a cudgel with which to bludgeon the civilian regime. There were economic problems as well. The old landowning elites of Ottoman and mandate Syria were locked into a pre-industrial social and economic paradigm. After 1946, there was general agreement that industrialization had to take place and would require that the government take an active role in enabling it.⁴²

By 1949 the paralysis affecting the civilian government, and more specifically the rejection of the Syrian Parliament of the building of the Trans-Arabian Pipeline or ‘tapline,’ resulted in the first military coup in March 1949 by the Syrian Chief of Staff, Husni al-Zaim, organized by the fledgling CIA and supported by the SSNP. The U.S. wanted to find someone they “could work with.”⁴³ The Zaim coup triggered another coup in August by General Adib bin Hassan al-Shishakli and the SSNP who placed a civilian government back in charge. Then in December 1951, tiring of the civilian government, Shishakli staged yet a third coup. He remained in power as a

military dictator until 1954. Three coups occurred in 18 months because the new parliamentary system in Damascus simply could not function in the chaotic political landscape of Syria.⁴⁴ It stands as recognition on the part of Syrians and Westerners that without centralization of authority, nothing positive was going to happen in what was now a state called Syria.

In 1954, Shishakli was removed; he had overplayed his hand and alienated his supporters, but more importantly, he had failed to establish a stable system of government. After his removal, there were 'relatively free' elections in which new parties, including the Communists and Ba'thists, put up candidates. This was the first entry of the Ba'th into politics, and they won 22 percent of the vote. It polled second among political parties. Michael Aflaq, a Christian, and Saladin Bitar, a Sunni Muslim, founded the Arab Ba'th Movement in 1940.⁴⁵ The party focused on Arab unity and opposition to imperial rule by France and Britain. It borrowed some of its ideas from the Syrian Nationalist Party (SNP), which dated from the early 1930s and called for the unification of Syria including Lebanon and Iraq. In 1947, it merged with the Arab Ba'th Party to form the Arab Socialist Ba'th Party (Ba'th). First and foremost, it was a pan-Arab party focused on unity and opposed to foreign meddling in the Arab world.⁴⁶

The Ba'th and others on the left in Syria found their message and their position bolstered by events in Egypt and Jamal Abd-al-Nasser's rise to power. Nasser's popularity in Egypt, the evacuation of the British from the Canal Zone in 1954, and then the 'victory' over the imperialists and Zionists, Britain, France, and Israel in 1956, all coupled with his commitment to pan-Arab unity and the non-aligned movement, made him the hero of the hour in the Arab world and someone whom the Ba'th believed shared their vision of the Arab future.⁴⁷ Given Nasser's immense stature in the Arab World and the increasing problems that Syria faced in establishing a stable government and functioning economy, the idea of a union with Egypt appealed to many in the Ba'th Party. The Ba'th was also increasing in power. By 1956, no government could be formed in Damascus without Ba'thist support. In April 1956, the Ba'th National Command declared that unity between Egypt and Syria was their goal as a first step toward full Arab unification.⁴⁸ The Ba'th saw threats to Syria not only in the Western alliance system with Iraq and others, but also because the Communists in Syria had fallen out with the Ba'th and were making a power play of their own. The fragmentation of Syrian politics now threatened not only the Ba'th but the

cause of Arab unity and noninterference as well. To counter these threats, in 1957 the Ba'th began to push for full unification with Egypt, but it would not be the Ba'th that brought the arrangement to fruition; it was the Syrian army that pushed the agreement to conclusion.⁴⁹

Many had doubted that it would happen because Nasser demanded total control—the total subjugation of Syria institutions to Egyptian rule. In January 1958, to almost everyone's surprise, the Syrians agreed to unification on Nasser's terms. The scope of the proposal shocked Egyptian and Syrian politicians alike.⁵⁰ Skeptics pointed out the inherent conflicts between Egyptian and Syrian political practice. Syrian President Shukri al-Quwatli allegedly warned Nasser, "You have acquired a nation of politicians; fifty percent believe themselves to be national leaders, twenty-five percent to be prophets, and at least ten percent to be gods."⁵¹ The Egyptians believed that the problems of unification would be overcome by Syrian acquiescence to Nasser's demands for a centralized state following the Egyptian model and the dissolution of all political parties and by Nasser's stature as the leader of the pan-Arab movement.

In Syria, the Ba'th Party agreed, but expected to become Nasser's political partners and ideologically dominate in the new state.⁵² Michel Aflaq justified his agreement to disband the Ba'th Party, arguing, "We will be officially dissolved but we will be present in the new unified party, the National Union. Born of the Union of the two countries, this movement cannot be animated by principles other than those of the Ba'th."⁵³ Nasser had no intention of sharing power with the fractious Syrian politicians. Nevertheless, on 1 February 1958, from the balcony of the Abdin Palace, Nasser and Khalid al-Azm, the President of the Syrian Republic, proclaimed the creation of the United Arab Republic, announcing that Nasser would be the president of the new republic.

Fearing that a federal system was fundamentally unworkable, Nasser believed the 'ungovernable' Syrians could, in fact, be managed through centralized control, eliminating the possibility of collapse.⁵⁴ Demands for unification spread across the region, accompanied by widespread popular agitation for economic and political change through the union with Egypt and Syria and the removal of traditional leaders.⁵⁵ Nasser had become the "new Saladin."⁵⁶ Nasser presented the merger to the suspicious West as a move by Syrian Ba'thists to forestall a Communist coup. He argued that he had abolished all political parties to reduce instability and leftist influence



Figure 4. Jamal Abd-al-Nasser signs the unity pact with Syrian president Shukri al-Quwatli, forming the United Arab Republic, February 1958. Source: Newscom

and to heighten the focus on “Arab unity.”⁵⁷ It also gave the Egyptian president a leg-up on his rival, Nuri Pasha al-Sa’id, in Baghdad.

Thus, Nasser agreed to a union with Syria, a country in which “he had never set foot.”⁵⁸ In very short order the Syrians realized that Egyptian solutions applied to Syrian problems simply did not work. Egypt was more or less homogeneous and Syria was not. From the military to businessmen, Syrians quickly came to resent Egyptian control. In September 1961, Syrian army units revolted, took over the capital, and declared an end to the United Arab Republic (UAR). Nazim al-Kudsi, a National Party politician, became president with military backing, but his regime, like those before him, was fraught with instability.

During the Egyptian administration, the Ba’th, no longer a recognized party, lost prestige. Among the leadership, the lack of direction caused

groups within the Ba'th to look inward for solutions and support. In Egypt a group of Syrian officers sent there for advanced training were isolated and frustrated by the situation. This secretive group, composed of Muhammad 'Umran, Salah Jadid, Hafiz al-Assad, Abd-al-Karim Jundi, and Ahmad al-Mir, resented Aflaq and Bitar because of the dissolution of the Ba'th in 1958. All were members of minor sectarian groups. 'Umran, Jadid, and Assad were Alawi. Jundi and Mir were Ismaili or Sevener Shi'a. Secret during the Union period, the Military Committee emerged after 1961 to become the real power behind the Ba'th Party in Syria. The Alawites and other minorities had not only found a home in the military, but they had also found an ideology in the Ba'th that could be used to support their overall position in society and politics. The Ba'th was a secular party. Sectarian affiliation was suppressed—at least in theory. In Syria with its majority Sunni population and old-line traditional Sunni families, this approach to the sectarian gave the Alawite officers a significant theoretical argument against the discrimination that the sect had faced prior to the mandate, but in the future it provided a weapon to use against the majority claiming that they were seeking to divide the Arab nation by practicing sectarian politics.⁵⁹ The rise of the military Alawites had another effect; the Ba'th became increasingly dependent on the military to take and hold power and thus became increasingly reliant on the minorities in the military, and in particular the Alawites.

In March 1963, Al-Kudsi was overthrown in a Ba'thist coup. This coup came weeks after Ba'thist participation in a coup in Baghdad and was driven by the Iraqi branch of the Ba'th. Once again the political wing of the Ba'th under Michael Aflaq initiated a flurry of meetings on unity with Egypt and others. However, the real power lay in the hands of the military committee. After much maneuvering, the Ba'th military establishment emerged as the real power in Syria; Commander of the Air Force Hafiz al-Assad had been a key player in the Ba'th victory. The next two rulers of Syria (1963-1970), Amin al-Hafez and Nurredin al-Atassi, were the fronts behind which the real struggle for power occurred.

From 1963 to 1970, Druze, Ismaili, and Alawite officers removed and reassigned Sunni officers leaving the Syrian military in the hands of Ba'thist minority officers headed by Hafiz al-Assad. Assad survived the debacle of the 1967 war with Israel and, when he objected to supporting the Palestinians against King Hussein of Jordan in 1970, his rivals in the Ba'th tried to remove him. Assad was prepared and within days arrested his key opponents

and took control of the Syrian regime—it was the beginning of the Alawite dictatorship.⁶⁰ What the French had set in motion with their policies under the mandate that favored the minorities, particularly the Druze and the Alawite, had now come to full fruition.

Syria and its Sunni majority was now ruled by (from a Sunni point of view) the apostate Alawites and the Druze, Christian, and Ismaili allies. The reemergence of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Ikhwan, in Syria can be directly attributed to the rise of the Alawite-dominated Ba'th in 1963. The Ikhwan had fallen on hard times; the government became the clear enemy—a call that resonated with middle and lower class Sunnis of all stripes.⁶¹ The rise of the Ba'thist Alawites coupled with the defeat of secular Arab nationalism at the hands of the Israelis had another effect as well. It undermined the secularist message and, to many in the Sunni community, it fueled a return to pan-Islamic ideals and a new kind of the religious fervor.

Iraq from the Rise of the Ba'th to Dictatorship

Having narrowly avoided a disaster in the form of the 1941 Rashid Ali al-Gaylani revolt in Iraq, the British carefully managed their post-war relationship with Iraq. The Iraqi Petroleum Company had become even more important to cash-strapped Britain after the war, and London had no intention of endangering its position there. The Iraqis themselves, including British clients, often had other ideas.

The Hashemites in Iraq were the direct descendants of Feisal I who had ruled from Damascus as King of the Arabs. They and their political supporters continued to believe that unification with Greater Syria, meaning Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine, was a goal to be pursued. Of course, they had a rival Hashemite who held similar views, King Abdullah of Transjordan. In addition, for the Iraqis, there was the issue of Kuwait—the 19th province of Iraq—and historically a vassal of the Basra governorate. The relative stability in Baghdad compared to the political chaos in Syria and the loss of coastal Palestine to the Zionists fed the idea that Iraq was the logical focal point for a union of the Levant and Mesopotamia. The British viewed these ideas as dangerous. First and foremost, Iraqi designs on Kuwait were non-starters. Under no circumstance would London tolerate any move by Iraq, client or not, against Kuwait. The British also believed that Iraq should focus on its

own stability and, with the Gaylani revolt still fresh in their minds, discourage adventures in the region that could destabilize the home front.

Among the Iraqis, the political situation devolved into a struggle between prominent conservative groups for power, and more specifically between Nuri Pasha al-Sa'id and the Crown Prince Abd-al-Ilah al-Hashemi, the Regent and uncle of King Feisal II. The army had ceased to be a critical concern. Before 1941, it had been the source of instability and coups against various governments; after the Ali Rashid collapse and the imprisonment and execution of the ringleaders, the army had at least temporarily departed the political scene. Nuri Sa'id had been the mainstay of British indirect rule and influence since the creation of Iraq. An officer in the Ottoman army who switched sides and fought with Lawrence in the desert campaign, al-Sa'id became the trusted advisor of Feisal I and the chief of staff of the Army. He used his position to develop a broad base of the support in the military and among conservative political groups. In fact, after the war, al-Sa'id could either choose to be prime minister or to manipulate the system from behind the scenes; in either case, he remained the most influential political figure in Baghdad.⁶² Sa'id engineered the election of Sayyid Salah Jabr, the first Shi'a prime minister of Iraq in 1947, likely to deflect criticism of himself in what he foresaw as a potential looming Arab disaster in Palestine and a secretly renegotiated security treaty with Britain that promised to maintain British influence for the next 25 years. When it became public knowledge that Jabr had approved the treaty, riots and acrimonious sectarian accusations caused his government to collapse. In reality it had been al-Sa'id in London that brought the treaty to conclusion. The treaty brought a protest movement, *al-wathba* (the leap) and mobilized large demonstrations across the country against the treaty and the government. Police fired on demonstrators and the revolt grew. The crown prince concluded that to stifle the protests the treaty had to be rejected, giving the protesters an unexpected victory. It destroyed Sa'id's credibility with the Arab street, but he continued to be the single most powerful politician in Iraq.⁶³

Other changes were buffeting Iraq as well. The war in Palestine and the formation of Israel made the West very unpopular on the Arab street. In addition, as oil production increased and new discoveries were made, political groups began to question the arrangements with the British who controlled the Iraqi Petroleum Company. Iraq received 10 and later 12 percent of the revenue from the oil production, while in Saudi Arabia, Riyadh and

the Arabian-American Oil Company (ARAMCO) had a 50-50 split. Political parties had formed and became a vehicle for popular discontent. The three most important were Istiqlal, the National Democratic Party (NDP), and the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP). Although headed by a Shi'a, Istiqlal was predominantly Sunni. It called for an end to British rule, support for the Palestinians, the incorporation of the Arabic speaking provinces of Iran, and pan-Arabism as opposed to Iraqi specific nationalism. The NDP supported an Iraqi-centric approach and called for an end to monopolies, political freedoms, and wealth redistribution through taxation. It was dominated by educated elites and attracted large numbers of Shi'a. The final organization, the ICP, was not recognized, but it was the best-organized political party in Iraq. It included the minorities—Jews, Christians, Shi'a, Kurds, the educated elite, and a sizable worker contingent. All had been active in the *al-wathba* and played a role in the growing political ferment.⁶⁴ With the army removed from an active political role, the Iraqis had a window in which to make civilian government work.

The early 1950s would change that political equation. First, Mohammed Musaddiq came to power in Iran and nationalized Iranian oil. This resulted in new demands in Iraq for similar measures. Second, a military coup in Egypt ended the monarchy and brought General Muhammad Neguib to power, but behind Neguib the real power lay in the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) headed by a little known but charismatic colonel, Jamal Abdul Nasser. The combination of events put

With the army removed from an active political role, the Iraqis had a window in which to make civilian government work.

established traditional regimes out of political vogue. In 1952, combined with local frictions, these events resulted in another Iraqi popular revolt. After five months of demonstrations and unrest, the Iraqi government declared martial law to quell the *intifada*. The military was back in politics and the Chief of Staff of the Army, General Nur al-Din Mahmud, was prime minister.⁶⁵

In 1953, the regency over Feisal II ended, but Crown Prince Abd-Ilah continued to actively direct policy. In an attempt to neutralize Nuri Sa'id, he called for elections in 1954. It was a relatively free and open election, and several parties managed to win seats in the Parliament, but none had a ruling majority. Sa'id's supporters had taken a plurality of the seats. Nevertheless,

establishment politicians threw their weight behind Sa'id believing that his election was essential.

In September 1954, the new 'unopposed Parliament' was seated and, for the next four years, Sa'id ruled through decrees, the army, and the security services. While the authoritarian rule allowed Iraq's entry into the Western containment system, the Baghdad Pact, and enabled survival of both the Suez Crisis of 1956 and the union between Syria and Egypt in 1958, the Baghdad Pact became the catalyst for a much more lethal form of opposition.⁶⁶ Seeing Nasser's success in Egypt, disaffected Iraqi military officers had formed their own secret command council and began plotting against the government.

By early 1958, the political and economic situation in Baghdad appeared to improve. Still the target of incessant Egyptian and now Syrian propaganda campaigns, the government appeared to be in control. In March 1958, the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad reported that the Iraqi opposition, while having dabbled in various forms of "neutralism, leftism and nationalism," was "at the moment enthralled by only one important commodity—Nasserism," but that it was "neither particularly significant nor effective."⁶⁷ The British maintained their influence in Iraq and would no doubt do what was necessary to sustain their position. The British assessment of the situation in Baghdad divided the Iraqi reaction vis-à-vis Nasser into three groups; the 'unthinking public,' 'students,' and 'some politicians' welcomed the Syrian-Egyptian union 'uncritically.' The politicians were 'suspicious.'

Finally, the palace, the members of the government, and the many officials and professional men who had a broader understanding of the situation saw the Union as a threat to Iraq, to its oil revenues, to its development program, to its monarchical regime, and all that it stood for.

Needing an alternative to Nasser, the Iraqi government explored union with Jordan, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia, but only Hashemite Jordan showed interest. The Saudis were noncommittal and sat 'on the fence.'⁶⁸ London vetoed Kuwait's participation, fearing that it would "probably backfire" and bring a "collision with Arab nationalists" upsetting the "delicate balance" in the oil-rich emirate.⁶⁹

In addition, Sa'id wanted to incorporate Kuwait into Iraq.⁷⁰ In February 1958, the British Ambassador in Baghdad, Sir Michael Wright, warned the Foreign Office that the long-term prognosis was problematic.

The Iraqis, with far too few exceptions, were not natural leaders and, conscious that Iraq is a small and new state without much international experience, they were all too inclined to look to others for inspiration: hence much of the appeal of Colonel Nasser. This means that the government and the many in Iraq who believed in the Western alliance looked to Britain and America for leadership and help. If the West could not give at least some of the help that was needed, it would be extremely difficult in the long term for the regime to maintain itself in the face of the challenge as described.⁷¹

The British and the Iraqi governments saw the Egyptian-Syrian union as a direct threat to oil exports through the tapline and a potential political threat.

On 14 July 1958, a coup utterly destroyed the Hashemite regime and any hope of consolidating a pro-Western Arab regime to counter growing radical nationalism.⁷² The success of the coup astonished everyone. It was swift, violent, and conclusive. The Leader of the Supreme Committee plotting against the government, Brigadier Abd-al-Karim al-Qasim, had learned from the short-lived Rashid Ali coup of 1941. Taking no chances, the plotters decapitated the regime, removing any cohesive power center around which opposition could coalesce.⁷³ Hanna Batatu in his classic,

If the West could not give at least some of the help that was needed, it would be extremely difficult in the long term for the regime to maintain itself in the face of the challenge as described.

Old Social Class and the Revolutionary Movement in Iraq, suggests that “one must take a wider view of things” and understand the coup as more than a military operation. Anti-government Iraqi groups saw it as the climax of a generation of middle, lower-middle, and working classes struggle. They believed it to be “the culmination of an underlying, deeply embedded insurrectionary tendency of which the coup of 1936, the military movement of 1941, the *al-wathba* of 1948, the *intifadah* of 1952, and the risings of 1956 were other manifestations.”⁷⁴ The Iraqi revolutionaries would be sorely disappointed.⁷⁵ In reality, the military officers who overthrew the regime manifested a plethora of political ideas. They were unified in their opposition to the regime; almost to a man, they were Sunni, but beyond that they had little in common politically. In fact, most were politically unsophisticated.⁷⁶

Also to prevent intervention, Qasim also quickly assured the West, particularly the United States and Britain, that Iraq would honor all of its previous agreements.⁷⁷

Most of the world believed that the revolt was a Nasserist coup and that union with Egypt and Syria would quickly follow—they were wrong.⁷⁸ Nasser had worked diligently to overthrow the Hashemite and Nuri Sa' id, but now that it had actually happened, he had no idea what had occurred. Nevertheless, he and the Syrians optimistically awaited an announcement from Baghdad of solidarity with the UAR. On 18 July he flew to Damascus where he met with Abd-al-Hamid al-Sarraj, the UAR Syrian security chief, and an emissary from Baghdad, Abd-al-Salam al-Aref, Qasim's pro-Egyptian deputy. Fearing Western intervention, Qasim had dispatched Aref to enlist Nasser's aid. The meeting produced a pact of mutual support and friendship. Ironically, it would prove to be the last agreement of any kind between Nasser and the new Iraqi regime.⁷⁹ The Iraqi revolution turned out to be just that—an Iraqi revolution. Qasim had no intention of joining Egypt and Syria, primarily because he had every intention of preserving Iraq's oil wealth for itself.⁸⁰

An internal debate erupted over the nature of the relationship between Baghdad and the UAR. Kurdish groups in the north and the Shi'a population opposed submersion in a Sunni Arab-dominated super state. In addition, the ICP, having witnessed Nasser's suppression of Communists in Egypt and Syria, preferred to avoid a similar fate. Qasim and other Iraqi nationalists had no intention of submitting to Egyptian control. Nasser's Iraqi supporters, including Qasim's deputy, Colonel Aref, found themselves increasingly isolated and in conflict with groups supporting an independent Iraq.⁸¹

During the last half of 1958, UAR-Iraq relations became ever more problematic as Qasim suppressed pro-UAR elements, including the arrest of Aref.⁸² Potential opponents of Qasim would find themselves arrested and often handed over to Colonel Fadhi Abbas al-Mahdawi (1915-1963), a confidant of Qasim and now the President of the Iraqi Supreme Military Court, for a trial that ignored judicial protocol—it was the first of the show trials in Iraq and it included singers and dancers in the aisles to enhance the entertainment. Various sentences, including the death sentence, were imposed whimsically but usually later commuted to imprisonment. It was a warning to those who would oppose the regime.⁸³ It was watched by much of the

population every afternoon in the coffee shops. To counter Nasserist and Ba'thist calls for unity with the UAR, Qasim relied on Communist support.⁸⁴

Qasim's alliance with the Communists and their hatred of the UAR did not bode well for stability in restive Syria.⁸⁵ Qasim's courtship of the ICP also enhanced his standing in Moscow, cooling the Kremlin's relationship with Cairo. By the fall of 1958, not only had Iraq challenged Nasser, but things were also not well in Syria, and Nasser's Ba'th Party allies had grown more disillusioned with Egyptian rule.

The Qasim era 1958-1963 provides an interesting backdrop for the political system that eventually came to dominate Iraq. While philosophically Qasim was a reformer raised from the lower-middle class, he lacked any real political backing. His political ideas focused on improving the conditions of workers and the middle class, and rebalancing the distribution of wealth in the society, particularly ending the monopolies that certain large families had over entire sectors of the economy. Having been outlawed for decades, the Communists lacked any real sponsor in the political system. In addition, the ICP was not a hardcore Marxist-Leninist organization; its policies reflected more of a social democratic bent. The ICP was still more revolutionary in character than Qasim, who was a reformist. In any case, they were well organized and Qasim needed their support.

When Michael Aflaq, head of the Ba'th in Syria, arrived in Baghdad, it became apparent that Qasim, the NDP, and the Communists as well as the Kurds, Shi'as, and other nationalist groups were not well disposed to union with the UAR. Pan-Arabism was widely supported in Sunni circles, although not exclusively. It did not help that Aflaq had been forced to accept the dissolution of the formal Ba'th Party in Syria as a result of Nasser's requirements if he were to take on the union. This situation had caused growing dissension within the Ba'th itself, which had begun the splintering process that would lead to a military versus civilian split. The open split between Iraqi and Pan-Arab nationalists came when, after an attempt to exile Abd-al-Salam al-Aref failed, Aref was tried and sentenced to death for subversion. The sentence was commuted, which was a mistake on Qasim's part because Aref became a figure around which Pan-Arab opposition coalesced and Aref eventually overthrew Qasim. It also inspired Rashid Ali al-Gaylani of 1941 coup fame, now returned to Baghdad, to attempt another coup supported by Nasser and his faithful security chief in Syria, Abd-al-Hamid al-Sarraj, centered on Mosul in March 1959. It failed, and Qasim allowed the Communists to

slaughter the opposition, hanging coup participants from lampposts on the main thoroughfare through Mosul as a warning.⁸⁶

It was now the Communists turn to be singled out. Having decided they were indispensable to Qasim, the Communists demanded their share of power including the creation of an armed peoples' militia. Qasim turned on them for their 'excesses,' and dismantled the party infrastructure with arrests and intimidation. Despite the fall from grace of the ICP, the Ba'thists and other pan-Arab groups concluded after the Mosul failure and the execution of conspirators, that only the assassination of Qasim could set the country on the right track. In October 1959, a group of assassins, including 23-year-old Saddam Hussein, succeeded in wounding, but not killing Qasim in an ambush. The investigation and trials that followed crushed the Ba'thists and Nasserists, but the assassination attempt had another more profound effect on Qasim. Since July 1958, he had steadily accumulated more power in his own hands with the growing view that he could trust no one. First, the Aref affair, the Ali Rashid backed Mosul coup attempt, then the Communists attempted to undermine him, and now an outright assassination attempt by the Ba'th from which his survival was little short of miraculous, understandably made him increasingly dictatorial and distrustful. He began to view it as divine deliverance for his role as "Sole Leader."⁸⁷

Increasingly isolated, Qasim turned to a true military dictatorship. The political institutions and parties were simply too weak to support a civil society. Isolated and obsessed with enemies, Qasim became convinced, and not without cause, that the Nasserists and the West, particularly the United States, were out to get him. Isolated, he began to lash out in an attempt to shore up his weakening political position. A Shi'a revival and war in Kurdistan, as well as a failed attempt to annex Kuwait, all played a role in undermining his regime. In February 1963, pro-Nasserist military officers and the Ba'th Party executed a coup that overthrew Qasim. He was captured and summarily executed in his office in the Ministry of Defense.⁸⁸ James Critchfield, head of CIA Near East operations, commented that the agency considered it a "great victory."⁸⁹

Radio Baghdad announced the formation of RCC and called on the "masses to descend to the streets to see the body of Qasim."⁹⁰ The Communists knew the score. They would receive the same consideration that they had meted out when they hung Nasserists from lampposts in Mosul in 1959. RCC Proclamation 13 called for the "annihilation of anyone that disturbs

the peace” and exhorted the people to inform against “the agent—Communists—the partners in crime of the enemy of God.”⁹¹ Immediately following the coup, the new Iraqi Foreign Minister, Talib Shabib, stated Iraq’s intentions to cooperate closely, but not federate, with the UAR, Yemen, and Algeria. As for Syria, Baghdad expressed specific concerns in light of reports that fugitive Iraqi officials had fled there. Shabib stated that while Iraq did not plan direct action against Syria, he left no doubt that Baghdad would welcome a more ‘congenial’ government there at the earliest possible date. The wait was short.

As previously noted, the Baghdad coup placed the Syrian government of Nazim al-Qudsi in an impossible position. On 8 March 1963, Ba’thist military and party elements overthrew the Syrian government and announced a policy that supported Arab unity with Iraq, the UAR, the Yemen, and Algeria. The new regime also declared its opposition to indigenous Communism.⁹² In Syria, the Ba’th had fractured. Aflaq was no longer the dominant power in the new Syrian Ba’th, but rather the ‘Military Committee.’

These factors, along with the arrival in Damascus of exiled Syrian Nasserists, resulted in a call on 14 March for ‘Tripartite Unity’ between the UAR, Syria, and Iraq.⁹³ It was a proposed second attempt at constructing the UAR with Iraq as a third member. Negotiations ensued in Cairo in March and April 1963 between Syria, Iraq, and the UAR paralleling the Yemen mediations. The Iraqi and Syrian Ba’thists arrived in Cairo expecting to conclude a quick arrangement with Nasser. Remembering 1958 and 1961, Nasser put them off. He explained that before negotiations could begin, he had to clear the air between the Syrian delegation and the UAR with regard to the creation of the UAR and Syria’s secession. Nasser wanted his pound of flesh from the Syrian Ba’th as unity required their humiliation.⁹⁴

Nasser opened with a question,

Are we asked to unite with the Ba’th Party or with Syria? If the Ba’th party is ruling Syria and we are supposed to unite with it, then I am not at all prepared to continue these discussions. Union with Syria would be welcome, but to union with the Ba’th my answer would be, ‘no thank you.’

The Ba’thists were taken aback.⁹⁵ On 17 April, Nasser appeared to have triumphed when it was announced that Iraq, Syria, and Egypt would unite in a federal state to be called the ‘United Arab Republic.’⁹⁶

In reality, the Syrian and Iraqi Ba'thists were reluctant to enter the kind of union proposed by Nasser. Nasser wanted a plebiscite to be held on the question of whether rule of the united UAR should be by committee or a single president. Remembering 1958, the Syrian Ba'thists and government rejected the plebiscite. This resulted in the resignation of the five Nasserist ministers.⁹⁷ On 18 July 1963, Syrian Nasserists attempted to displace the Ba'thists in a coup led by Jaim 'Alwan. The coup failed and, rather than the usual exile, the coup ringleaders were tried and executed. The coup and the subsequent suppression effectively ended Nasserism in Syria.⁹⁸ In August 1963, Nasser withdrew from the agreement of 17 April, and with a straight face, he accused the Ba'th of attempting to use it for "their own political ends."⁹⁹

In Iraq, the Ba'th faced a challenging situation. In the RCC, eight out of 18 civilians were Ba'thists. Of the military members, 8 of 10 officers were Ba'thist. Of the senior positions, Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr was prime minister, Tahir Yahya was chief of staff, Salih Mahdi Ammash was defense minister, and Hardan Tikriti was deputy chief of staff and air force commander. The old-line civilian Ba'thists looked with some suspicion on the military officers because most were relatively recent converts. The civilians, Aflaq's protégés Ali Salih al-Sadi and Talib Shabib, found themselves trying to balance policy with the fact that the military had the ability to impose a solution.¹⁰⁰

The split with Nasser pushed the Syrian and Iraqi Ba'th parties into closer alignment. On 26 August, Abd-al-Salaam Aref, now President of Iraq and Nasser's old supporter, agreed to unity talks with the Syrian Ba'th. On 8 October 1963, Iraq and Syria signed the Military Unity Charter as an initial step toward full unification. Despite this 'progress,' relations between the two Ba'th party branches had begun to unravel. Many in Iraq viewed it as Syrian Ba'thist domination. In both Iraq and Syria, generational differences between the older traditional Ba'thists and the younger generation created frictions. Aflaq and Sadi resorted to using the military to undermine each other. Coupled with the usual conflict between the military and civilian branches, bilateral unity talks faced obstacles. In Iraq, the situation was somewhat different. The power struggle within the Ba'th pitted the civilians who wanted to create a militia to counterbalance the military against Aref, nonaligned military officers, and waffling Ba'thist military officers who wanted to maintain their power. When a Syrian delegation showed up to discuss the mechanics of unity, Shabib asked Sami al-Jundi, "Are you really serious about this unity

talk? We're about to slaughter each other over here."¹⁰¹

Nationalists and military Ba'thist officers in Iraq had had enough of the civilian Ba'th and, on 18 November, Aref displaced

the Iraqi Ba'thists in a coup. There was a struggle with demonstrations and counter-demonstrations, but in the end the National Guard was disbanded and Aref purged the civilian Ba'thists from the regime. This caused the Syrian RCC to abrogate all its agreements with Iraq.¹⁰² Many of those that Aref did not purge, particularly in the military, were put in positions where their access to power was controlled.¹⁰³ Aref acted quickly in outlawing the Ba'th and establishing a non-party nationalist leadership.¹⁰⁴ The Ba'th was out of power in Iraq, but now it was evident to everyone in both Iraq and Syria that it would be the military—and the ability to impose political, economic, and social policy on the state—that from this point forward would determine winners and losers, not a parliamentary or even a party process.¹⁰⁵

The Aref regime was far more about family ties than ideological loyalty. Aref appointed his brother, Abd-al-Rahman al-Aref, as chief of staff. Of the four former Ba'thists that were considered trustworthy, Vice President Ali Hassan al-Bakr, Prime Minister Tahir Yahya, Interior Minister Rashid Muslih, and a military officer, Abd-al-Sattar Abd-al-Latif were all from Tikrit and all but Bakr were from the same tribe. To bolster his position against the Ba'th, Aref resurrected his unification talks with Nasser, including accepting a contingent of 6,000 Egyptian troops to bolster the regime. Aref and Nasser settled for alignment.¹⁰⁶ Aref died in a helicopter crash in April 1966 and was succeeded by his brother, Abd-al-Rahman, in the presidency. The arrangement with Egypt lasted until the Ba'th returned to power.

On 17 July 1968, the Ba'th returned to power in a coup. They had learned their lesson in 1963 well. First the Ba'th co-opted key independent military officers and immediately following the coup they eliminated them. The Director of Military Intelligence Abd-al-Razzaq al-Nayif and Commander of the Republican Guard Ibrahim al-Daud were given the position of premier and defense minister, respectively. Two weeks later on 30 July, al-Bakr removed and arrested both Nayif and Daud. Over the next few years, al-Bakr used plots against the regime—real and concocted—to eliminate non-Ba'thist centers of power in the military. Al-Bakr then turned to his head of security

In both Iraq and Syria, generational differences between the older traditional Ba'thists and the younger generation created frictions.

and intelligence, Saddam Hussein, and used his network and ruthlessness to bring the military Ba'ath under control of the civilians. Even with ruthless methods, the Ba'ath had difficulty in consolidating its hold and developing institutions capable of projecting state power; that changed with the 1973 oil crisis. Iraq's oil revenues jumped from \$500 million to over \$21 billion. There would be a ruthlessly authoritarian regime in Baghdad, but one dominated by the security state, not the military.

Summary

Projecting back in time, the political odysseys of Syria and Iraq between the end of World War II and the rise of the dictators in the early 1970s have several remarkably similar traits. Faris and Husayn in *Crescent of Crisis* blame the Ottomans and then the colonial powers—Britain and France—for fomenting “religious and national” differences and “divide and rule” approaches to administering the region.¹⁰⁷ In the case of the Greater Levant, the British and French merely modified the Ottoman *millah* system, but in two very different ways. The British attempted to co-opt the system using the once majority Sunnis, now a minority within the borders drawn to denote their creation—Iraq. This had its problems but reinforced the four-century-old Ottoman system and political, economic, and social order, while the French—because of prejudices and insecurities—turned the Ottoman system on its head by favoring the minorities. Under the mandate, the French more or less insisted on heavy-handed direct rule; in contrast, the British, having faced a near full-blown insurrection in 1920, opted for indirect rule.

In the aftermath of World War II, these differences had a significant impact. Iraq, with its monarchy and leadership intact, was better prepared for civilian self-rule primarily because they had 13 years of practice. In addition, the British had corralled the military in the aftermath of the Rashid Ali revolt of 1941. As a result, it served as a creature of the state. In Syria, the attempt at state formation started from scratch and the fractionalized political landscape made it impossible to consolidate anything other than an authoritarian state. It was a modified Ottoman order with a twist—the minorities.

From a political and social point of view, the French had empowered and relied on the minorities to a degree that it was only a matter of time until the traditional Sunni order would succumb to a military dominated by Druze,

Ismailis, and Alawites. Even then governments rose and fell at a rapid pace and had little to show for their tenures. In Iraq, the British provided the authoritarian solution for the immediate post-war period in their suppression of Rashid Ali in 1941. The British used indirect rule through the monarchy and the old ruling Sunni elite to protect their interests. They embraced a version of the Ottoman practice carried out largely by their chosen client Nuri Pasha al-Sa'id, and to a lesser degree by the Hashemite monarchy. In both Syria and Iraq, political change occurred largely in a conflict between factions; the street became involved either as a result of manipulation by the factions or in spontaneous explosions resulting from specific events.

Popular political expression or dissent was a threat to be dealt with, but it never fundamentally altered the practice of the politics at the top. That continued to be a battle between elites in which the Arab street became a weapon to be controlled or suppressed depending on the particular event. As a result, no matter what the political orientation or creed, the need to contain and control the political topography, i.e., a fractured, segmented political and social order, meant that control of the coercive tools of state were paramount. This, of course, meant the military initially (and security services later) moved to the forefront as the most important instruments of policy and stability.

The Ba'ath Party, with all of its high-minded goals and ideals, was no exception. The Ba'ath became militarized through its secret cabals and military committees until the civilian leadership no longer mattered. Because of the composition of the military in Syria, this meant the minorities, and particularly the Alawites, assumed control of the state as it moved from an authoritarian military-dominated state to a dictatorship in 1970. In Iraq, the timing was somewhat different but the same process occurred; the difference was the dictatorship was masked by family and bureaucratic structures from 1970 to 1978 when Saddam Hussein emerged as absolute ruler. Nevertheless, the precedents were already there in al-Sa'id's rule from 1954 to 1958 and in Qasim's emergence as the 'Sole Leader' following the 1958 revolt.

This progression occurred not because the particular leaders involved were inherently evil and duplicitous—although some were and that is why they survived—but it occurred because no one could figure out how to rule the Levant or Mesopotamia without an overarching, controlling, coercive political and security umbrella that dictated relationships and provided stability. After 400 years of Ottoman structure and control, no one could come

up with a realistic plan to manage relations in the Greater Levant except in a top-down system. In fact, the dictatorships established by Hafiz al-Assad and Saddam Hussein were not Ba’thist at all—they were a cult of personality dictatorships in which Ba’thist ideology was twisted to suppress sectarian and ethnic differences. It was not an accident that the Alawite minority in Syria and the Sunni minority in Iraq adopted a secular message; it gave them *carte blanche* to suppress any opposition on the basis that it was inciting sectarianism or ethnic strife. Underneath the political structure, the Saddamists and Assad knew that nothing had changed in Iraq and Syria—it was a fractured, truncated political, economic, and social landscape that would explode unless vigorously controlled and suppressed. Iraq and Syria were artificial colonial creations, and the requirements for ruling them were the same as they had been for the Ottomans before.

4. Dictatorship and Disintegration

After four centuries of Ottoman administration and control and a mandate period of either direct or indirect colonial control, in 1945 the politicians, military men, and people of the Levant and Mesopotamia gained the opportunity—more or less intervention free—to build a stable functioning state. The objective fact is that neither succeeded. The diversity of the Greater Levant from top to bottom in sectarian, ethnic, and social terms, and the artificiality of the Western-imposed constructs prevented the emergence of a stable nation-state. In neither case did the facts on the ground match even the basic requirements for a state. From Basra to Beirut, stability and security in the region came not from indigenous elements but from a system imposed top-down on the region by external forces. To be sure, the outside powers used indigenous elements and established a pecking order between groups as well as the responsibilities of each group, but the system was externally enforced.

Whether in Syria or Iraq, the political progression quickly devolved into an increasingly authoritarian structure for the simple reason that order and stability had always been imposed. With less institutional structure, Syria succumbed quickly and, by 1949, military rule had become a prominent factor in politics. Because the military had been depoliticized in the aftermath of 1941 and the monarchy offered a buffer against direct military rule, Nuri al-Sa'id instituted a regime in 1954 that relied on the military and security services to maintain control. The increasing authoritarianism in both Syria and Iraq affected the attempt to establish political parties and coalitions as well. The Ba'th is an excellent example. Clearly a civilian-dominated, secular party, it split into civilian and military wings. In Syria, the military wing came to dominate the organization; in Iraq, Saddam Hussein and his security services emerged to dominate the military and, in turn, the remainder of the society. This move to authoritarianism was less a malevolent scheme as it was a natural progression as the artificial states attempted to recover some semblance of the administrative and security control exercised by the Ottomans. Quite simply, no one could come up with a viable approach to governance other than authoritarianism. This ultimately led to the personal dictatorships of Hafiz al-Assad and Saddam Hussein. As we will

see, the collapse of those regimes has returned the situation in the Greater Levant to a level of chaos not seen since the rise of Ottoman power in the 16th century; nevertheless, it mirrors the instability of the 1950s and 1960s. Given the context, the death of Hafiz al-Assad in 2000 and the removal of Saddam Hussein in 2003 left Syria teetering, and Iraq in a state of almost total collapse with the remnants propped only by the U.S. military and Iran.

The Ba'th Party as a Vehicle for Minority Domination

In many respects the odyssey of the Ba'th Party provides an object lesson for the progression of authoritarian government in the region. Although dominated by Michael Aflaq, Saladin al-Bitar, and the 'civilian committee,' the internal functioning of the party was more or less representative; from 1954 to 1958, it emerged as another of the civilian parties vying for power in Syria. The message of the party was particularly attractive to minorities because calls for a 'secular' state in which confessional identity played as a requirement for political, economic, and social position was eliminated. In the aftermath of the Ba'thist coups in Iraq and Syria in 1963, the path to



Figure 5. Then Iraqi Vice President Saddam Hussein with Iraqi President Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr in November 1978. Source: Newscom

dictatorship diverged. In Syria, by 1966, the Military Committee of which Hafiz al-Assad was a charter member eliminated the civilian Ba'th from power. Because the Ba'th continued to be fundamentally civilian in Iraq, President Abd-al-Salam al-Aref and the nationalist military ended their alliance with the Ba'th in late 1963 and removed the party from power. For the next five years in Iraq, the Ba'th 'civilian' wing focused building an intelligence and security apparatus that in 1968 subverted the military, placing it in a clearly subordinate position. The power behind al-Bakr and his regime was the security organizations controlled by his deputy, Saddam Hussein. In both cases, the Ba'th Party as originally conceived by Aflaq and Bitar no longer existed.

Hussein and Assad effectively subverted both branches of the Ba'th parties making them creatures to perpetuate and enhance their personal power. By the late 1970s, the questions of civilian or military control were no longer at issue; the party had become the personal instrument of the dictators. But for one important issue, the ruling party might have been given any name; that issue was 'secular' Arab nationalism—the most important word being secular. In Syria, the mandate upended the Ottoman system and social structure. Through its separate administration, it had given the largely despised heretical Alawites a position in mandate Syria that represented almost a total reversal of fortune. The Ba'th and its message of a secular society provided the ideological legitimacy for what was, in effect, a *coup d'état* by Syrian minority sects against the majority Sunnis. Any person who took a sectarian position or could be accused of taking a sectarian stance on political issues became an enemy of the state. It justified the suppression of any form of opposition on the part of the Sunni majority and legitimized the rule of the Alawites with the support of their Christian, Druze, Turcoman, and Ismaili allies. The arrangement fundamentally destroyed 400 years of tradition.

In Iraq, the issue of the Ba'th was in theory different, but in reality it functioned inversely exactly like that in Syria. In contrast to the French, who upended the Ottoman structure in Syria, the British in Iraq embraced it. Their 1920 experience of a near full Shi'a revolt in southern Iraq had left the clear conviction that indirect rule through the established Sunni order in Mesopotamia was the preferred path despite the fact the Sunnis in the new colonial creation called Iraq were a minority. In Iraq, the Ba'th became the party of the minorities. There, the dual message of pan-Arab unification and secular nationalism boosted the Sunni view that they were the rightful heirs

to the Ottomans—read Sunni Arab—in Mesopotamia. The weak support for the Ba’th among Shi’a and Kurds in Iraq clearly implied that this general view was shared. The Kurds and the Shi’a had no desire to be subsumed in a society dominated respectively by Arabs or Sunnis. The Ba’thist secularist ideology became the primary rationalization for Sunni rule. To oppose the Ba’th was to incite sectarianism and to oppose pan-Arab unification and, after 1979, opposing the Ba’th became indistinguishable from opposing Saddam Hussein’s regime.

Despite their shared ideology, Iraq and Syria were enemies. Each represented a threat to the other. Sunni-dominated Iraq with its tribal and sectarian ties to the majority Sunnis in Syria created deep insecurities in Alawite-dominated Damascus. In Iraq, Ba’thist Syria with its ties to Iran, Hezbollah, and largely by proxy, the Shi’a majority in southern Iraq posed an existential threat to the Sunni regime in Baghdad. In neither state was the issue classical nor traditional Ba’thism; it was about borrowing from Ba’thist ideology to justify minority rule. Those in the West that blamed Ba’thism for the authoritarianism in Syria and Iraq focused on a superficial aspect of the regime, not the core issue of the political, economic, and social environment of the Greater Levant. Dictatorship in Syria and Iraq resulted from the historical political and social topography—a search to replace Ottoman stability and security—as opposed to the arrival of some 20th century pan-Arab nationalist ideology.

Finally, like the Ottoman system, even at their height the dictatorships had to be mindful of the internal political, economic, and social dynamics within their spheres of control. In other words, they needed to co-opt allies. Dictatorships need internal allies or at least the co-opted support from more than their narrow ruling circle. In the case of Syria, the linkage between the ruling Alawites and the other minorities was critical, if not at some times strained. The Assad regime also exploited social and economic differences. With the Sunnis accounting for the vast majority of those living within its borders, the regime exploited class differences to co-opt the wealthy Sunni mercantile establishment into the support structure for the regime and used their influence to undermine broader opposition that might find root within the Sunni community.

In similar fashion in Iraq, Saddam’s regime relied on the Tikriti tribal clans first and then on the broader Sunni community for its primary support. However, in a construct that mirrored the Syrian Ba’th, the regime could

count on Christians, Turcoman, Yazidis, and other minorities. It also co-opted Shi'a notables and recruited among the younger generation of secular Shi'as in order to undermine opposition that might emerge. In similar fashion in Kurdistan, Baghdad used the clan conflicts between the Barzanis and the Talabanis to sow distrust and factionalism there in an effort to control the ever-fractious Kurds in the north. In short, dictatorship, whether in Syria or Iraq, required the adept use of the carrot and the stick with natural allies and enemies alike to maintain control. It was little more than a late 20th century version of the balancing act practiced for four centuries by the Ottomans, and depending on the particular issue under threat it was hardly less brutal. The policies were almost continually in flux as the situation on the ground would change and shift alliances and interests, thus demanding that the 'center' adjust in order to maintain its power.

The Assad Dictatorship in Syria

In October 1970, Assad assumed power in Damascus. The frictions of the three years of fractionalized Ba'thist rule came to a head. In September 1970, Syria's failure to come to the aid of the Palestinian uprising in Jordan raised tensions within the regime. Of course, faced with the Jordanian military and the very real threat of intervention from Israel and the United States, discretion and good sense was the better part of valor and Assad knew it. The withdrawal from Jordanian territory occurred simultaneously with the death of Jamal Abd-al-Nasser in Cairo, the symbol of Arab nationalism. At an emergency National Party Conference on 30 October, a confrontation took place between the 'Civilian Ba'th' under Jadid and the 'Military Committee' backed by the army under Assad. The civilians announced that Assad was relieved of his duties in the party and as commander of the armed forces; however, since Assad had taken the precaution to surround the conference hall with troops and tanks, the speeches were so much "*haw 'a*" (hot air). When the conference broke up two weeks later, Assad's opponents fled or were arrested. Air Force intelligence units arrested suspected Jadid supporters. Three days later on 16 November with the situation in hand, Assad announced the regime change.¹⁰⁸

The Ba'th Party, now cleansed of its opposition, became a tool of the Assad regime. There were Congresses, elections, and debates on policy, but within the parameters established by Assad and his immediate entourage. Michael

Aflaq resigned in disgust as president (just ahead of the arrival of Alawite security agents), and went to Baghdad where he held court on the deviations of the Syrian Ba'th. In 1971, although gratuitous, further confirmation that the Ba'th was no longer a political party but rather a political tool for maintaining Assad's control came in the form of treason trials for Aflaq and four others, now resident in Ba'thist-controlled Baghdad. All were condemned to death as a warning that Aflaq and his associates were *persona non grata* in Syria and that he would not tolerate any interference from Iraq.¹⁰⁹

Ruling Syria became an exercise in controlled participation. At a foundational level, Assad depended on his family and fellow Alawites; others filled important positions, but they were not the bedrock of the regime. Nevertheless, the façade of political participation provided a safety valve. In 1972, the Syrian government announced the creation of the Ba'th dominated National Progressive Front and local councils in each of the governorates. The councils in particular were more apolitical and focused on practical issues affecting the regions. This approach provided an outlet for political participation and, perhaps more importantly, a tripwire for rising political discontent. The real competition for power in Syria lay within the factions of the ruling elite.¹¹⁰

The 1973 October War with its promising beginning for the Arabs devolved into a series of ceasefires and, ultimately, agreements that removed Egypt as a confrontation state. Syria and Assad were isolated and vilified

The real competition for power in Syria lay within the factions of the ruling elite.

despite having signed a ceasefire and disengagement agreement over the Golan Heights. The isolation extended beyond the immediate participants in the 1973 war and the confrontation with Israel. By 1975, hostility between Assad and the Ba'th Party in Baghdad boiled over into a vitriolic propaganda campaign pitting Damascus against Baghdad. Michael Aflaq, from the safety of Baghdad, assailed Assad for betraying the Arabs to Zionists and in return, Damascus accused Baghdad of abandoning Arab lands (Khuzestan) to Iran.¹¹¹

To complicate bilateral relations, Soviet-sponsored dam building in Syria on the Euphrates had severely limited water for agriculture in Iraq. "From 1975 onward the two countries began abusing each other over the airwaves—fascist rightwing criminal—was the standard invective—arresting each others' sympathizers, moving troops threateningly to the border, and setting off explosives in each others' capitals."¹¹² As the Syrian-Iraqi war of

words increased, Assad suffered another blow. King Feisal of Saudi Arabia had been a steadfast Assad supporter and an absolute opponent of the Egyptian agreements with Israel; however, a troubled, American-educated family member assassinated the king. Isolated and assailed by Cairo, Baghdad, and Washington and effectively isolated by U.S. diplomacy in the region, Assad became heavily reliant on his relationship with the Soviet Union.¹¹³

In addition, two new developments threatened the Assad regime. In 1975, full-scale civil war broke out in Lebanon and, by early 1976, the Lebanese army and security services had divided along sectarian lines and collapsed. Lebanon, a microcosm, not only of Syria but Iraq as well, put ethnic and sectarian chaos at Assad's doorstep. For the Assad regime, it was a nightmare that seemed to be spreading. In 1976, an insurrection that would last for six long years broke out in Syria pitting the Muslim Brotherhood (Sunni backers in Iraq and the Arabian Gulf) against the Ba'thist state dominated by Alawite apostates. What began as assassinations of government officials escalated into a full-blown revolt centered on Aleppo in 1980 and Hama in 1982.¹¹⁴ The Brotherhood exploited old rivalries between regions and overlaid it with the ideology of *jihad* against the Alawite apostates.

Syria-Iraq and Another Proposal for Unity

By 1978, isolated and desperate for allies, the Assad regime sought a rapprochement with the Bakr regime in Baghdad which now was basking in the flood of oil money generated by the embargo five years earlier. It was a means of gaining some breathing space and securing his flank against Iraqi support for the insurgency. On 26 October, Iraq and Syria signed the Charter for Joint National Action and began to move toward a unity agreement. Given the history of relations between Assad and Hussein, the real power in Baghdad, the odds of unification occurring were remote. Conjecture about who actually scuttled the talks, Saddam or Assad, are academic—some historians have argued that unified with Iraq, Assad could not hope to retain power because of Iraqi wealth and the confluence of Sunni interests. Others countered that it was Saddam Hussein that opposed the union because with Bakr as the president of the new unified Ba'th and Assad as his deputy, Hussein would be the odd man out and his opportunity for personal rule in Iraq would vanish.

Whatever the case, Saddam decided that it was time to step into the open as leader. In mid-July 1979, the RCC removed Bakr and confirmed Saddam Hussein as leader, and within a week, initiated a purge of Ba’thist officials who were accused of plotting with Syria to overthrow the regime in Baghdad. The resulting show-trials and ‘popular’ executions of the offenders were filmed and distributed to senior military and government officials as a warning to those that might oppose the new regime. Hussein immediately launched a campaign designed to make him “the Iraqi nation [and] the voice of the collective people.” He made the situation crystal clear: “We are now in our Stalinist era. We will strike with an iron fist against the slightest deviation or backsliding beginning with the Ba’thists themselves.” With Saddam Hussein establishing a “cult of personality” and firmly in personal control of the Iraqi state, any prospect for Ba’thist or any other kind of unity was dead. Saddam envisioned Iraq as the new Babylon.¹¹⁵

Syria and the Aftermath of a Failed Union

For Assad, the collapse of cooperation with the ‘Tikriti regime’ could not have come at a more inopportune time for his ‘Alawite regime.’¹¹⁶ The Assad regime was firmly in power but assailed on all sides by potential enemies and situations that might unravel even its tight control. The internal insurrection grew, as did the worsening situation in Lebanon. Israel was more powerful than ever, and Saudi Arabia had moved steadily toward policies more aligned with those of the United States. Now Iraq, the regime in the best position to exploit Syrian weakness, had come under the absolute control of Assad’s implacable personal foe, Saddam Hussein.

As an exclamation point, in June 1979, an instructor at the Syrian Army Artillery School in Aleppo had orchestrated the massacre of more than 50 cadets. In the aftermath of the massacre and the failed unification talks, Syria blamed the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Iraqi regime. The Brotherhood denied responsibility and instead argued that it was an outgrowth of Sunni-Alawite hostility and frictions between groups in Aleppo and the government in Damascus that had nothing to do with them.¹¹⁷ The Assad regime made little distinction between the Muslim Brotherhood and other Sunni opposition; the attack signaled open warfare in Syria between the government and various opposition groups that would undermine Alawite rule.

The opposition groups and their offshoots during this period are too numerous to list, which underscores the fragmented nature of Syrian society. The prominent opposition groups were Sunni and urban in origin, they tended to be situated in urban centers that had historically resisted Damascene control, and they had separate administrations in the Ottoman and even mandate periods. The largest and best organized was the Muslim Brotherhood, but there were other organizations as well including “the Aleppo-based Islamic Liberation Movement, established in 1963; the Islamic Liberation Party, originally established in Jordan in the 1950s; Muhammad’s Youth; Jundullah (Soldiers of God); and Marwan Hadid’s group, established in Hamah in 1965, often referred to as *At Tali’a al Muqatilia* (Fighting Vanguard).”¹¹⁸ Syrian authorities believed that the financial and training support for these groups came from the Arab Gulf, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), whose leadership at the time Assad was attempting to undermine.¹¹⁹ The war on the Muslim fundamentalist opposition and the claims of captured American equipment also convinced Assad that the U.S. was a party to, if not an orchestrator of, the attempt to overthrow his regime. In addition, since 1976, Assad had found himself trapped in the ‘quagmire’ of the Lebanese civil war.¹²⁰ Even a dictatorship with pervasive intelligence and security organizations backed by the police and military constantly teetered on the brink of insurrection and chaos.

Assad needed an ally if his regime was to survive. The Soviets could provide weaponry but not the regional support that could make the difference in regime survival. It was at this point that the Alawite regime received something of a compound gift—the Iranian revolution. Vilified and maligned by the West and the Arab states of the region, Khomeini’s Iran, although embattled, promised Assad two things—a new level of legitimacy and at least some level of concrete support. In return, Syria and Iran maintained the most vehement and steadfast opposition to what they viewed as the illegitimate, colonial creation in Palestine—the Zionist entity and an abiding hatred of Saddam Hussein.

While it must have raised some eyebrows in the Qom seminaries, the Revolutionary Iranian government accepted the 1973 ruling of Musa al-Sadr, the most influential Shi’a jurist in Lebanon, that the Alawites were a ‘legitimate offshoot’ of Twelver Shi’ism.¹²¹ The ruling was particularly useful to the Alawite regime facing the cries of ‘apostasy’ from its Sunni fundamentalist

opposition. It also more tightly coupled the growing Shi'a majority in Lebanon to the regime in Damascus, thus providing a potential means of securing Syria's Western flank. Although under siege, Iran would provide fluctuating levels of support and Syria gained breathing space as Saddam Hussein, now thoroughly paranoid about his own Shi'a population, launched a war with Iran that would consume most of Iraq's attention and resources for a decade. Iran gained something in return. Syria might oppose a specific Iranian policy like airstrikes against oil tankers in the Gulf, but it maintained a generally pro-Iranian stance and attempted to blunt attempts to unify all of the Arab States against Iran. In effect, the Syrian relationship prevented Iran's total isolation in the Arab Middle East, and Syria's position as a Soviet client prevented direct action against Damascus; nevertheless, it drove the Arab states—Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt—and the West closer together in supporting Iraq against Iran; this would have increasingly important effects after 1984.¹²²

From 1982-1984, internal and external crises threatening the Syria regime reached a crescendo. First, the internal war against the Sunni insurgency was more complicated than just a war driven by Muslim Brotherhood attempts to overthrow the government. It was also fed by the fundamental animosity that many in Aleppo, Hama, Homs, and other more conservative Sunni-dominated cities had historically felt toward outsiders in general and Damascus in particular. All three cities were surrounded and demonstrations were crushed by government troops, but it was only the prelude. In February 1982, an incident between government security units and the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama morphed into a full-blown confrontation that ended in the bombardment of the city and a full-scale assault that cost more than 10,000 lives, including a high percentage of civilians.¹²³ Hama became the symbol of the brutality of Assad's regime, but it also served as a warning about the methods that the regime would resort to in order to hold its grip on power. It was a harbinger of change in the opposition. In the streets, Syrian soldiers recalled people shouting from rooftops and doors, "Allahu Akbar—Go away murderers we want Islam."¹²⁴ "In 1970, he was popular; in 1982 he was feared." To the Assads, it was a war of survival against terrorists where no quarter was to be given.¹²⁵ For almost 30 years, the example of Hama deterred the regime's opposition from open revolt and also tainted Hafiz al-Assad.

In June 1982, dealing with the aftermath of the internal revolt, the Damascus regime faced another more daunting challenge. The Syrian invasion of

Lebanon brought a modicum of stability to certain areas. Like the Ottomans before them, the Syrians had become one of the arbiters in a macro sense of what was politically acceptable and unacceptable behavior among the warring factions. The case of Kamal Jumblatt, leader of Druze in Lebanon, provides a cautionary tale about crossing the Syrians in Lebanon. By heading the Lebanese National Movement and allying himself with the PLO against Syrian intervention and pro-Syrian Christian elements, pro-Syrian elements in Lebanon, at the behest of Assad, assassinated Jumblatt in 1977.¹²⁶ In the chaos of the civil war, the Syrians were attempting to provide an Ottoman-like security structure that served Syrian stability and security interests. From its founding by the French, Christian-dominated Lebanon had been unstable and merely marking time awaiting the catastrophic outbreak of civil war in 1975. Lebanon has always been an extension of the fractured Levantine political, sectarian, and ethnic landscape but never a nation-state.

One would think that having watched Assad fall into the ‘quagmire,’ the Israelis would have avoided it. But the Israeli leadership had its own ideological visions of the future, and Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon simply could not resist chasing the mirage of ‘Greater Israel.’ In June 1982, the Israelis launched a military campaign, “Peace in Galilee,” with three primary objectives: (1)

In the chaos of the civil war, the Syrians were attempting to provide an Ottoman-like security structure that served Syrian stability and security interests.

(2) crush the Syrian army and perhaps bring the fall of Assad, and (3) transform a Christian dominated Lebanon into a client state.

It failed. The Israeli military hesitated in front of Beirut fearing the casualties of urban warfare. The Syrian army held the road from Damascus to the Bekaa Valley at great cost including an air war in which it lost more than 90 frontline aircraft. However, the bombardment of Beirut by Israeli forces, the assassination of Israel’s Christian ally Bashir Gemayel, the massacres at Shatilla and Sabra Palestinian refugee camps, the opposition at home, and finally, the unhappiness of the Reagan administration forced Tel Aviv to moderate its policies. Israel opted for unsustainable occupation and humiliating withdrawal that would leave Israel’s most implacable and dangerous foe yet—Hezbollah as the dominant force in Lebanon. Many referred to the Lebanese adventure as “Israel’s Vietnam.”¹²⁷ During the first six months of 1982, Assad had demonstrated that he was willing to take the steps necessary,

including a terror campaign against his own people in Aleppo and Hama and the sacrifice of his air force, to protect Alawite rule in Syria against the incipient instability of the region.

In the aftermath of the Israeli pullback and the PLO withdrawal from Beirut, the Multi-National Force (MNF), made up largely of French and American military units, intervened on behalf of the Christian-dominated Lebanese Army providing air and artillery support. U.S. and French installations suffered a series of suicide attacks, one destroying the U.S. Embassy in Beirut and two others killing over 300 members of French and American MNF units. Hezbollah, backed by Syria and Iranian intelligence officers and logistics, carried out the attacks. After the intervention failed and the Lebanese army retreated from West Beirut, the Reagan administration reassessed the mission and withdrew U.S. and other MNF forces from Lebanon.¹²⁸

These attacks were the product of yet a new development in the Levantine political landscape; the confluence of Iranian support for Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Outsiders quickly became the enemy in the Syrian-Lebanese environment. Syria had effectively lashed out at those who undermined its interests at home or in its extended territory—Lebanon.¹²⁹ The West had learned a pointed lesson that good intentions and vague objectives were a recipe for experiencing the perplexing, painful reality of sectarian and ethnic conflict in the Levant—stability is fleeting and outsiders quickly wear out their welcome.

By late 1983, it became apparent that Assad had survived—or had he? Since 1970, the one constant of regime survival had been family and clan loyalty. In November 1983, Hafiz al-Assad fell ill. He was in poor health and rumors spread quickly that it was a heart attack. While he was incapacitated, Assad appointed a six-man, largely civilian committee to run the state. He excluded his younger brother and heir apparent, Rifa't Assad, who was also commander of the most capable military forces in the country. The old military-civilian split in the party raised its head. Senior officers went to Rifa't to express their concerns and, under pressure, the head of the six-man committee expanded it to 19 members including Rifa't and his supporters. Posters of Rifa't "flooded Syria" in what was an obvious attempt to confirm his position as the heir apparent should his brother not recover.¹³⁰ The contravention of Hafiz al-Assad's orders and long simmering policy differences between Rifa't and his older brother led to a confrontation in Damascus between Rifa't's forces and those loyal to the president. Rifa't would have

likely won the confrontation but backed down in the interests of family loyalty; he was marginalized and then sent into exile for a decade.¹³¹

The events of 1979 to 1984 underscore the reality of rule in Syria. Legitimacy is ephemeral and stability is an illusion. The regime commanded all the coercive instruments of the state, and yet in the Sunni insurrection, it survived and maintained the unity of the state structure by only the narrowest of margins and the most draconian of methods. Assad balanced the centrifugal forces of politics and society against each other in a never-ending game of divide-and-conquer, and he prevailed. The desperation of facing down the Western powers, Israel, and his Arab enemies in 1982-1983 left him for all appearances as the strongest ruler in the region, and yet having run the labyrinth and emerged still in power, old fissures between civilian and military in the party and family conflicts had almost undone his accomplishments. With all the resources he possessed and with the backing of Iran and the Soviet Union, rule in the fractious Syria was impossible without coercion, and even then it was precarious. He attempted to utilize the Ottoman approach of stick and carrot but without the political, social, and cultural legitimacy of the Sunni Ottomans.

Syria: Riding the Levantine Tiger 1988-2003

In 1988, after eight years of steadfastly supporting his sole regional ally, Iran, the Iran-Iraq War came to an end. That Saddam Hussein would declare victory is hardly surprising, but the reality was that both Iran and Iraq were devastated economically. From a Syrian perspective, there was concern that Saddam might refocus his animus on the regime in Damascus. In addition, the continuing collapse of the Soviet Union promised to remove a major benefactor of the regime. Both Saddam Hussein and Hafiz al-Assad were paranoid, but unlike Assad, Hussein was impulsive and this played to Syria's benefit. Rather than turn on Syria, Hussein turned on what he viewed as his ungrateful Gulf Arab allies, particularly Kuwait. From a Syrian point of view, Saddam's occupation of Kuwait, after it became apparent that the United States was intent on reversing it, was something of a godsend. "Overnight, the whole edifice of the regional status quo crumbled and Syria seized the occasion to establish for itself a new position of power and influence with the nascent system."¹³²

Syrian Succession

The U.S. approached Syria about joining the coalition against Saddam Hussein and contributing troops. The price was a free hand in Lebanon. Syrian troops had returned to Lebanon in 1987 to enforce the ceasefire between competing groups. Assad's government participated in the Multilateral Middle East Peace Conference in Madrid in October 1991. Having apparently restored his regime's regional fortunes and alleviated the immediacy of the threats to its survival, Assad, with his health failing, began to focus on the next phase of Alawite rule—the transfer of power to a successor.

Rifa't al-Assad had been the presumed successor to his older brother until the confrontations in 1984. Given the dissimilarities in personalities and significant policy differences—Rifa't preferred a more pro-Western policy and had good relations with senior Saudi political figures—it is likely that at the

time of Hafiz's illness, Rifa't's exclusion from the initial governing council indicated that his position was slipping. After 1984, Assad's oldest son, Bassel al-Assad, became his father's confidant and closest companion. Groomed as the heir apparent, he was killed in a car accident, raising questions of succession and stability.¹³³ Bashar al-Assad, the second son and an ophthalmologist studying in London, was recalled and began a six-year grooming process for the presidency.¹³⁴ Signs appeared across the country with pictures of the three Assads with titles: "The Leader, the Example, and the Hope."¹³⁵

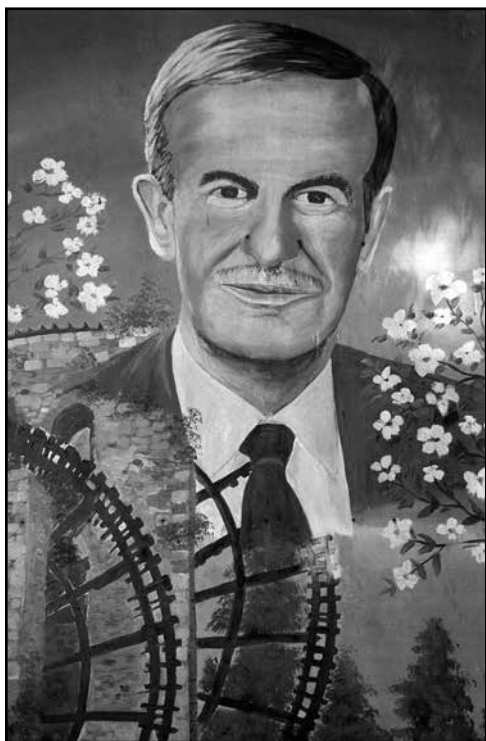


Figure 6. Mural of Hafez al-Assad in Hama, Syria. Source: Newscom

Other signs indicated that Assad was clearing the way

for Bashar. In July 1994, Major General Ali Haydar, the commander of special forces, and several of his subordinates were arrested and relieved of their commands. Haydar was a pillar of the regime, instrumental in the capture of Hama in 1982 and in the confrontation with Rifa't al-Assad in 1984. In September, Major General Majid Sa'id was removed as head of the General Intelligence Directorate (GID). Other changes in the military indicated that Assad was ensuring regime loyalty as he prepared Bashar to take his place.¹³⁶ In 1998, General Hikmat al-Shihabi, the chief of staff, was retired. A Sunni, there was no way that the Alawite power structure would countenance him at the top; General Ali Arslan, the deputy chief of staff, an Alawite from the Assad's tribe, was picked to replace him. That same year, GID Chief Muhammad al-Najjar was removed and jailed for corruption while Rifa't Assad, home from exile, was again compelled to leave the country.¹³⁷

On 10 June 2000, Hafiz al-Assad, ruler of Syria for 30 years, died; on 11 June, Bashar al-Assad, the former ophthalmologist, was unanimously nominated by the Ba'th Party to succeed him. At the time, he was only 34 years old—the Syrian constitution specified 40 as a qualification for the presidency, but it was quickly amended to 34. It was believed by many that Bashar would institute reforms that would bring a new era in Syria.¹³⁸ Despite a so-called 'Damascus Spring' in which prisoners were released and organizations were established to give voice to public opinion, reformers made the mistake of failing to differentiate between reform and modernization. He supported "modernizing authoritarianism."¹³⁹ Economic reform and technological progress do not equate to political reform. As events would prove, Bashar al-Assad was just as staunch a supporter of the Alawite dictatorship as his father had been. The tendency is to view personal authoritarian rule as weak with a lack of institutional development. This is simply not the case in Syria or for that matter in Iraq. It personalized rule, but there was an elite with developed institutions, particularly security and military around them, or the regime could never have survived in the Levant for 45 years.¹⁴⁰ The same was true of Iraq—Saddam survived everything short of a full-scale invasion by the world's only superpower, and even then the institutionalized Sunni tribal and clan structures would prevent the formation of a replacement. But, there was one difference between the rule of Hafiz al-Assad and his son that was problematic.

Because Bashar was from another generation and had been viewed as 'The Hope,' many expected across the board liberalization. Bashar's early speeches

fueled this belief. When it became apparent that his reforms did not extend to the political sphere or the prerogatives of the regime, the general disillusionment was more profound.¹⁴¹ The ‘Damascus Winter’ quickly followed the ‘Damascus Spring’ as security organs cracked down on pro-democracy elements and intellectuals that criticized the regime.¹⁴² The invasion of Iraq, accompanied by calls in the West to make Syria next, prompted Assad to harden his position insisting that democracy had to be home-grown and not imposed from the outside. It would have made no difference; he not only lacked his father’s powerbase and credibility, but to anyone knowledgeable about Syria, it was apparent that if controls were removed as in Iraq, the country would likely fragment and descend into chaos.¹⁴³ This was absolutely correct; beneath the administrative and security structure of the Alawite state, there were no institutions capable of maintaining the cohesion of the state. For 500 years, structure and stability had been imposed top-down—Western liberal wishful thinking could not change that fact.

The Iraqi Dictatorship

From the perspective of Saddam Hussein (and to be fair from that of the broader Iraqi political elite), Bakr’s proposed union with Syria offered little, and in addition to the risks for Saddam Hussein and his carefully constructed security and intelligence apparatus that controlled the Bakr regime, the growing linkage between the Alawite regime and Iran and then to the Shi’a majority in Iraq could not be ignored. By the time of the 1979 coup in Baghdad, the Ayatollah Khomeini had emerged as the real power in Iran.

While the shah of Iran had forced compromises on the Bakr regime, including division of the Shatt al-Arab waterway leading to Basra during the Kurdish border war of 1975, he had kept his agreements and withdrawn his support for the Kurds and he opposed the rising tide of Shi’a fundamentalism. Because Khomeini had been Saddam Hussein’s prisoner while in exile from Iran, the ayatollah hated Saddam and the Sunni-Ba’thist regime in Baghdad almost as much as it did the shah. In an interview in Paris in 1978, Khomeini named his enemies, “First the Shah; then the American Satan; then Saddam Hussein and his infidel Baath Party.”¹⁴⁴ It would only be a matter of time until the ayatollah moved against Iraq. Even if all other issues were excluded, the linkage to Shi’a sectarianism was a showstopper for the

Sunni regime in Baghdad. For Saddam Hussein, now in his ‘Stalinist era,’ the question became, what next?

Having eliminated his opposition, Saddam Hussein was now absolute ruler of Iraq, but no matter how powerful, Saddam understood that he ruled a fractured state with a restive Shi’a majority in the south and the independent-minded Kurds in the north. In spreading his cult of personality, the state apparatus created a persona that embraced pre-and post-Islamic Mesopotamia. Now having personalized control of the Ba’th Party structure, Saddam extended down to the village level in an attempt to unite the entire country in his person. Iraq became an Arabized Mesopotamia, and Saddam Hussein personified the unity of all its component parts. In the case of the Shi’a and Kurds, it was critical that alternative narratives of loyalty or allegiance be eradicated. Despite this attempt to reach out, the core of the state was constructed from the “values and personnel” of Saddam’s own community and then patronage dispensed through that medium to other groups in the Iraqi state. Saddam, at the center of this web, appeared to guarantee that he could control the growing sectarian and ethnic divisions.¹⁴⁵

In 1979, renewed clashes in Kurdistan driven by the Kurdish Democratic Party and a new militancy among its leaders, Idris and Masoud Barzani raised concerns, but it was in the south that the situation threatened to spin out of control. Multiple underground Shi’a organizations agreed to commence a violent campaign against the government. Al-Dawa’, Jund al-Imam, the Islamic Task Organization, and others supported by the Jama’at al-Ulama (Society of Religious Scholars) initiated a campaign against the government. An assassination attempt on Tariq Aziz and a follow-up attack on the funeral of those killed in the failed attempt on Aziz in Baghdad garnered a fierce response from the security services.¹⁴⁶ Having pledged his allegiance to Khomeini and as leader of the Dawa Party, Ayatollah Bakr Al-Sadr and his sister, Bint al-Huda, were arrested and executed—a first in Iraq and an indication of the determination of the regime to brook no opposition. Sadr’s death brought rioting in the south that resulted in a security crackdown in which hundreds more were killed and thousands were wounded or fled Iraq.¹⁴⁷

On 17 December 1979, Iranian students occupied the American Embassy in Tehran and Khomeini moved to support their actions. The Iranian hostage crisis appeared to place the United States and Iran on a collision course. Saddam, believing that war with Iran was inevitable, decided to take advantage of the chaos created by the revolution and the confrontation with the

United States. In September 1980, Iraq launched an invasion of Iran, initiating what would be called the First Gulf War. Poorly planned and executed, the Iraqi effort bogged down against a stubborn and suicidal Iranian defense. During the early years of the conflict, Saddam largely shielded the home front from the effects of war by increasing domestic spending and infrastructure projects. By 1982, the Iranians had recovered all of their lost territory and

In September 1980, Iraq launched an invasion of Iran, initiating what would be called the First Gulf War.

rejected Iraqi ceasefire overtures.

For his part, Saddam had withdrawn to the international boundary and was preparing to fight a defensive war for his very survival.

Fear of Iranian fundamentalism garnered for Iraq support not only from the Arab Gulf but also from the Soviet Union and the United States and its Western allies as well. American satellite and signals intelligence became a mainstay of Iraqi attempts to stem the Iranian onslaught. Egyptian support served to pave the way for its readmission to the Arab League suspended following the Camp David Accords with Israel.¹⁴⁸ Saddam had made Iraq the Western proxy through which the momentum of the Iranian revolution could be stopped.

By the time of the 1982 crisis, the Shi'a opposition had been crushed. Some have made a point that Iraqi Shi'a conscripts fought the Iranians alongside Sunni troops and, while many may have been loyal to the regime, it must be pointed out that Shi'a troops were integrated with and overseen by Sunni units and that all had Republican Guard units behind them ready to slaughter those who did not fight. The reversal of fortunes on the battlefield emboldened other groups chaffing under control from Baghdad. The Kurds began a campaign with Iranian support to end government control in Kurdistan. As the threat intensified, the Iraqi government made more and more desperate attempts to quell the revolt. By February 1987, the major Kurdish parties had agreed to cooperate against the government. Using regular forces and the *Fursan* militia, Ali Hassan al-Majid, also known as Chemical Ali, in the *Anfal* (spoils of war) campaign used chemical and conventional weapons to destroy the opposition killing combatants and civilians alike. Resistance was crushed, but the residual hostility of the Kurds resulting from more than 50,000 dead, mass deportations, and the widespread use of internment camps created a situation that forever damaged Baghdad's reputation in the

north. The aftermath also contributed to a process that eventually alienated many of Saddam Hussein's Western supporters.¹⁴⁹

By 1988, the sacrifices of the war convinced many around the Ayatollah Khomeini that Iran had to accept a ceasefire. With U.S. intelligence support, a resupplied and refitted Iraqi military dealt the Iranians a string of defeats in 1988. The Iranians suffered massive losses in men and material, including virtually all the Iraqi territory that they held in the border regions. Iranian cities were under sustained missile and air attack, including the use of chemical weapons, and Saddam Hussein threatened more massive weapons of mass destruction (WMD) attacks if the Iranians did not accept a ceasefire. Then an American warship shot down an Iranian airliner. The regime in Tehran was shocked by the lack of global support in the incident and believed that it was an intentional provocation to be followed by an all-out attack by U.S. forces. In July 1988, Iran announced its willingness to accept a ceasefire. In August, Iraq came under heavy pressure to end hostilities, and both sides accepted a ceasefire.

For both sides, losses were horrific. Iran was simply exhausted having suffered over 200,000 dead with much of its infrastructure destroyed. For Iraq, the impact was in many ways more severe but less visible. With over 100,000 dead, including many Shi'a conscripts used as cannon fodder, any hope that Saddam Hussein had of creating a unified secular state had vanished. In the north, the Kurds, although cowed, were perhaps forever alienated from any state governed by Baghdad—Sunni or Shi'a. While Iraq survived with the less physical damage than Iran, behind the security and military façade, any hope for a nation-state to coalesce had disappeared. The hardships of the war had driven additional wedges into the fabric of political, economic, and social structure. The massive expenditures on the war effort and the dramatic collapse of oil prices during the war meant that the patronage system no longer extended outward as far as it once had.

With over 100,000 dead ... any hope that Saddam Hussein had of creating a unified secular state had vanished.

Patronage went to supporters of the regime to maintain their loyalty; thus, the Sunnis and other minorities who supported the regime received the lion's share of more limited government subsidies and support. Politically, the breadth of the ruling elite narrowed significantly. Family members or fellow Tikriti clansmen now controlled every key element of the security and military structure with the

ultimate vested in the person of the president himself.¹⁵⁰ In many respects, it mirrored what had happened in Syria following the troubles of 1980 to 1984. Top-down administrative, security, and military control was the only means to maintain the cohesion of the state. Maintenance of the state had become almost totally a family business centered on Saddam Hussein.

Aside from maintaining physical control of the country, the issue of debt became the single most important issue facing the regime. From Saddam's perspective, he had saved the Arab Gulf from Iranian domination; from the Gulf perspective, they had saved Saddam from his own ill-advised adventurism that had almost undone them all. The difference was that Iraq had the fourth largest army in the world, and Saddam had managed to convince himself that he had won a great victory. The Gulf refused to forgive \$50 billion in Iraq's debts and refused to cut back oil production to increase prices. In the case of Kuwait, Iraq accused the emirate of slant drilling and stealing Iraqi oil.¹⁵¹

Despite the increasingly heated rhetoric, the Kuwaitis snubbed Iraqi demands. Saddam Hussein grew increasingly strident as the debt crisis mounted. In Baghdad, Kuwait was represented as the ungrateful pawn in an attempt orchestrated by pro-Zionist elements and the United States to undermine Iraq and its leader. By summer 1990, Iraq had put in place a plan to take Kuwait and solve all of its debt problems with one stroke; the occupation of Kuwait also fulfilled a long-standing goal that every regime in Iraq since its founding in 1920 had pursued at one time or another. On 31 July, Iraqi and Kuwaiti delegates met in Jidda, Saudi Arabia. Iraq made it clear that it wanted border adjustments, compensation for stolen oil, its debt forgiven, and a new loan. There was no agreement, and in the early morning hours of 2 August 1990, Saddam ordered crack, loyal Republican Guard units to seize Kuwait.

The details of the war itself are not particularly important to this study. Suffice it to say that Saddam miscalculated, but only barely, and George H.W. Bush insisted, despite some arguments to the contrary, that Iraq would be expelled by force. This was done with massive damage not just to the Iraqi military but also to the infrastructure of the country as a whole. In the aftermath, it also set in motion full-scale revolts of the Shi'a in southern Iraq and the Kurds in the north. What it did not accomplish was the expected overthrow of Saddam Hussein. His security apparatus and the unintended survival of the Republican Guard divisions allowed him to maintain power

and crush the Shi'a revolt while the coalition military was ordered not to intervene. The Shi'a were then subjected to a ruthless campaign that brutally suppressed the revolt. It was an all-out war by the Sunni military on the Shi'a population. It also alienated the Shi'a from the West in general and the U.S. in particular because the U.S. had encouraged the revolt and then sat back and watched while the Republican Guards annihilated it. In the north, the Iraqis contained the Kurdish revolt to their territory in the mountains.

The survival of the regime in the aftermath of the war was simply unprecedented and spoke to the determination of Saddam Hussein and the Sunnis to preserve what they could of their control by focusing on four "white provinces"—Anbar, Diyala, Ninawa, Salah Adin—those that had remained loyal during the war and rebellions. Baghdad was somewhat problematic because of its large Shi'a population. As a creature of the regime, the Ba'th continued, but more than ever Saddam relied on his clan and his family for support. In addition, tribal authority was enhanced with various sheikhs being armed and given security responsibility for specific regions. The pretense of a nation-state disappeared, and an openly tribal structure emerged. By 1995, 60 percent of the delegates to the National Assembly were tribal leaders or sponsored. The ruling clique reorganized the army, and the security services tightened control. In addition, the rhetoric of the regime began to change from that of secular Ba'thism to a more religious bent including claims that Iraq was "the representative of God" in its struggle with outsiders that would dominate it.¹⁵²

Despite this reconsolidation, the regime faced continuing internal and external problems. Problems with the Kurds and Shi'a continued. There were coup attempts from within the Republican Guard, tribal rebellions in Sunni areas like Ramadi, and family frictions that brought the defection of brothers Hussein and Saddam Kamil with their wives who were Saddam's daughters. This problem was at the heart of the regime and underscored the extent to which factionalism had resurfaced at the core of the regime. They were eventually enticed back to Iraq where Majid tribesmen killed the Kamil brothers for dishonoring the tribe. Competition also broke out between Saddam's sons Uday and Qusay with the latter displacing the former as the heir apparent to his father.¹⁵³ In addition, sanctions were severely hurting the regime causing the patronage circle to grow ever smaller. Incremental increases in Iraq's oil allotment improved the situation somewhat, but oil exports were still under foreign control, and United Nations WMD inspections continued.

By 2001, the Iraqi regime was increasingly isolated within its own borders. Its military was a shadow of what it had been a decade before and the infrastructure was crumbling, yet Saddam Hussein clung to power. The regime had taken on a much more religious tint. The flag had been changed—inscribed with *Allah al-Akbar*. In the increasingly tribal and almost exclusively Sunni ruling group, Islamic references to jihad and other forms of resistance became more prominent. In effect, Saddam comingled pan-Arabist, and pan-Islam became the new ‘survival’ political discourse.¹⁵⁴ What the world called Iraq had returned to its fractured roots and the pretense of a nation-state forgotten in the struggle of its ruling Sunni leaders to survive.

The events of 11 September 2001 brought matters to a head. From the beginning, the Bush administration internally made it clear that one of the post-9/11 goals would be the destruction of Saddamist Iraq. When the argument that he was aligned with Osama bin Laden failed to carry sufficient weight, then the argument that he was manufacturing WMD was raised. After the invasion when the WMD did not materialize, then the campaign to rid Iraq of a dictator and establish a functioning democracy was substituted. After capturing Baghdad in 2003, the United States would learn—like the Ottomans, the British, the Hashemites, and the various republican governments before them—the three former Ottoman provinces of Mesopotamia—Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul—did not constitute a nation-state and that any effective centralized control rested on coercion and top-down imposed stability.

Summary

Between 1970 and 2003, Syria and Iraq followed a remarkably similar trajectory. The dictatorships utilized the captive Ba’th Party structure as a tool to exercise control over a socially, ethnically, and religiously fractured state. During this period, Iran and Syria were no more nation-states than they had been under the Ottomans, the mandates, or the previous republican governments. They were an amalgam of competing and conflicting interests and groups. The groups themselves were splintered from within and it was only autocratic control at the top that maintained order and stability. Saddam Hussein and Hafiz al-Assad attempted to use the Ba’th party, albeit firmly under their control, as a rallying point around which to build a secular, inclusive, and yet controlled society.

Both failed, not because of Ba’thist ideology or some personal flaw in the leadership of which there were plenty, but because the Ottoman provinces of the Levant and Mesopotamia, arbitrarily reorganized by the British and French in 1919 into combinations called Syria and Iraq, were not nation-states. The competing agendas of the various sectarian, ethnic, and social groups prevented the creation of what Benedict Anderson refers to as the “imagined community.” In each case, stability and cohesion had to be implemented through an authoritarian structure, which in the end devolved into personal dictatorial rule by Saddam and Assad. Both used the carrot and the stick to maintain control and both increasingly relied on the latter as time went on. Both attempted to create a broad base of support and both increasingly had to constrict their base of support to family and clan for survival. Even with this constriction, they faced challenges from within the inner most sanctums of their supporters—Assad from his brother Rifa’ and Saddam from the Kamil brothers. In both cases, the secularist message of the Ba’th was used to justify minority rule, and in both cases the societies returned to their Islamic roots or rather reengaged the roots that the vast majority of the population never left. By 1970, the promise of a secular society and body politic based on an Arabized Western ideology had failed—by the mid-1980s even the shell of that promise had disappeared into a grim struggle by the dictators to survive, relying on the ever-narrowing support of family and clan.

Despite the pervasiveness of the state and its security apparatus, the dictator’s longevity was due more to personality, family, and clan ties. The political, economic, and social cohesion for a nation-state certainly did not exist. The centrifugal forces of the region made state formation virtually impossible –Ibn Khaldun’s views in the *Muqaddimah* better fit Syria and Iraq than Western concepts of a state. The term nation-state is an absolute misnomer. A nation-state, as defined by Weber, has never existed in the Greater Levant—Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq.¹⁵⁵ Even attempts to copy a Western totalitarian state like Stalinist Russia were compromised by both the regional political, economic, and social reality. The only thing surprising about the chaos of the post-2003 order in the Greater Levant is that few in positions of responsibility grasped that once the coercive structure was removed, the Levant and Mesopotamia would quickly return to their competing parts, and the colonial creations of Iraq and Syria would crumble.

5. Collapse and Anarchy 2003-2011

This Chapter begins with 2003 because that is the beginning of the end for the colonial ‘nation-state’ construct in the Greater Levant. The best possible solution, a fractious peace imposed by an outside imperial power, is unlikely to happen—the last decade has served as a warning to all who would try to resurrect imperial control. As Sir Charles Napier, the quintessential imperial soldier and conqueror of Sindh put it, “so perverse is mankind that every nationality prefers to be misgoverned by its own people than to be well ruled by another.”¹⁵⁶ This is particularly true in the Greater Levant.

In writing about Qasim’s regime and its narrowing base of support, Mwafaq Haded Tikriti, in a work endorsed by Saddam Hussein himself, stated: “A personal ruler without a certain ideology prefers to choose from close family and associates. Attributes such as strong personality, tribal connections, identical religious affiliations, and occupational similarity become more important than political and professional considerations.”¹⁵⁷ This statement was meant to contrast Qasim’s regime in Iraq with a favorable view of Ba’th Party rule under al-Bakr where Saddam Hussein was the power behind the presidency. Mwafaq Tikriti hit the nail squarely on the head with regard to rule in the Greater Levant—Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon after 1918. By 1979, the Ba’th was no longer a party but an emasculated creature of Saddam Hussein’s personal rule. Regimes with any longevity eventually embrace ‘personal rule.’ Saddam and Assad could not recreate the legitimacy of the Ottoman structure and, as the situation deteriorated, their power base narrowed to a very tight circle of family and clan—and even then there were problems. The region was too volatile and too splintered to maintain power, much less general stability with heterogeneous centers of power.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq sent shock waves through the region. Ali Allawi stated, “In official Washington, ignorance of what was going on inside Iraq before the war was monumental. None of the proponents of the war ... had the faintest idea of the country that they were going to occupy.”¹⁵⁸ As Thomas Ricks put it in *Fiasco*, “As war was about to begin, everything was ready except for one thing: a real plan.”¹⁵⁹ The people that were most opposed to the war were those that really understood Iraq. Some of them would later shape key elements of the U.S. withdrawal; they fully understood that after

2010, the Iraqis would never endorse a plan that included a status of forces agreement that was perceived to infringe on Iraqi sovereignty.¹⁶⁰

The reaction ranged from incredulity to fear that the U.S. really had a master plan for the region. As the mission in Iraq morphed from WMD to regime change to establishing a democracy, senior Arab military officers confused by the policies asked expectantly if the Bush administration had a strategic plan—first for Iraq and then for the broader region.¹⁶¹ As the chaos grew, Paul Bremer—a bureaucrat with no experience in the Middle East, but the American ‘Viceroy’ in Baghdad—removed all Ba’th members from positions of responsibility and disbanded the Iraqi army. This effectively brought the government to a halt and cashiered 400,000-armed men leaving them jobless. When warned by the CIA and others in the military that his order could bring a disaster, Bremer rigidly replied, “I have my instructions.” Actually, he did not have his ‘instructions,’ but no one in Washington countermanded him so, authorized or not, it would handicap everything that occurred in Iraq from that point forward.¹⁶² As former Prime Minister Ali Allawi pointed out, Iraqis did not believe that the Ba’th per se was bad, but rather that Saddam Hussein had usurped the Ba’th and distorted its otherwise credible record to suit his own purposes. There was, in effect, a ‘good and bad Ba’th.’ The Sunni community viewed the order as anti-Sunni. Bremer was clueless as to the actual impact on government operations. In addition, the order failed to accomplish its goal—Ba’thists and their sympathizers who were now alienated by the “blunderbuss approach” remained in the ministries and used the bureaucracy to challenge the CIA at every turn.¹⁶³

By summer 2003, governmental structure in Iraq had almost ceased to function and nascent insurgency (that the Bush administration refused to recognize as such) had taken hold. By the end of 2003, it was a full-blown guerilla war despite Bremer’s histrionic assertion that, “This is not Vietnam. This is Iraq.” It is not clear if Bremer ever understood the implications of his actions, but most of those charged with responsibility for Iraq in the U.S. and Britain came to share Churchill’s view: “At present, we are paying eight million a year for the privilege of living on an ungrateful volcano out of which we are in no circumstances to get anything worth having.”¹⁶⁴ Churchill, as much as anyone else, had created Iraq because on paper it had looked logically simple; a few years down the road an insurrection had turned it into a security and financial nightmare.

From a Syrian perspective, the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan was a logical reaction to the events of 9/11; the attack on Iraq was something else. Despite frictions over Palestinian issues and the intifada against the continuing Israeli occupation, in the aftermath of 9/11, there was a significant degree of intelligence cooperation between Syria and the United States. Radical Sunni fundamentalism was an enemy to both. With the invasion of Iraq, U.S. policy became more problematic for the regime in Damascus. The U.S. and its Global War on Terror now lumped Hamas and Hezbollah together with al-Qaeda. On 6 November 2001, President Bush stated in a speech, “You’re either with us or against us in the fight against terror.”¹⁶⁵ Bashar Assad and the Syrian government were ‘with us’ on the issue of al-Qaeda and ‘against us’ on the issue of Palestine, Hamas, and Hezbollah.



Figure 7. Central Bank of Iraq currency in 2003. Source: Shutterstock

As time passed, the administration in Washington seemed unable to differentiate between who had attacked them and other groups that in Assad’s view had legitimate grievances. To Damascus, this black and white approach to a region painted in shades of gray was naïve and potentially dangerous. Bashar Assad and his associates had seen the events of 2001 to 2003 as opening for a greater dialogue with the United States. They were slow to grasp that Washington now viewed Syria and the Alawite regime as part of the problem. The Bush administration was demanding total compliance with its policies aimed at any group that it defined as “terrorist” including Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas before it would be allowed to negotiate a place in what Washington envisioned as a new ‘democratic’ Middle East. In addition, casting about for an explanation for the problems in Iraq, the U.S. accused Syria of hiding WMD, supporting the insurgency, and harboring former Iraqi officials. As pressure from Washington grew, in 2004, Bashar commented: “If you have good relations with most of the rest of world, you are not a rogue regime just because the United States says you are.”¹⁶⁶

Syria had to be careful with a large U.S. presence in Iraq and surrounded by enemies. It had only one friendly neighbor, Lebanon. By 2004, Damascus

believed that the crisis had abated. Their assessment was that the United States was now bogged down in an unwinnable insurgency and that further adventurism in Syria was unlikely no matter how certain political elements in Washington wanted to see such a move. The situation allowed the Alawite regime to return to what it did best—straddle the regional fence. While Syria did not want to see the Iraq conflict spill over its borders, it played a double game of border cooperation with U.S. forces while simultaneously turning its head to cross border traffic in fighters and arms. Syria wanted a united but weakened Iraq because should Iraq split into its sectarian parts, then Damascus understood that it could be the next target for the united Sunnis of Syria and Western Iraq.¹⁶⁷

For the Americans in Iraq, the situation had gone from bad to worse. For this reason, the Syrian regime calculated that it had some additional room for maneuver against its enemies—particularly those in Lebanon. In 2005, former Lebanese Rafiq Hariri was assassinated by a car bomb in Beirut. An opponent of the Syrian military occupation and an ally of Saudi Arabia and the West, the immediate reaction was to blame the Assad regime, the pro-Syrian Lebanese government, and Hezbollah. The assassination resulted in massive protests, the Cedar Revolution, that forced the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon.¹⁶⁸ The political storm following Hariri's death undermined any hope that the Assad regime might have had for international rehabilitation. It fit squarely into the Western narrative that the Alawite regime was in fact a rogue regime.

That said, the aftermath likely encouraged the view in Damascus that it should act to protect what it perceived as its own interests regardless of world opinion and Western condemnation, because in the end, neither the United States nor France were willing to do much about it in this case. Pro-Syrian elements stonewalled the investigation and assassinated witnesses and investigators; in the end, only low-level perpetrators from Hezbollah were indicted. After the Syrian withdrawal, the Cedar Revolution burned itself out. As one commentator pointed out, "The reality is that Lebanon has had democracy for quite some time ... But instead of being a panacea for the country's problems, this relative excess of democracy has merely exacerbated them." Lebanon, like Syria and Iraq, is a "bewildering array of ethno-religious and political fiefdoms." It has avoided the centralized authoritarian rule by "devolving power back to the various clans, parties, and religious groups that constitute, in effect, a collection of mini-states."¹⁶⁹

Lebanon is a reflection of the rest of the Levant and Iraq as well. Today, the nation-states have failed, and the remnants revert back to the various clans, parties, and religious groups that constitute it.

However, in Damascus, the Assad regime learned an entirely different lesson from the 2005 experience. They maintained their influence through Hezbollah and their other Lebanese sympathizers and gradually reasserted themselves. Syria's sponsorship of Hezbollah paid real dividends in 2006 when it blunted a poorly thought out Israeli military offensive in southern Lebanon and used missile attacks to subject Israeli population centers to sustained bombardment. It also undermined the ruling Lebanese anti-Syrian coalition and showed U.S. support to be of little value in a real crisis.¹⁷⁰ Assad's prestige at home and in the region was enhanced by the performance of his allies in southern Lebanon. By 2008, Bashar had outlasted his would-be nemesis Bush and appeared to be in the strongest position perhaps since his succession. In 2009, while maintaining his links to Iran and Hezbollah, he renewed his security and economic arrangement with Russia, engaged in limited cooperation talks with Turkey, and was pushing for dialogue with the United States. By 2010, despite lingering issues, the threats to the regime appeared to recede.¹⁷¹ Looking back at the struggles faced by his father, Hafiz al-Assad, and the multiple times it appeared the regime would be overwhelmed by hostile forces, and then seeing its survival through good luck and dogged perseverance, Bashar Assad must have been encouraged, believing the regime had successfully passed a similar trial by fire. Any optimism was premature.

Back in Iraq the outright civil war of 2005-2006 had resulted in a decision by Washington to deploy more troops to stabilize the situation. For many, next to the Bremer

Today, the nation-states have failed, and the remnants revert back to the various clans, parties, and religious groups that constitute it.

appointment, the single worst decision for the long-term stability of any political entity resembling pre-war Iraq was support for Nuri al-Maliki as prime minister. In 2006, as the situation in Iraq spiraled out of control, the decision was made that Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Eshaiker al-Jafari had to go. His leadership style was deemed passive, allowing key decisions to fall to his subordinates or not be made at all. The situation required someone else.¹⁷² It was decided that a little known Dawa Party political officer, Nuri

al-Maliki, would replace him. Maliki served in Tehran and Damascus. Ali Khedery, the longest serving U.S. official in Iraq and the advisor to five ambassadors, stated that after lobbying for the U.S. and the Arab Gulf to support Maliki, he came “to realize that if he (Maliki) remained in office, he would create a divisive, despotic and sectarian government that would rip the country apart and devastate American interests.”¹⁷³ While Maliki’s tenure no doubt made certain that any chance of success for the U.S. agenda in Iraq was dead, the issue in all likelihood had already been decided by the fall of 2003. Maliki’s attempts to become a Saddam-like despot had as much to do with the reality of ruling Iraq as it did with Maliki’s personality—Iraq’s post-Ottoman history was one of a steady march from monarchy to dictatorship under Saddam.

In 2006, Ambassador Peter Galbraith, now retired, wrote a book titled, *The End of Iraq: How American Incompetence Created a War without End*. The entire notion that the invasion and its aftermath had knocked ‘Humpty-Dumpty’ off the proverbial wall was not only heresy to the Bush administration desperate to recover the initiative in Iraq, but also to the scores of area specialists reared on the concept of the nation-state and the Middle East region as a collection of national entities. One studies Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon and the ethnic divisions within those lines on a map—one does not study the political, social, and economic ties between Levantine and Mesopotamian Sunnis, for example. A holistic view was largely missing from the foreign policy establishment. Galbraith put forward the “Three State Solution”—Sunni, Shi’a, and Kurd—stating that it actually reflected the reality on the ground and that if a group wanted out, the U.S. should facilitate it.¹⁷⁴ The idea was simply too radical and too unpalatable for much of the foreign policy community—Republican or Democrat. In 2007-2008, the ‘Surge’ appeared to restore stability and provide a breathing space where the new Iraqi army and its Shi’a government could restore order and where civil government would resume—none of that really happened.¹⁷⁵

The fact that the Maliki government was unable to provide basic services to its people and that the U.S. military often had to shield forces of Sunni *sahwa*, or awakening, from Shi’a dominated regular Iraqi units and Shi’a militias was glossed over in the rush to declare victory and get an exit agreement. The Surge had indeed brought a breathing space, but the Iraqis themselves and particularly the Maliki government failed to take advantage of the U.S. effort and sacrifice. In fact, the Shi’a-led Iraqi government

had no intention of continuing to support the Sons of Iraq program that armed Sunni elements in the fight against terrorists and al-Qaeda. There was concern at the time that strategically the ‘Surge policy’ was reinstating tribalization in Iraq and thus further fracturing what was left of the Iraqi state and assuring it could not be reconstituted. It also served to heighten sectarianism across the board.¹⁷⁶ By this time, the U.S. was trapped. The goal was to stabilize the situation and enable a withdrawal, but for all intents and purposes without large numbers of U.S. troops to prop it up, Iraq as a state had already ceased to exist. The Shi’a, now with Iranian backing, were creating a sectarian state in which the Sunnis were second-class citizens or worse—enemies of the state.

This had an interesting effect. It erased what was left of the border between Iraq and Syria; the line on the map became meaningless. In a 2010 discussion with Lieutenant General Talib al-Kenanai, the director of counterterrorism in the Maliki government, on security issues for Iraq, Syria and the lack of control in the border regions was the paramount concern.¹⁷⁷ The U.S. invasion, the destruction of the Iraqi army, the removal of Sunnis from positions of responsibility, and then the campaigns to subdue the Sunni insurrection had linked Sunni resistance in Iraq to the Sunnis of Syria in a manner that had not existed since the Ottomans. Smuggling routes from Iraq to Syria to support sectarian brothers in the Alawite-dominated state now moved from Syria to Iraq to support the insurgency. Designed to elude Syrian government control, Damascus could impede but not stop the flow, particularly in light of the fact that from 2005 to 2007, there was little control on the border. The surge reinstated control but only through the aggressive forward posture of U.S. troops, and then not completely.

After the surge and the withdrawal of U.S. forces at the behest of the Iraqi government, control on the border collapsed again. This not only affected the security situation in Iraq, but it also created problems in Syria as well. By 2010-2011, the failure of the Shi’a government in Baghdad and the Alawite government in Damascus to address fundamental political, economic, and social issues with their Sunni populations turned eastern Syria and western Iraq into a Sunni powder keg requiring little to set it off. In Syria, the growing affluence of the

The Shi’a, now with Iranian backing, were creating a sectarian state in which the Sunnis were second-class citizens or worse—enemies of the state.

cities was in stark contrast to the continuing deterioration of the rural areas, particularly to the east. The resources of the state were directed toward the urban centers and infrastructure.¹⁷⁸

In Syria, there was an additional problem as well—the ‘invisible enemy.’ Syria’s traditionalist Sunni *ulema* were increasingly asking the government to do something about the rise of ‘neo-Hanbali’ influence in the mosques. Due to the media revolution, it had become impossible to ‘seal’ the country against the Salafi message—exiling preachers simply did not work anymore. The Salafis opposed Sufis religious norms incorporated into Orthodox Sunni worship as well as non-Sunnis of all stripes. All of this undermined the ability of the government to control or communicate with the rising Islamic forces in the country.¹⁷⁹ Amazingly, neither government seemed to understand the extent of the threat or care about it for that matter. Assad assumed that he had weathered the storm from 2003 to 2010, and Maliki was intent only on attempting to build his personal power as ‘Saddam light,’ fighting with rival Shi’a politicians and arresting his Sunni rivals. Neither realized that the real storm was yet to come.

Because of the Sunni revulsion against the Iranian client governments in both Baghdad and Damascus, the Sunni border regions reached critical mass. Their respective Shi’a overlords effectively precluded both groups from meaningful political participation. Damascus and Baghdad excluded both groups from the economic mainstream. Both Iraqi and Syria Sunnis, particularly in the countryside, shared a social and cultural heritage that had always resisted the secular message of Ba’thism and included an identity that reflected membership in the broader regional Sunni majority that viewed the Shi’a and Alawites as apostates. The Sunnis also found themselves the target of security operations and attacks by government and Shi’a militias alike.

In effect, the historical ruling group in the Greater Levant, the Sunnis, had become a persecuted majority in the minds of many. For the Sunnis, it was little more than colonial gerrymandering that divided the dominant Sunnis in the region and then elevated the minorities. For Iraqi Sunnis, the wounds were still fresh—an outside power, the United States, launched an ‘unprovoked’ invasion based on manufactured intelligence and then devised a sectarian-based system that precluded Ba’thist, i.e., Sunni participation in the political order. The invasion destroyed a 350-year pecking order in Mesopotamia that dated from the treaty of Zohab in 1639. Then, even after



Figure 8. Ramadan Mosque in Baghdad, Iraq. Source: Newscom

switching sides and fighting with the Americans to eliminate al-Qaeda, the U.S. abandoned Sunnis to their Shi'a enemies.

In 2010, the U.S. departure from Iraq mandated by the treaty the Bush administration had signed in 2008 and supported by the Maliki regime and the Shi'a majority coincided almost exactly with the outbreak of a movement in the region that became known as the Arab Spring. In December 2010, protests against the government in Tunisia began to spread. In March 2011, the first protests hit Syria and met with fierce repression on the part of the government. Bashar al-Assad's reaction to calls for democracy was no different than his father's; he assumed that as in the past, a hardline approach to protest would nip the movement in the bud. When the government cracked down, a general revolt ensued—2011 was not 1982. Key officials in the government, almost all Sunni, defected and joined the rebellion encouraged by support voiced in the West.

While there had been defections during earlier revolts, they were low level. These defections were high-level officials. This could be attributed to several different issues. The hope for liberalization engendered by Bashar al-Assad's early pronouncements in 2000 followed by a crackdown a few months

later had been particularly bitter and disillusioning. There was a personal element to it. Many, particularly in the Sunni community, concluded there would be no change in the situation as long as the Alawite regime and the Assads remained in power.

There were also very practical impacts from Syria's status as a rogue state. As resources dried up, there were fewer options for patronage, and the opportunities that existed fell more and more into the hands of a narrowing set of Alawite and minority military officers and government officials. Some Sunnis continued to receive their share, but the circle of patronage had significantly narrowed. Finally, as the revolt spread, it became apparent the regime would stop at nothing to stay in power, fearing correctly that Hama 1982 would pale when compared to the looming struggle because they had no desire to be branded international criminals. Many defected to the opposition.

What happened in the Levant and Mesopotamia between 2011 and 2014 represents a confluence of factors that drove the Sunni communities together. The two greatest were the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the destruction of the Sunni order that had dominated there for 350 years. In Syria, the shrinking core of the Alawite state and despair that it could ever change through a political process drove the Sunnis to revolt despite the risks. Remove either stimulus and the two crippled dictatorships might have limped on, but the combination overwhelmed them both. What Saddam Hussein and Hafiz al-Assad had done was to create personal dictatorships that replaced the old structure used to control the regions. There was a natural, even logical, progression from the Ottoman system through the mandates to the failed attempts at democratic, or at least republican, self-rule to military authoritarianism, and then finally the dictatorships.

Between 2011 and 2014, Western credibility was further damaged by promises of support for the Syrian revolt and then the failure to deliver help of any significance. In trying to avoid entanglements in Syria, the U.S. contributed little but verbiage to assist the rebels while Gulf Arab money and foreign fighters flocked to their banner. Unable to commit, the West, and the U.S. in particular, stood by while the radical fundamentalists gained in strength and influence. In Iraq, there was a misplaced faith that the security forces and American-trained army would be sufficient to hold Sunni radicals at bay. Despite the fact the Maliki government had channeled its best military and intelligence resources into special units responsible for protecting the

regime and had alienated the Sunni and Kurdish communities, the foreign policy community raised few concerns about the rising threat.

To some degree, attention was focused on Syria, and the problems in Iraq were under the radar. The insurgency appeared on the cusp of unseating Assad in Syria and then fortunes shifted; the regime appeared at least in part to regain its footing by employing ever more brutal methods. In the summer of 2013, it appeared that Syria might use chemical weapons to root out insurgents in urban areas. President Obama had cited chemical weapon use as a red line that, if crossed, would require an American response. On 21 August 2013, the Syrian regime attacked a rebel-held suburb of Damascus with poison gas. It put the U.S. administration in a tight spot; an attack might bring down the regime, but what then? Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey bluntly told Congress that American intervention could change the military balance, but it could not resolve the underlying and historic ethnic, religious, and tribal issues that were fueling the conflict.¹⁸⁰ The assumption across the region was that the U.S. was about to strike. In Syria, the Alawite regime understood that an American attack might well mean the end of the regime. However, Obama opted for a military stand-down, Russian diplomatic intervention, and a promise by Syria to get rid of all chemical weapons. Congress would not vote to authorize intervention, and the American public opposed it—politically the decision was easy.¹⁸¹ Although in dire straits and surviving on Iranian support and Hezbollah fighters, the Assad regime had gotten a reprieve. The Obama administration

In Syria, the Alawite regime understood that an American attack might well mean the end of the regime.

move also created problems among the Western powers and its allies. Saudi Arabia was stunned by the U.S. back-down and, more than likely, it led to the removal of Prince Bandar bin Sultan al-Saud as the head of Saudi GID and the Syrian portfolio.¹⁸² In the Arab Gulf and among U.S. allies including the Syrian opposition, there was consternation.

In Damascus, the regime was little short of jubilant. They knew how to play the sanctions, UN inspections, and games with the West, and from their point of view, the U.S. administration had taken the military option off the table no matter what the public pronouncements. The situation also spread dissension and disbelief among those supporting the overthrow of the regime. Then, when it was announced in the fall 2013 that the U.S. and

Iran had been secretly negotiating a nuclear treaty to end that confrontation, many in the Arab world concluded that U.S. restraint on the issue of Syria had been a *quid pro quo* with Iran.

The connection appeared obvious to some. As one senior Gulf military officer put it, “What people here and most of [the] Sunni population thinks is that the USA has sold [out] the alliance with SA [Saudi Arabia] and [the] rest of the Arab Nations for Iran!”¹⁸³ Not only did the U.S. ‘draw a red line’ and then back down, acquiescing to a Russian-sponsored compromise, but also within a matter of weeks, Washington announced that it had been holding talks with Iran on the nuclear program with the goal of an agreement that would lift sanctions.¹⁸⁴ Washington, instead of striking the Syrian regime, an Iranian ally, for using poison gas, supported a Russian-sponsored compromise in order to preserve what it hoped would be a breakthrough in negotiations with Iran. Oman sponsored the secret talks, and given its long-demonstrated tendencies to follow independent courses of action, this raised concerns among U.S. regional allies.¹⁸⁵

The Obama administration concluded the U.S. could not solve the problems in Syria or Iraq and the results of intervention in Syria simply could not be predicted. Although this judgment was likely correct, the ‘climb down’ rankled many and upset longtime U.S. allies in the region. Washington also knew the American public wanted nothing to do with an intervention that put significant numbers of U.S. military at risk or was too expensive. The U.S. Congress was unwilling to vote authorizing the president to use force; after Iraq, few politicians wanted their fingerprints on another military commitment with no true endgame. The administration believed it was largely done with Iraq, with the exception of military aid, and to become deeply involved in Syria was to invite another quagmire.

All of that said—sometimes a failure to act even when it is a gamble can create a situation as bad as or worse than the one that might follow taking the initiative. Forcing the removal of the Assads was risky. It might not work or it might cause a general collapse in Syria and make a catastrophic humanitarian situation worse, or it might remove the primary impediment to compromise between more rational elements and lead to a strained equilibrium if not a peaceful settlement. Failure to act in this case brought further radicalization and desperation on the part of the Sunnis in the region, and that in turn facilitated the dramatic growth of a potentially greater threat.

Summary

In hindsight, the circumstances and justifications for the invasion of Iraq in 2003, to all but the most diehard ideologues, were lacking. Interestingly, this had all happened before. In 1959, the U.S. had faced another such crisis in Iraq. Fearing a Communist takeover there, Vice President Richard Nixon wanted a pretext for military action to overthrow the government of Abd-al-Karim al-Qasim. Assistant Secretary for Middle East Affairs William Rountree told him,

The revulsion against any government set up under [U.S.] aegis would be so great that it would probably be swept away and its replacement would in all likelihood be a Communist government. Thus for this reason alone we cannot advocate this course, apart from the long standing United States principles which would be violated by what would in effect be unprovoked United States aggression and apart from the catastrophic psychological reaction throughout Africa and Asia which would inevitably portray us as being worse aggressors than the Communists.¹⁸⁶

Eisenhower sided with Rountree, taking a wait-and-see attitude, and in six months the crisis had passed and in five years the U.S. obtained all of its goals in the 1963 Baghdad coup—Qasim and the Communists were slaughtered and it was other Iraqis that did it. A six-month delay in 2003 might well have resulted in rethinking the invasion and its planning.¹⁸⁷

The invasion notwithstanding, the U.S. had no conception of what it was undertaking politically, economically, socially, and culturally, and the Bremer decisions of de-Ba’thification and disbanding the army are absolute proof. It was at that moment that Iraq ceased to exist. The army was the only national institution in Iraq and the ‘blunderbuss’ de-Ba’thification alienated the group that ruled Iraq for 350 years—the Sunnis. As icing on the cake, Bremer made sectarian and ethnic identification the basis for political participation by dividing the advisory council based on Sunni, Shi’a, and Kurd.

Over the next seven years, the U.S. struggled to make something work, but anytime something seemed to be within reach, the Iraqis snatched it away. The Maliki government did not want reconciliation; it wanted submission from not only the Sunnis, but also the Kurds and other Shi’a rivals. Maliki made every attempt to reinstitute personal rule just like Saddam Hussein.

Desperate to get an agreement, in 2008, the Bush administration agreed to withdraw U.S. forces by the end of 2011. The proviso that the Majlis had to approve any agreement to leave forces in Iraq was a non-starter because of the Status of Forces Agreement.

The Obama administration arrived with one clear objective. They wanted out of Iraq and they wanted to end, to the degree possible, any boots on the ground engagement in the Middle East in general and out of Iraq in particular. One of the biggest factors in his election had been disenchantment with Iraq. In addition, Obama had Bush's agreement with Maliki that accomplished exactly that—without Iraqi approval no U.S. combat troops could remain. When Maliki refused immunity for any remaining U.S. troops, Obama withdrew U.S. forces. Despite the finger pointing now, neither Congress nor the American body politic would have allowed U.S. forces to remain in Iraq if their actions were subject to so-called Iraqi law. Although predictable, it was an Iraqi decision.

At the same time, the degeneration of the Assad regime in Syria, coupled with the instability bleeding from the collapse of Iraq into eastern Syria and then the Arab Spring, brought on a full-scale revolt there. At almost any cost, the Obama administration wanted to avoid involvement in Syria. Support for the ouster of Assad went no further than verbiage and, even when redlines on the use of chemical weapons on civilians were breached, the administration refused to act and instead deferred to Congress and a Russian mediation effort. This policy was widely supported by the American public, but it led directly to the sudden expansion of the Islamic State and the influence of other jihadist groups. More acceptable groups were starved of support and the jihadists made gains. By 2011, governmental control in the Sunni areas of the Greater Levant had disappeared, and the vacuum awaited the arrival of groups willing to impose their own brand of order on the region.

6. Conclusion

The Conclusion is open ended. We know how the events of the last decade began and, having reviewed the last 500 years and more of the history of the region, we can guess with a high degree of certainty that there is no solution to the instability and factionalized forces that have created the current chaotic situation. At some point, the chaos of the moment will subside into a simmering brew of local and regional ethnic, sectarian, and social rivalries with various parts falling under the sway of autocratic rulers who, through patronage and fear, will establish an equilibrium that brings some order to the chaos. However, we do not know exactly what that will look like on a map nor do we know who or what those autocratic forces will be. We do absolutely know it will not be a Western style democracy and it will be imposed top-down on all or part of the region depending on who prevails in what area. At this point, we should also understand that Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq are lines on a map, not real states, and that in the end, the lines on the map will either be redrawn by those autocratic forces or the *de facto* reality will be an uneasy Lebanese-like truce across the region that pays homage to, but in reality ignores, the lines drawn on the map as a result of Sykes-Picot and the French and British mandates following World War I. U.S. blundering in 2003 and 2013 complicated all of these issues and made them American problems. Where are we now? What is possible? And where are we likely to go in the future?

The survival of the Assad regime was not the only problem associated with U.S. reluctance to become more involved in the Syrian problem and warned that it was spreading to Iraq. When ISIS emerged as a separate radical group in 2011, U.S. allies in the region urged more support for the other Syrian options in order to quickly overthrow Assad and to blunt the influence of ISIS. None of the options were 'democratic' and several were Islamist. The inability of Washington to see where events were headed and refusal to intervene more decisively allowed ISIS to grow. The U.S. equivocated offering non-lethal support. The less radical elements in the Syrian opposition found themselves at the mercy of the Assad regime on the one hand and the radical jihadists on the other.¹⁸⁸

Western policy was a paradox; Washington demanded the opposition fight by acceptable Western rules of warfare that put them at the mercy of all comers in a vicious civil war, and then refused meaningful support. U.S. policy was aimed at bolstering acceptable resistance groups but not enough that they could actually topple the Assad regime. The former British Chief of Staff, David Richards, viewed the half measures as useless, “[policy] has to be creating an army or nothing.” Given that the more radical groups were better funded, U.S. policies failed to accomplish any of its goals.¹⁸⁹

The potential threat in the form of a more radicalized Sunni community went unheeded—that is, until ISIS launched an offensive in Iraq and captured its second largest city, Mosul. ISIS success has served as a force multiplier spurring groups opposed to the Iranian-backed regimes in Damascus and Baghdad to unite with the more radical ISIS.¹⁹⁰ Mosul is a Sunni city that has long been a rival of Baghdad, now the seat of an American-created Iranian-backed Shi’a government and its militias and intelligence services.

ISIS did not capture Mosul, a city of 1.5 million, with 10,000 fighters without considerable help from the residents. As one retreating Iraqi soldier put it, “On the morning of June 10, the commanding officer told the men to stop shooting, hand over their rifles to insurgents, take off their uniforms and flee the city.” Before they could leave, local civilians shouting and throwing rocks attacked them, “We don’t want you in our city. You are Maliki’s sons. The sons of *mutta!* [Shi’a temporary marriage practice] You are Safavids! You are the army of Iran!” One could argue that it was as much a popular uprising as an assault by ISIS.¹⁹¹ Others connected with the government fled for their lives, leaving mountains of U.S.-supplied equipment behind, but a significant percentage of the population preferred jihadist rule to that of the Shi’a government in Baghdad.

Strategically, it was a multidimensional debacle because it also played into Assad’s hands. It shifted focus away from the issue of unseating him, a prerequisite for any kind of ceasefire or political settlement in the Levant and shifted to ISIS. His forces mostly focused on attacking opposition groups that might receive decisive Western support while more or less ignoring ISIS.¹⁹² In addition, ISIS’ goal of consolidating its rule in Eastern Syria and Western Iraq ‘dovetailed’ with Assad’s decision to focus on holding western Syria. The successes of ISIS in Iraq and Syria caused King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and other allies in the Gulf to turn up the political heat on Washington. “While not mentioning any terrorist groups by name, King Abdullah’s statement

appeared aimed at drawing Washington and its NATO allies into a wider fight against ISIS, and its supporters in the region.”¹⁹³

Now, the U.S. and its allies were committed to undermining ISIS as well as the more regionally controversial attacks on other radical groups in the region including Jabha al-Nusra, the al-Qaeda affiliate. In the region, some Arabs view the obsession with Jabha al-Nusra as counterproductive since the Front has fielded arguably the most effective fight against the Alawite regime. It also signaled a growing reluctance by the West to precipitate a sudden collapse of the Syrian regime’s authority in Western Syria because most likely ISIS, Jabha al-Nusra, or another jihadist group would step into the vacuum.¹⁹⁴ In short, the West and its allies wanted the Assads gone, but not the remaining government structure including the Alawite-dominated Syrian army and the security services. The coalition war against ISIS was proving a boon to Iran in trying to take the pressure off its client in Baghdad and to Syria in focusing on the evils of ISIS and Jabha al-Nusra. Turkey is the only state in the region indirectly supporting ISIS and directly assisting Ahrar Al-Sham, another Islamist group also supported by Qatar, because both provide leverage against the emergence of independent Kurdish areas in Syria and the former threatens the Kurdish autonomous region in Iraq.¹⁹⁵

After months of air attacks and claims of progress on the part of the coalition, Iraqi Prime Minister Hayder al-Abadi, bolstered by the recapture of Tikrit, proclaimed that his government had won the ‘psychological battle’ with ISIS. Despite the fact this involved massive intervention of Shi’a militias, the personal presence of Quds Force commander Qasem Sulaymani, and U.S. air strikes, it appeared that the government had turned a corner in its struggle against ISIS.¹⁹⁶ It was a mirage. Between 15 and 20 May 2015, ISIS delivered two stunning surprises. First, it captured the provincial capital of Anbar province driving more numerous but poorly motivated Iraqi troops from the town. Then, five days later, they captured Palmyra when Syrian forces were redeployed to the west. These victories, combined with Sunni resentment and fear of the Shi’a regime in Baghdad and the Alawite regime in Damascus, have brought fresh Sunni recruits into ISIS’s ranks.¹⁹⁷ The reaction of anti-ISIS Sunni militiamen who were promised support that never arrived was predictable: “Abadi is a liar just like Maliki. He won’t arm the Sunnis but will weaken them instead.”¹⁹⁸ The Sunnis also deeply resented those Shi’a militias that flooded into Sunni areas at Abadi’s orders.¹⁹⁹



Figure 9. An ISIS militant waves an Islamic State flag during a parade in Raqqa province in Syria. Source: Newscom

Beheadings aside, ISIS is winning the consolidation battle in the Sunni areas by providing basic services and stability that neither Damascus nor Baghdad can, or most likely will, provide. Mosul now has a fairly stable electrical supply and an operating hotel, and Saddam's palaces have become parks for family strolls. While the West is outraged by the destruction of archeological sites and ISIS' brutality, but cannot bring itself to do something about the brutality of Assad or the Iraqi Shi'a militias, the Sunnis have the first stability they have known in over a decade in many areas.²⁰⁰ What appears to be insanity on the part of ISIS is a rationally thought out policy that at its core supports extreme Hanbali logic, undermines the secularist national agenda, brings in funding by quietly selling antiquities, and adds shock media exposure.²⁰¹ It is not lost on ISIS that ideologically secular leaders like the Assads and Saddam Hussein used the ancient past to mute sectarian differences in a narrative that linked the pre-Islamic past to the present.²⁰²

Invoking H.A.R. Gibb, it is the ability to seize and hold power that constitutes legitimacy in much of the Sunni world.²⁰³ Putting it another way, al-Abu Hamid Ghazzali (1056-1111) has perhaps had more impact on Islamic

thinking than any other with the exception of the Prophet. His views on legitimacy, power, and authority are reflected as follows: “The Imamate theory of al-Ghazali had been based on three key conditions: 1) the power required to ensure the order in the state; 2) the caliphate as a symbol of the unity of Muslim community (*umma*) and its historical practice, and sultanate becoming an integral part of caliphate; and 3) the functional and institutional authority of the caliphate being based on Sharia.” Note the order of priority. As al-Ghazali also stated, “An evil doing and barbarous sultan must also be obeyed.”²⁰⁴

The Economist is correct in saying: “The danger is that the IS caliphate is becoming a permanent part of the region.”²⁰⁵ With regard to al-Ghazali, Gibb, and simple logic, the legitimacy that the Islamic State is accruing in the eyes of many Sunnis only increases with the very fact that it continues to exist; it has little to do with how it continues to exist. Put another way, the Islamic State, because of its practices, is at least as legitimate as Saddam’s dictatorship, and more legitimate than the Shi’a and Alawite apostate regimes in Baghdad and Damascus, respectively. As one Sunni politician in exile put it, “Partition is already a reality, it just has yet to be mapped.”²⁰⁶

The reality is that Iraq and Syria are no more. To quote a former U.S. ambassador intimately familiar with Syria and Iraq: “The United States is the only country in the world that does not realize that Sykes-Picot is dead.” The Greater Levant—Beirut to Basra—is now more or less four general regions: the Mediterranean coast; a hodge-podge that includes Damascus, Beirut, and Latakia largely held together by Hezbollah, the Alawite rump state in Syria, and Christian elements in Syria and Lebanon; Sunnistan, dominated by IS and to a lesser degree by a plethora of Sunni resistance groups including Jabha al-Nusra; the Shi’a Iranian vassal state including Baghdad and Basra; and the truncated Kurdish state politically separated and opposed by Turkey. Now in joining the fray, the Russian have at the absolute least assured the survival of an Alawite-rump state in the north and potentially from Damascus to Latakia as well as the only Russian military base in the region. By siding with Alawites and Shi’a, Russia has to some degree reclaimed the old Soviet Union’s special relationship with Damascus and Baghdad and an on the ground role in politics from the Mediterranean to the Gulf. Not only is this the current reality, but this is also the historical reality dominated by Ottoman Turkey for four centuries and then artificially divided into states

by the British and French during the mandate period and ruled for 30 years as such by dictatorships.

This reality requires a complete rethinking of more than policy. It is a matter of re-conceptualizing the Western view of the region and the political reality on the ground if Western policy is to even have a chance of being partially successful in undermining ISIS. The Sunnis of the former state of Iraq will never accept Shi'a rule from Baghdad (and for that matter the Kurds will not accept it either), nor will their sectarian brothers in Syria accept any state run by the oppressive apostate regime in Damascus. In both cases, ISIS and Jabha al-Nusra are more legitimate and frankly in their view 'just' rule. In addition, they are merely doing under an Islamic banner what Hafiz al-Assad and Saddam Hussein did ostensibly through the Ba'th Party—imposing their will on the fractious, feuding elements of the region with a twist. Saddam and Assad demanded allegiance to a secular ideal that supported their dictatorships while Baghdadi demands allegiance to an Islamic concept deeply rooted in the region, the idea of a Caliphate.

Given the historical context and the reality on the ground, it should be obvious to all which line of thinking is more lucid with the exception of those that have a vested interest in resurrecting a now decade-old colonial corpse—Iraq. None of the communities in Iraq really understand or want to have a civil society. The Shi'a want to rule the Sunnis as the Sunnis ruled the Shi'a under Saddam; the Sunnis want to reinstate their control in Baghdad or at a minimum achieve autonomy; the Kurds want their own state and have it in all but name. Unless it is under the thumb of an authoritarian regime, sectarianism across the board had been the political order in Mesopotamia.

For SOF, having perspective on problems and challenges is always a critical commodity. In the Middle East, it is a requirement. Missteps are easy to make and almost impossible to escape. This study has examined roughly 500 years plus years of historical context in the Greater Levant—Iraq, Syria, and to some degree Lebanon—and connected to the present to demonstrate that some military officer, intelligence officer or administrator for more than five centuries has been trying to quell the chaos between Beirut and Basra. In every case, the effort has proven to be enormously costly and in the end impossible. The British, the French, the Israelis, and the United States have all attempted to pacify the region to no avail. Even the Ottomans, who could take any action they choose, found they had the resources to deal with the big issues and left the everyday administration to local leaders and their

Sunni Arab allies. In fact, in the 20th century, stability came only through the dictatorships of Saddam Hussein and Hafiz al-Assad. That political structure is gone and what is left is the broader region—the Greater Levant being reordered.

SOF need to understand that they cannot solve the problems of the region. They can only hope to partially contain them. No matter what action that the United States takes, it will win few friends and likely create more enemies. Nevertheless, U.S. interests dictate involvement, but that involvement needs to take advantage of the political and military flow that exists. A secular state run by a group devoted to democracy and Western civil society is not going to emerge in Sunnistan. Policy needs to start discarding labels and decide which Islamist Salafi group or groups that it is going to back. Hopefully this study underscores the necessity of a new way of thinking about the region—to preserve U.S. and Western interests it is going to be a search for the lesser evils. SOF need to start thinking about what exactly that entails in practical terms because that is where we are right now.

The mythic special operator Kermit “Kim” Roosevelt, the leader of Operation AJAX, the overthrow of the Musaddiq government in Iran in 1953, refused to participate in schemes to overthrow Nasser in the mid-1950s. According to Allen Dulles, then director of the CIA, both President Eisenhower and his older brother, John Foster Dulles, badgered Roosevelt into making a trip to Cairo to survey the situation. Upon returning, Roosevelt told the White House that Tehran had only worked because the momentum against the Musaddiq regime already existed. In contrast, he pointed out that Nasser was actually popular and a coup had no chance of success. “I tried to tell them that these operations never work, if you are going against the grain of events. You have to have so much going your way before you dare undertake them. First and foremost, you have to have the vast majority of the people behind you. We did in Iran. And you have to have a leadership that is better than the one in power and one that can take control. We had in Iran in the army and the power structure; and the shah himself was a very gentle and reasonable person, although later he turned into a tough customer.” He advised the White House to get used to Nasser because the Iranian option simply did not exist.²⁰⁷ With revisions, this is very good advice for the Sunni areas of the former states of Iraq and Syria. This, of course, means that if we are really going to influence events and undermine ISIS, our partners on the ground are likely not going to be acceptable in polite company.↑

Appendix A: Acronyms

ARAMCO	Arabian-American Oil Company
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
GID	General Intelligence Directorate
ICP	Iraqi Communist Party
MNF	Multi-National Force
NDP	National Democratic Party
PLO	Palestinian Liberation Organization
RCC	Revolutionary Command Council
SNP	Syrian Nationalist Party
SOF	Special Operations Forces
SSNP	Syrian Socialist National Party
UAR	United Arab Republic
WMD	weapons of mass destruction

Endnotes

1. An exception would be a concerted terrorism campaign that brought the collapse of the Arab Gulf states thus threatening the global economy and the Western position in the Gulf.
2. There will be “boogeyman” hysteria about the merger of Sunni jihadists. For example, the article by Riyadh Mohammad, “The Merger of ISIS and al-Qaeda Could Cripple the Civilized World,” *The Fiscal Times*, accessed 10 October 2014 at: <http://www.thefiscaltimes.com/2014/10/10/Merger-ISIS-and-al-Qaeda-Could-Cripple-Civilized-World>. For the foreseeable future, many of the jihadi groups will remain terrorist threats but only the consolidation of a jihadist state might constitute a strategic threat by undermining Western allies in the region. The fact remains that these groups like groups of all stripes in the region have their own agendas and leaders and at some point, there will be an internal conflict and fracturing.
3. Dexter Filkins, “The Extremists’ Iraq Rise: American’s Legacy,” *The New Yorker*, accessed 11 June 2014 at: <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/in-extremists-iraq-rise-americas-legacy>. See also the following collection of articles: *Commercial Appeal – Memphis*, 8 February 1984, “No matter what the Reagan administration would like to see come to pass in Lebanon, the United States doesn’t control events there. The scenario that the administration tried to create apparently will have to be abandoned;” *Kansas City Times*, 9 February 1984, “Mr. Assad is the winner for now;” and *Time*, 20 February 1984, “After 17 months, the U.S. effort to rebuild Lebanon has failed. On one side were the Druze and the Shiite Muslim forces, backed and armed by the Syrians. On the other were the Lebanese Army and, unfortunately, the Marines, whose role was now being described by the Reagan Administration as upholding the government of President Amin Gemayel. Increasingly, the U.S. forces fought back as they came under attack, but they were woefully unprepared for the realities of Lebanon, as demonstrated by the Shiite terrorist bombing of last Oct. 23, which took the lives of 241 Marines.”
4. “Who Lost Iraq?” *Politico Magazine*, July/August 2015, accessed at: <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/06/iraq-roundtable-george-w-bush-barack-obama-119221>.
5. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 2006), 5-6. See also Youssef M. Choueiri, *Arab Nationalism: A History* (London: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 207-218, in which the author discusses the history of Arab nationalism. He argues that following the failure of various Arab nationalist movements, the movement has now become what he calls Neo-Arabism with the ideals of “democracy and civil society” as the centerpieces. Given the events in the region since 2000, Choueiri provides an excellent lesson in westernized thinking vis-à-vis the region. In other words, this idea that democracy is going to dawn and spread across the region uniting various groups under its banner is

a foreign concept imposed by westerners and those that espouse Western values. The region has its own political topography and in the end that will dictate the structure, not Western conceptions.

6. Choueiri, *Arab Nationalism*, 4-23.
7. Martin Kramer, "Syria's Alawis and Shi'ism," in *Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution*, ed. Martin Kramer (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), 237-54.
8. Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 100-102.
9. Daniel Pipes, *Greater Syria: A Brief History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1990), 13-22.
10. Ze'ev Maghen, "Occultation in Perpetuum: Shi'ite Messianism and the Policies of the Islamic Republic," *The Middle East Journal*, Spring 2008, 249. This was something of an unusual set of issues because Ismail I himself was a Sufi and heavily influenced by Sevener Shi'ism. Along with many of his followers, he believed in his own partial divinity.
11. Ussama Makdisi, *Artillery of Heaven: American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 33.
12. Pipes, *Greater Syria*, 159.
13. Vali Nasr, *The Shi'a Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2007), 65-66.
14. Jane Hathaway, *The Arab Lands under Ottoman Rule, 1516-1800* (London: Pearson Longman Press, 2008), 79-81.
15. Christopher A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridians: The British Empire and the World 1780- 1830* (London: Longman Limited, 1994), 35-74.
16. Leila Tarazi Fawaz, *An Occasion for War: Civil Conflict in Lebanon and Damascus in 1860* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 206-207.
17. Stephen F. Dale, *The Muslim Empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 285-287.
18. Karl E. Meyer and Shareen Blair Brysac, *Kingmakers: The Invention of the Modern Middle East* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 240.
19. Nadav Safran, *Saudi Arabia: The Ceaseless Quest for Security* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 34-35.
20. David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace: Creating the Modern Middle East, 1914-1922* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1989), 110.
21. *Ibid.*, 110.
22. Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 42-43.
23. Bruce Westrate, *The Arab Bureau: British Policy in the Middle East, 1916-1920* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 113-116.

24. Geoffrey Warner, *Iraq and Syria 1941* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1974), 12.
25. Ali A. Allawi, *Faisal I of Iraq* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 259-293.
26. Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 54.
27. *Ibid.*, 53-54.
28. *Ibid.*, 57.
29. Ahmed M. Gomaa, "The Syrian Throne: Hashemite Ambition and Anglo-French Rivalry, 1930-1935," Edited by Uriel Dann in *The Great Powers in the Middle East 1919-1939* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988), 185.
30. Khoury, *French Mandate*, 63.
31. Malik Mufti, *Sovereign Creations: Pan-Arabism and Political Order in Syria and Iraq* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 23.
32. Susan Pedersen, "Getting Out of Iraq—in 1932: The League of Nations and the Road to Normative Statehood," *American Historical Review* (October, 2010), 979.
33. Allawi, *Faisal I of Iraq*, 359.
34. James Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj: Merchants, Rulers, and the British in the Nineteenth-Century Gulf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 31.
35. Christopher Catherwood, *Churchill's Folly: How Winston Churchill Created Modern Iraq* (New York: Carroll & Graff Publishers, 2004), 106.
36. Warner, *Iraq and Syria 1941*, 35-42.
37. Robert Lyman, *Iraq 1941: The battles for Basra, Habbaniya, Fallujah and Baghdad* (London: Osprey Publishing, 2006), 63-68. This is the best concise narrative of the 1941 British campaign to recover Iraq. It is fascinating because it demonstrates how to conduct a "go light" invasion of Iraq and succeed in the aftermath. Instead of disbanding the defeated or rather cowed Iraqi army, the British put it in tact back in power purged of its worst elements. There was a lesson to be learned here.
38. Ellie Kedourie, *The Chatham House Version and Other Middle Eastern Studies* (Hanover: University of New England Press, 1984), 224.
39. Pipes, *Greater Syria*, 33.
40. Nabih Amin Faris and Mohammed Tawfik Husayn, *The Crescent in Crisis* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1955), 174.
41. Ann Sinai and Allen Pollack, *The Syrian Arab Republic* (New York: American Academy Association for Peace in the Middle East, 1976), 23-25.
42. Steven Heydemann, *Authoritarianism in Syria: Institutions and Social Conflict 1946-1970* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 12-24.
43. David W. Lesch, *Syria and the United States: Eisenhower's Cold War in the Middle East* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 18-19.

44. Derek Hopwood, *Syria 1945-1986: Politics and Society* (London: Uwin Hyman, 1988), 33-38.
45. *Ibid.*, 37.
46. John F. Devlin, *The Ba'th Party: A History from Its Origins to 1966* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1976): 5.
47. Hopwood, *Syria 1945-1986*, 37-44.
48. Devlin, *The Ba'th Party*, 87-89.
49. *Ibid.*, 93-95.
50. Anthony Nutting, Nasser, (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1972), 215. See also: "Telegram from British Embassy WDC (Sir H. Caccia) to FO, 27 January 1958," (PRO, FO371/134386), 1. The Egyptian Chargé in Damascus told the American Ambassador, "The (Syrian) delegates burst into tears and fell on their knees before Nasser in order to get him to agree to help them out."
51. Robert Stephens, *Nasser, A Political Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971), 277. Taken from an article by Emile Bustani, "Can Arab Unity Survive?" *New Statesman*, 5 January 1962, 48.
52. Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War, 1958-1967* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 12-16.
53. Devlin, *The Ba'th Party*, 115.
54. "Analysis of Formation of the U.A.R. from Lampton Berry, NEA, to Secretary of State, Dulles," National Archives – College Park Maryland (NACPM), General Records of the Department of State (GRDOS) – 59, CDF 55-59, NEA, 611.86B/2-758 (Box 2555), 7 February 1958, 1-3. See also, Nutting, Nasser, 219. Nasser apparently confided in Raymond Hare, the U.S. Ambassador in Cairo, that the union with Syria would become a "great headache" and that most of the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) actually opposed the union. Zacharia Mohieddin, who described Nasser's reasoning in accepting the union, believed that the entire scheme "would be an unnatural association built on sentiment and hampered by geography." Most accounts of Nasser's reluctance to form the union came from the later period after its collapse and, as a result, they ring somewhat false. There is no doubt that Nasser regretted his decision in 1962 and 1963 but, in 1958, riding the crest of popularity and seeing a future full of promise, there is little doubt that he believed that he could manage the difficulties. See also: Miles Copeland, *The Game of Nations: The Amorality of Power Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1969), 227. Copeland recounts the Egyptian optimism at the time; "My Egyptian friends confidently predicted that during 1958 'Chamoun, Hussein, and Nuri will fall – and in that order.'" Clearly, the Syrian venture represented the welcomed first step on the road to Arab unity.
55. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War*, 21.
56. "The Middle East – Between Thunder & Sun," *Time* (March 31, 1958), 17. When Nasser spoke in Cairo announcing the creation of the United Arab Republic, he linked himself with the legendary Arab leader Saladin. "Always the Arab peoples

were able to conquer invaders whenever they joined and stood together in one army – as in Saladin’s day.” The crowd responded by proclaiming Nasser, the new Saladin. Stage-managed or not, the crowd clearly reflected the mood in the much of the Arab world.

57. “Egypt, Syria: Shotgun Wedding,” *Newsweek* (February 10, 1958), 52.
58. Copeland, *Game of Nations*, 224. Copeland points out that Nasser believed U.S. assertions about Soviet designs on Syria, but he found American protestations of their innocence with regard to plotting against Damascus somewhat disingenuous. The author also stated that, in the case of Syria, the circumstances drove Nasser to “break one of his cardinal rules: take authority wherever you can get it, but avoid responsibility like the plague.”
59. Itamar Rabinovich, *Syria under the Ba’th 1963-66: Party Army Symbiosis* (Jerusalem: Israel University Press, 1972), 25.
60. Hopwood, *Syria 1945-1986*, 45-48.
61. Joshua Teitelbaum, “The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, 1945-1958: Founding, Social Origins, Ideology,” *The Middle East Journal* (Volume 65, No. 2, Spring 2011), 232-233. The author argues there is a direct connection from the resurgence of the Ikhwan to the Aleppo artillery school massacre in 1979 to Hama in 1982. That line also extended to the rise of Sunni fundamentalism and the current insurrection.
62. “Letter from Bunker to Bartlett with attached Memorandum of Conversation, Bunker with Prime Minister Nehru, Delhi, 19 July 1958,” NACPM, GRDOS – 59, SA 1947-1959, Entry 1330 Miscellaneous Files, Lot file No. 62, D 43 (1 of 3), Subject Files SA 1957-1959, 790.00/7-1958, cover letter, 1-6. In a conversation between Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru referred to Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Sa’id as “a strange 19th century feudal character ... [who] had little concept of the changes, economic or social, which had come over the world in the last generation.” Many leftist politicians in the region shared that view primarily because al-Sa’id’s success in manipulating Iraqi politics was frustrating to them.
63. Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 118-127.
64. Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2004), 62-70.
65. Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 131.
66. Marr. *Modern History of Iraq*, 73.
67. “Dispatch from Baghdad to WDC, March 18, 1958,” NACPM, GRDOS – 59, CDF 55-59, NEA, 787.00/3-1858 (Box 3797), 1.
68. “Telegram from British Embassy Baghdad (Wright) to FO (Lloyd), February 11, 1958,” PRO, FO371/134222.
69. “Minute by Rose, FO, on Wright’s telegram and analysis, 21 March 1958,” PRO, FO371/134222. See also: “Minute (author unknown) on Wright’s telegram, February 27, 1958,” PRO, FO371/134222, that gives a more detailed analysis of

Kuwait's role, including the fact that it kept France and Britain supplied with oil during the Suez Crisis.

70. "Memorandum of Conversation Between President Eisenhower and Prime Minister Macmillan, Washington, June 9, 1958," DDEL, PPDDE, AWF, International Series, Box 24, Section Three: 1-2. In a meeting with the U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, Sa'id had demanded "money and Kuwait," threatening to resign if he did not get both. When Macmillan learned of the demand, he compared Sa'id to Nasser, stating, "Nuri (has) been difficult for some time and was now attempting a Nasser-type operation against Kuwait." The Prime Minister found it a "great shock ... to learn that Nuri has 'out and out threatened Kuwait." In his meeting with Eisenhower on 9 June 1958, Sir Patrick Dean, a Macmillan advisor, quickly interjected himself to downplay Sa'id's remarks, "Nuri wants money more than he does Kuwait which he can't really expect to have by this weekend."
71. "Telegram from British Embassy Baghdad (Wright) to FO (Lloyd), February 11, 1958," PRO, FO371/134222. Sir Michael Wright recommended the consideration of a "crash" program to build a pipeline from Kirkuk to the Persian Gulf and a deep water offloading facility on the Fao Peninsula near Basra. He recommended that, as a stopgap measure, London issue a clear declaration stating that any move against the pipeline in Syria or Lebanon would be considered "an aggressive act" and be met by "available means."
72. Robert McNamara, *Britain, Nasser and the Balance of Power in the Middle East 1952-1967: From the Egyptian Revolution to the Six Day War* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 128-130.
73. Geoffrey Warner, *Iraq and Syria 1941* (Newark: The University of Delaware Press, 1974), 86. According to Warner, the key to the British ability to reestablish control in Iraq lay in the precipitous nature of the 1941 coup and the poor planning of the plotters. Because of the lack of solid military planning and in-place Axis support, the regent, Abd-al-'Ilah, Nuri Sa'id, and other key pro-British elements escaped. In 1941, Churchill, despite Wavell's advice to the contrary, set about destroying Rashid Ali; in 1958, London hesitated. In 1958, Qasim would argue that his "revolution" was merely the fulfillment of 1941.
74. Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movement of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba'athists and Free Officers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 806. This work is often referred to as the best work on any Middle Eastern revolutionary movement because it is exhaustive. Batatu provides an outstanding analysis of social and political movements in Iraq and how these movements and individuals interacted to produce the July revolution of 1958. The author believes that this class involvement is what made 14 July a true revolution and not just another coup. Batatu talks of the coup and the class struggle as the product of almost irresistible historical forces. It was still a big surprise, not only when it happened, but also that it endured; it could have easily been another on the list of failed Baghdad revolts.

75. Harold Macmillan, *Riding the Storm, 1955-1958* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971), 510.
76. Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 145-147.
77. Elie Podeh, *The Quest for Hegemony in the Arab World: The Struggle over the Baghdad Pact* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 241-242.
78. Macmillan, *Riding the Storm*, 511. In addressing the aftermath, Macmillan stated, "All this was devastating news destroying at a blow a whole system of security which successive British Governments had built up." His view summed up to a great extent the interpretation of events from Washington as well, namely that the British "system of security" in the Middle East had largely collapsed, leaving only a fragile shell. Quite naturally, observers assumed that the Hashemite regime in Baghdad had succumbed to a coup backed by the United Arab Republic and Nasser. See also: Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The White House Years: Waging Peace, 1956-1961* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1965), 270; "Memorandum of a Conference with the President, White House, Washington, 14 July 1958," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960, Lebanon and Jordan*, Volume XI, 212.
79. Nutting, *Nasser*, 239-243.
80. "Minute for the FO by D.M.H. Riches on events in Iraq, 14 July 1958," PRO, FO371/132502.
81. Stephens, *Nasser, A Political Biography*, 293-295.
82. "Memorandum from the Director Hugh S. Cummings, Director of Intelligence and Research to Dulles, 5 November 1958," NACPM, GRDOS - 59, CDF 55-59, NEA, 787.00/11-558. (Box 3798), 1. See (USARMA, Baghdad telegram CS 134, November 6, 1958, 787.00/11-658) *FRUS, 1958-1960, Near East Region*, Volume XII, 351. In a related telegram, the Army Attaché at the American embassy paraphrased the official statement issued concerning Aref's arrest. The Iraqi news agency cited Aref's "repeated attempts to jeopardize public security" as the reason for his detention.
83. Robin Bidwell, "Fadhil Abbas al-Mahdawi (1915-1963)," *Dictionary of Modern Arab History* (London: Keagan Paul International, 1998), 262. Mahdawi was totally untrained as a jurist but for the Iraqi street he was entertaining as he harassed accused opposition members from the bench. He was executed along with Qasim following the 1963 coup.
84. "Memorandum from the Director for Intelligence and Research (Cumming) to Secretary of State Dulles, 25 November 1958," *FRUS, 1958-1960, Near East Region*, Volume XII, 353. See also: Roby C. Barrett, "Intervention in Iraq, 1958-1959," *The Middle East Institute: Policy Brief* (No. 11, April 2008): <http://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/intervention-in-iraq-robby-barrett.pdf> for a more detailed account of the Western reaction to Communist support for Qasim.
85. "Memorandum from the Director of Intelligence and Research (Cummings) to Dulles, 5 November 1958," NACPM, GRDOS - 59, CDF 55-59, NEA,

- 787.00/11-558. (Box 3798), 1. See also, Simon Smith, *Ending Empire in the Middle East: Britain, the United States and post-war decolonization, 1945-1973* (London: Routledge, 2012), 86-89.
86. Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, *Iraq since 1958: From Revolution to Dictatorship* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001), 58-67.
 87. *Ibid.*, 70-74. It should be noted that it was a miracle that he survived the assassination attempt. At almost point blank range, the group of attackers poured automatic weapons fire into his car, which was occupied by only his driver and himself with no security detail. The driver was killed and Qasim was wounded. In the confusion, the attackers ran assuming that they had killed Qasim, who had hidden on the floor of the car and played dead, only to discover hours later that he was wounded but still alive.
 88. "Telegram from US Embassy Baghdad to WDC on Qasim's death, 8 February 1963," John F. Kennedy Library (JFKL), Presidential Papers of John F. Kennedy (PPJFK), National Security File (NSF), Country Files: Iran – Iraq, Box 117, 1. See also, "Telegram from OUARMA US Embassy Baghdad to WDC, 13 February 1963," JFKL, PPJFK, NSF, Country Files: Iran – Iraq, Box 117, Section II, 1.
 89. Richard Sanders, excerpt (24 October 2002) at <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/51/217.html> from Andrew Cockburn and Patrick Cockburn, *Out of the Ashes: The Resurrection of Saddam* (New York: Harper, 1999). See also: Adel Darwish and Gregory Alexander, *Unholy Babylon: The Secret History of Saddam Hussein's War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 203, in which the author refers to CIA involvement in the 1963 coup. See Roby C. Barrett, "Intervention in Iraq 1958-1959," *The Middle East Institute – Policy Brief* (No. 11 April 2008), 12. While something of an overstatement, Ba'thist who later claimed that they came to power "on the backs of the Americans" were to some degree correct.
 90. "Telegram from US Embassy Baghdad to WDC on RCC formation, 8 February 1963," JFKL, PPJFK, NSF, Country Files: Iran – Iraq, Box 117: 1.
 91. Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movement of Iraq*, 982-987. Batatu commented, "The Communists fought as only men could fight who knew that no mercy was to be looked for in defeat." Batatu also put Communist dead between 8 and 10 February at more than 5,000 and quoted King Hussein of Jordan as stating that he knew "for a certainty" that the coup had the support of U.S. intelligence. With reference to this last statement, the entire U.S. government supported the coup.
 92. "Memorandum to Kennedy on Cover Sheet to Letter from Kennedy to Qudsi, 28 January 1963," JFKL, PPJFK, POF, Country Files: Syria General 1961-1963, Box 124A, 1. See also: Mufti, *Sovereign Creations*, 141. Syrian Ba'thists had outmaneuvered their Nasserist allies by announcing the coup on 7 March. They told their Nasserist counterparts that it had been postponed until 10 March and then executed it on 8 March. The upshot was that the Ba'thists were in control before the Nasserists realized what had happened. Ba'thist unity talks between the Iraqi and Syrian branches of the party had already been underway and these picked

- up steam. In spite of their talk about unity with the UAR, the Syrian Ba'athists had one-eye cocked over their shoulders, determined to prevent a repeat of their 1958-1961 debacles with Nasser and his supporters.
93. Mufti, *Sovereign Creations*, 148.
 94. Kerr, *Arab Cold War*, 67.
 95. Walid Khalidi and Yusuf Ibish, *Arab Political Documents 1963* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1963), 76, 80. This set of documents contains the transcripts of the meetings published by the Egyptians in *Al-Ahram* between 21 June and 22 July 1963 and broadcast over radio Cairo in an attempt to discredit the Ba'ath.
 96. Mufti, *Sovereign Creations*, 151-153.
 97. "Briefing Notes for the Director of Central Intelligence, Attachment on 'Ba'ath Ideology and Practice, 30 December 1963," CIA, CRES, CIA-RDP75-00001R000400380006-7, 28.
 98. "Memorandum from Komer to Bundy, 15 November 1963," JFKL, PPJFK, NSF, Country Files: Iraq, Box 117A, 1. See also: Mufti, *Sovereign Creations*, 157.
 99. "Telegram from British Embassy Cairo (Beeley) to FO, 14 August 1963," PRO FO371/172901, 2.
 100. Mufti, *Sovereign Creations*, 147.
 101. *Ibid.*, 162.
 102. *Ibid.*, 159-165. Mufti provides a useful outline of the events of November 1963 that lead to the Aref coup.
 103. "Briefing Notes for the Director of Central Intelligence, Iraq Situation, 30 December 1963," CIA, CRES, CIA-RDP71T00730R000200020004-5, 7.
 104. Nutting, *Nasser*, 337.
 105. Mufti, *Sovereign Creations*, 166-167.
 106. Devlin, *The Ba'ath Party*, 270.
 107. Faris and Husayn, *The Crescent in Crisis*, 106-107.
 108. Patrick Seale, *Assad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1990), 162-165.
 109. Spencer Tucker, *The Encyclopedia of Middle East Wars: The United States in the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, and Iraq Conflicts*, Volume I (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO Books, 2010), 30.
 110. Seale, *Assad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, 179.
 111. *Ibid.*, 179.
 112. *Ibid.*, 263.
 113. *Ibid.*, 261-264.
 114. M. Clement Hall, *The History of Syria, 1900-2012* (Boston: Charles River Editors, 2012). This is a short work that is not paginated, but it is a useful chronology of events, particularly as a quick reference guide.

115. Efraim Karsh and Inari Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein: A Political Biography* (New York: Grove Press, 1991): 110-121.
116. *Ibid.*, 104.
117. “The Massacre of the Military Artillery School at Aleppo – Special Report,” The Syrian Human Rights Committee (November 3, 2003): <http://www.shrc.org/en/?p=19785>.
118. Thomas Collelo, ed. “The Assad Era,” *Syria: A Country Study* (Washington: Government Printing Office (GPO) – Library of Congress, 1987): <http://countrystudies.us/syria/18.htm>.
119. *Ibid.*
120. Seale, *Assad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, 336, 267-289. The author provides an excellent explanation of how Assad found himself stuck in the seemingly endless conflict in Lebanon and assailed by all sides for his intervention.
121. Tony Badran, “Moussa Sadr and the Islamic Revolution in Iran . . . and Lebanon,” NOW. (August 9, 2010): https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/moussa_sadr_and_the_islamic_revolution_in_iran_and_lebanon.
122. Jubin M. Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009): 107-131.
123. David Arnold, “Syria’s Hama Massacre Recalled – A Lesson for Assad Today?” *Middle East Voices – Voice of America* (February 3, 2012): <http://middleeastvoices.voanews.com/2012/02/syrias-1982-hama-massacre-recalled-lesson-for-assad-today/>. The number of civilian deaths were estimated as high as 45,000 depending on the source. At the time, Western intelligence officials in the region believed the death toll to be between 20,000 to 30,000 people; most of the victims were civilians.
124. Hopwood, *Syria 1945-1986*, 66.
125. Seale, *Assad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, 338.
126. Edgar O’Balance, *Civil War in Lebanon, 1975-1992* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998): 62.
127. David Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Assad and Modern Syria* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005): 48.
128. Dilip Hiro, *The Essential Middle East: A Comprehensive Guide* (New York: Carroll & Graff Publishers, 2003): 342.
129. Lesch, *New Lion*, 47.
130. Hopwood, *Syria 1945-1986*, 70-71.
131. Seale, *Assad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, 421-440.
132. Ghayth N. Armanazi, “Syrian Foreign Policy at the Crossroads: continuity and change in the post Gulf War era,” in *State and Society in Syria and Lebanon*, edited by Youssef M. Choueiri (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993), 114.
133. Robert Fisk, “Syria Mourns the Death of a Golden Son: Basil Assad’s fatal car crash throws open the question of who will succeed the president, writes Robert

- Fisk in Beirut,” *The Independent*, 22 January 1994,, accessed at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/syria-mourns-death-of-a-golden-son-basil-assads-fatal-car-crash-throws-open-the-question-of-who-will-succeed-the-president-writes-robert-fisk-in-beirut-1408555.html>.
134. Flynt L. Leverett, *Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trial By Fire* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2005), 61. Lesch in *The New Lion* puts forth the argument offered by Bashar al-Assad that he was not groomed to replace his father but was chosen by the people. This strains credulity. It is possible that in the closeted world of the Assad regime, Bashar actually might believe that it, but that would cast doubt on his intelligence.
 135. Lesch, *New Lion*, 67.
 136. Eyal Zisser, “The Succession Struggle in Damascus,” *Middle East Quarterly*, September 1995, accessed at: <http://www.meforum.org/264/the-succession-struggle-in-damascus>.
 137. Lesch, *New Lion*, 76.
 138. Joshua Stacher, “Reinterpreting Authoritarian Power: Syria’s Hereditary Succession,” *The Middle East Journal*, Volume 65, No. 2, Spring 2011, 198.
 139. Raymond Hinnebusch, “Syria under Bashar: Between Economic Reform and Nationalist Realpolitik,” in *Syrian Foreign Policy from and the United States: From Bush to Obama* (Fife, Scotland: Lynne Rienner Publishers for the University of St. Andrews Centre for Syrian Studies, 2010), 8-9.
 140. Stacher, “Syria’s Hereditary Succession,” 201. Stacher takes exception to the family succession issue arguing that it was a function of the elites. While this is true to some extent, the elites had been culled and a situation created where they had no real option. It is like a chicken and egg argument, but in this case we know the chicken, Hafiz al-Assad, emerging as the sole ruler from the elite and staying there was the key to Bashar becoming president. There is no way that Bashar could become president if Hafiz al-Assad had not held the position. The elite should not entirely be ignored but it had been shaped by the senior Assad well before his death to accept Bashar as his replacement. Stacher talks about elite selection and the inability of Vice President Abd-al-Halim Khaddam to succeed Assad that would never happen under any circumstances in Alawite Syria because Khaddam was a Sunni.
 141. Rhonda Roumani, “Syria Frees 5 Political Activists,” *Washington Post*, 19 January 2006, accessed at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2006/01/18/AR2006011802332.html?nav=rss_print/asection.
 142. David Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 19.
 143. Lesch, *New Lion*, 96.
 144. Con Coughlin, *Saddam: His Rise and Fall* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004), 185.
 145. Helen Chapin Metz, *Iraq: A Country Study* (Washington, D.C.: The Library of Congress, 1988), 215-217. See also: Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 225-227.

146. Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 229.
147. Coughlin, *Saddam: His Rise and Fall*, 186.
148. Karch and Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein: A Political Biography*, 158-164.
149. Dave Johns, "The Crimes of Saddam Hussein – 1988 The Anfal Campaign," *Frontline – World*, 24 January 2006, accessed at: http://www.pbs.org/frontline-world/stories/iraq501/events_anfal.html. See also: Marr, *Modern History of Iraq*, 200-203.
150. Neil MacFarquhar, "Saddam Hussein: Defiant Dictator Who Ruled Iraq With Violence and Terror, Dies," *The New York Times*, 30 December 2006, accessed at: http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/30/world/middleeast/30saddam.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.
151. "The Gulf War 1991 – Milestones," Department of State, Office of the Historian, accessed at: <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1989-1992/gulf-war>.
152. Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, *Iraq since 1958*, 304-308.
153. Marr, *Modern History of Iraq*, 270-273.
154. Choueiri, *Arab Nationalism*, 205.
155. Fuad I. Khuri, *Imams and Emirs: State, Religion, and Sects in Islam* (London: Saqi Books, 1990), 57. Khuri explains the difference between Max Weber's definition of a state with a "political personality" and a "jurist personality." The latter is a modern Western-style state; it can sue and be sued, and the latter, he argues, is represented by the Ibadī imamate in Oman and the Zaydī imamate in Yemen both creating a "unique political personality" that has existed since the 9th century. Khuri points out that the concept of state in the Arab world tends to refer to governments or regimes that resembled the concepts found in Ibn Khaldun's medieval works on society and government. His states lacked the attributes of and were in fact not nation-states. The states of the Greater Levant—Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq—reflect this. See also: Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).
156. Byron Farwell, *Queen Victoria's Little Wars* (New York: Norton, 1985), 27-31.
157. Mwafad Haded Tikriti, *Elites, Administration, and Public Policy: A Comparative Study of Republic Regimes in Iraq 1958-1976* (Austin: University of Texas, 1976), 141.
158. Ali A. Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 7.
159. Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2006), 109.
160. Discussion with a senior U.S. foreign service officer on issues associated with the 2008 agreement and status of forces, June 2015.
161. Discussions with multiple Arab military and intelligence officers during the spring and summer of 2004.

162. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*, 158-166. Ricks views were hotly disputed at the time, but the outcome speaks for itself. Of all the experts on Iraq known to this author, not a single one recommended an invasion. In fact, the assessments went from “high risk” at the most optimistic end to “a disaster” at the pessimistic end. See also Catherine Philip, “Spruned Saddam Henchman was Brains behind Isis,” *The Times*, 21 April 2015, accessed at: <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/middleeast/iraq/article4417611.ece>. Many Sunni Iraqi military and intelligence officers found their way into the ranks of the insurgency and finally organizations like ISIS. They have been the key to success in many operations.
163. Ali A. Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 148-152. Even taking into consideration, Allawi’s personal distaste for Bremer and the Bush administration, his comments ring true in light of subsequent events.
164. Shannon Monaghan, “Churchill on Living on an Ungrateful Volcano,” *History News Service*, 1 October 2007, accessed at: <http://historynewsservice.org/2007/10/churchill-on-iraq-living-on-an-ungrateful-volcano/>. In January 2003, in a conversation with W. Roger Louis, the leading scholar on the British Empire and author of *The British Empire in the Middle East 1945-1951*, he commented on the apparent preparations for the invasion of Iraq, “If an invasion happens, it will be viewed as a mistake on the level of Vietnam.”
165. “You’re either with us or against us,” George W. Bush speech, *CNN*, 6 November 2001, accessed at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2001/US/11/06/gen.attack.on.terror/>.
166. Lesch, *The Fall of the House of Assad*, 12-13.
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