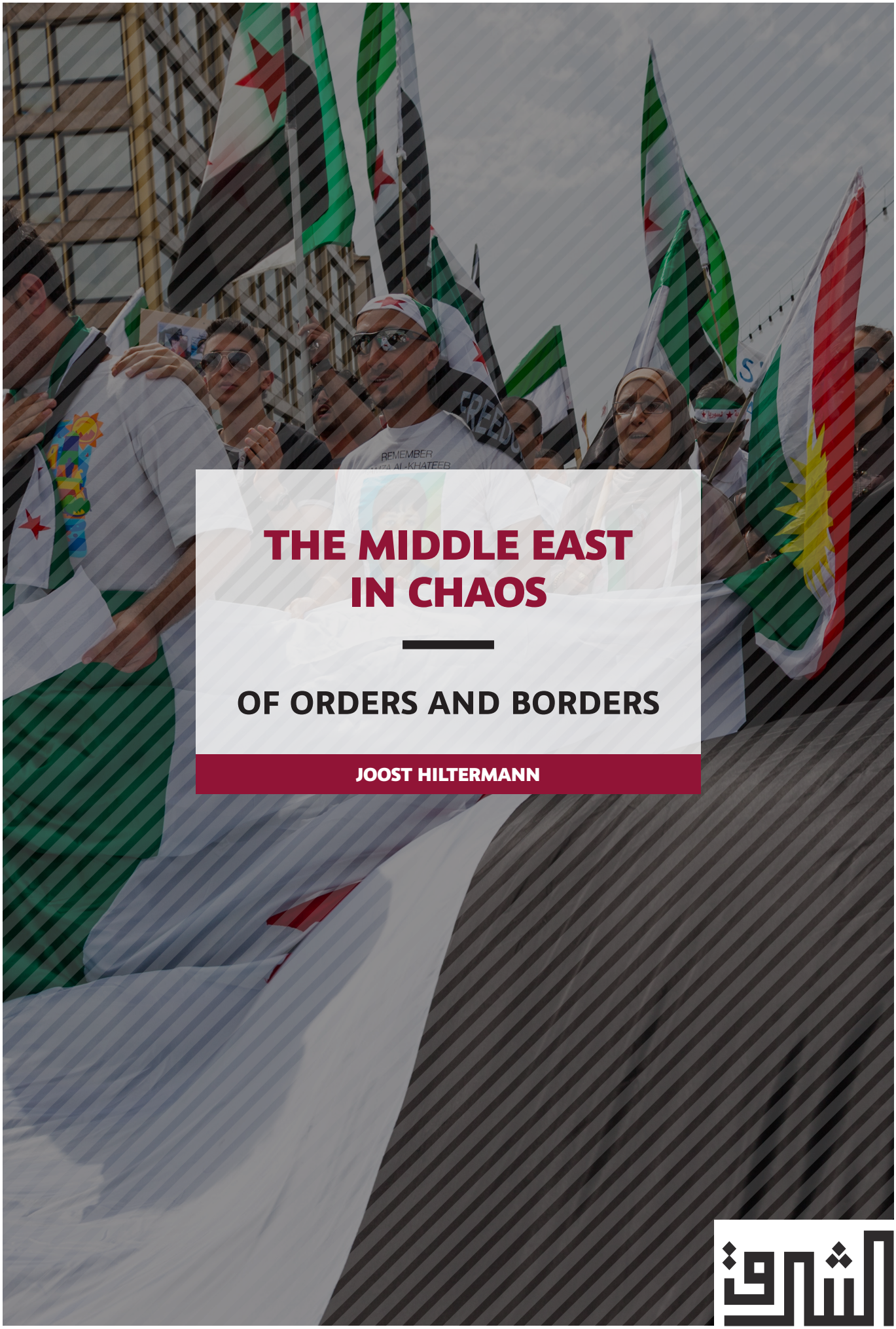

THE MIDDLE EAST IN CHAOS

OF ORDERS AND BORDERS

JOOST HILTERMANN

ALSHARQ FORUM ANALYSIS SERIES

ALSHARQ FORUM

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Abstract: It has been a hundred years since the outlines of the modern Middle East first took shape. Britain and France, having emerged victorious from the First World War, set out to divide the remnants of the defeated Ottoman Empire. The borders they drew have survived till this day; the political orders they established evolved, but never quite escaped their multiple dependencies on outside powers, giving rise to endemically dysfunctional state systems. This century-old order/disorder came under sustained challenge during the 2011 popular uprisings that coursed through the MENA region. The subsequent collapse of several Arab states in turn provided opportunity to two groups of non-state actors to erase borders they deemed unjust and work toward creating new ones: the Kurds, who had suffered grievously in their struggle for a state denied them 100 years earlier; and adherents of the Islamic State, who seek to found a worldwide Islamic Caliphate that would transcend nation states. That both groups have failed so far in their aspirations attests to the durability of the MENA region's borders. Their chance may yet come, but in the meantime, the answer to unjust borders may lie in the creation of better functioning political arrangements within them. As Middle Eastern societies start pulling themselves out of conflict, as Iraq seems to be doing today, this is the challenge they must face: to refashion social contracts and establish governing structures able to equitably accommodate a highly diverse population's needs and peacefully manage territorial disputes with neighbors.

When they meet with trauma and survive it, a people's aspiration to surmount it and prevent its recurrence does not die. On the contrary: it gains strength over time, despite setbacks – sometimes of the disastrous variety – until a time arrives that offers the chance to break through externally imposed barriers and realise long-nourished dreams. But success is not guaranteed. A people's agency – their willingness to struggle and make sacrifices – may be essential in the achievement of their goals, but it alone does not suffice. The ever-shifting geopolitical environment, too, will play a role in shaping the outcome.

Two recent examples: the Iraqi Kurds' September 2017 independence referendum, which proved to be a colossal misjudgment of timing; and the failed Arab uprisings, which sought to upend the state systems created in the aftermath of the Ottoman Empire's collapse (and which have evolved in the hundred years since but were dysfunctional throughout and, ultimately, had lost their last thin shred of legitimacy). These two sets of events were separate but also related: the collapsing Arab state order encouraged the Kurds to believe they could press forward with their statehood ambition. They also have the same progenitor: the chaos that resulted from the First World War and disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, which, increasingly dysfunctional itself, nonetheless provided a sense of order to its denizens for centuries.

Borders and Their Victims

To the victor the spoils, to the vanquished the deepest of grudges fed by unconsummated revenge. The victorious powers, Britain and France, started carving up the empire's remains well before the fight had ended. They bickered over borders for some years from the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement onward, finally settling on the arrangement that survives today. They broke their promises to subject populations almost as fast as they made them; in many cases, these were not

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real promises but mere ideas floated in the heat of bargaining and drawing lines on paper. The Kurds did not get a state of their own, as they had demanded and thought they had been promised, while the Arab "nation" was divided into various states, their borders defined by imperial interests that separated family from family and tribe from tribe – access to water and oil being primary drivers. Turkey emerged as a rump state broken off from the empire; yet, fueled by a new nationalist fervor under Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, it was able to curb both its adversaries' territorial ambitions and the Kurds' quest for independence.[1]

The Kurds, one of the world's largest non-state nations, were clear victims of the imperial powers' manipulations and, in their view, treachery. Offered the prospect of a state in the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres – in a geographic area that did not encompass the majority of Kurds – they were denied it only three years later in the Treaty of Lausanne. In the architecture of the new Middle East, they became four separate Kurdish minorities: in Turkey, Iran and the newly formed Arab states of Iraq and Syria. Their subsequent history has been one of struggle for rights and secession, for separate independence or belated unification into a single overarching Kurdish state.

Their motivation is easy to understand: tribes, clans and families were torn asunder by new borders; shepherds could no longer take their flocks from northern Syria's lowlands to their habitual summer pastures in the mountains of south-

eastern Turkey; merchants encountered uncustomary customs fees to trade within their own society; political association and representation were permitted only if they entailed fealty to a central state experienced as alien and habitually hostile; and any dissent – in particular any expression of cross-boundary Kurdish nationalism – was violently suppressed. Whatever they thought of the post-WWI borders, to Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria these borders became sacrosanct; they viewed any attempt to erase them as an existential threat and a cause for banding together despite their deep political, ideological and geostrategic differences.[2] "Partition" (taqseem) became the most hated word in the Arab vocabulary.[3]

The Arabs gained statehood, but the decades-old aspiration articulated by Arab nationalists for a single entity bound by language, culture and history was thwarted.[4] They resented the – in their view –arbitrary nature of the borders imposed on them, and they resisted Britain's declared intent to create a Jewish homeland on Arab soil as a particularly insidious attempt at keeping them divided. Fired up by such iniquities, pan-Arabism enjoyed mass appeal during a major part of the 20th century. It was fed by secular elites who, at times, tried to give it concrete expression, and a jump-start, by joining their state with another in which they detected similar aspirations: Egypt and Syria, Iraq and Jordan, and similar efforts. These projects invariably were short-lived, if they got off the ground at all. What is more, over time the ruling elites essentially bought into the borders they had inherited, and heartily embraced the separate Iraqi, Syrian, Jordanian, Egyptian, etc., identities that distinguish the states of the modern Middle East.[5]

The Arab armies' defeat in the 1967 war, humiliatingly labelled the "six-day war", was the turning point. It showed that pan-Arabism had failed (it was replaced by Palestinian nationalism for some time).[6] Secular elites went into decline and new ideologies came to the fore, led by Islamists whose aspiration was pan-Islamic more than pan-Arab; in other words, ethnically color-blind, in principle uniting Arabs, Turks, Kurds and others under a Muslim banner. Their first political expression was the Muslim Brotherhood, a group with origins in Egypt but sprouting ideologically likeminded confrères throughout the MENA region. Blocked by entrenched secular regimes supported by the West, they survived mainly by eschewing overt politics.[7] They also experienced a degree of radicalization, as frustrated youths gravitated to battlefields in Afghanistan in the 1980s and, later, post-U.S. invasion Iraq. Here they gained organizing and fighting skills, and built a reputation as heroes who stood up to foreign invaders, a model many at home wished they could emulate. In their most extreme organizational manifestation, the Islamic State, they aimed to restore the caliphate that Ataturk had abolished following the Ottoman Empire's demise.[8]

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When the Arab uprisings broke out in 2011, protesters were propelled not by the injustice or arbitrariness of their countries' borders but by the nature of their governing arrangements; these had bred nepotism, cronyism and other forms of corruption, and increasingly failed to provide services and distribute the fruits of whatever growth took place (which differed from country to country, with most wealth accumulating in

the Gulf states). The quest for a change in borders came from two limited quarters: the Kurds, who had none of their own and had suffered grievously in their century-long pursuit of statehood; and adherents of the Islamic State, who celebrated their June 2014 breach of the Iraqi-Syria border as the first step toward the establishment of a worldwide Islamic caliphate that would transcend nation-states. That both groups failed attests to the durability, as opposed to the alleged artificiality, of borders in the MENA region. How are borders changed? If history is a guide, boundary changes, especially when contested, result mainly from dramatic events that overturn more than just borders – such as the dissolution of an empire – with clear winners and losers. The First World War was one such earth-shaking set of events; so was the Second World War, which resulted in the creation of the European Union – an incremental consolidation of nation-states into a single unit, with respective borders partially erased over time. The war's outcome also led to the partitioning of Germany into two separate states; they reunited peacefully only when the Soviet Union collapsed more than four decades later. The USSR's dissolution also allowed Czechs and Slovaks to part ways – amicably. Elsewhere, new states and borders were forged in war, such as in the Balkans and Sudan/South Sudan. Even within Europe, separatist tendencies, long contained for the havoc everyone knew they can cause, have again begun to gather steam. Witness developments in Spain/Catalonia in 2017.[9]

If anything, Kurds are avid students of history and geography, their main objective being to understand what convergence of factors would help deliver a state of their own, and when. They have repeatedly engaged in alliances with greater powers in the hope that the latter, in exchange for the benefits they derived from the alliance, would support the Kurdish quest for independence.[10] When Iraqi Kurdish leaders saw Iraq weakened after 2003, Syria dissolve into civil war after 2011, and Turkey taking a self-destructive turn after 2015; and when they successfully exploited Western states' need for local ground forces in fighting the Islamic State after 2014 by providing such manpower and garnering, in return, military hardware and training, as well as political support and sympathy, they thought their moment had come.

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In September 2017, Masoud Barzani, the president of the Kurdish region in Iraq, brushed aside all objections, including from those same allies – the United States, European governments, and Turkey – and ignored the threats of his adversaries – the federal government in Iraq, as well as Iran. Yet, in his zeal he misevaluated the enduring strength of nationalist currents in Iraq and Syria, Turkey's leverage over the Kurds' revenue stream from oil exports, Iran's determination to deploy proxy forces to prevent the Kurds' departure from Iraq, and Washington's willingness to condone the above actors' combined counter-measures due to its overriding interest in maintaining Iraq's territorial unity. Instead of gaining the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan, Kurdish leaders were forced to withdraw their security forces from Iraqi territories, including Kirkuk, whose oil wealth would have constituted the engine of economic self-reliance, setting back their political aspiration by decades.[11]

The Islamic State's territorial ambition was likewise defeated, but by different means. It

was stranded in the group's strategic decision to launch its project from a territorial base – rather than trying to build a geographically dispersed movement that would be more difficult to target, such as al-Qaeda and its various affiliates have done. In late 2017, ISIS fighters had largely been driven from Iraq and Syria and the border restored. The group may yet survive, feeding on the grievances that once gave rise to it, but it is unlikely that it can soon embark on another attempt to restore the caliphate through conquest of territory.

Neither group should be expected to abandon its aspirations. Yet if they have learned from their respective failures, they will choose a different means to improve their prospects while waiting for the golden moment.

Orders and Their Disorder

Once they had carved up the post-Ottoman Middle East by establishing the new states' borders, Britain and France set about shaping the political order within each set of boundaries, in all cases installing pliant regimes.[12] These were partly fashioned in their own image: monarchies in the case of British-mandated states, republics in those managed by France. For Britain, the resort to the Hashemites as rulers of Iraq and Jordan was a reward for their support during the fight against the Ottomans in Arabia; both they and the form of government over which they presided were alien to the subject populations; in Iraq, they lasted for 35 years, in Jordan until today.[13]

A defining feature of the order created by Britain and France was their understanding of Middle Eastern societies as essentially a conglomeration of ethnic and confessional communities bereft of a larger organizing principle and which therefore could not be expected to congeal into coherent states. They played on these differences with an imperial divide-and-rule strategy, favoring minority

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groups, and especially religious minorities, to prevent majorities from gaining power and pursuing a more independent course: the Jews in Palestine, Alawites in Syria, and Kurds in Iraq.

The new states' paths to formal independence varied in length, but their dependence on Western metropoles (and in some cases during the Cold War on the Soviet Union) for military protection was long-lasting; in exchange, they offered what Western states wanted most: access to resources, loyalty (and suppression of nationalist sentiment, which the USSR exploited), allegiance and even material support in war (for example, over Kuwait), and a peace treaty with Israel.

Over time, pliant regimes gave way to unreliable ones, depending on who was in charge; the societies themselves were in constant flux, and the world around them underwent dramatic change in the span of a century. Indeed, the post-Ottoman Arab experience is a chronicle of societies seeking to cope with constant interference from more powerful outside actors, part despised for their neo-colonial exploitation of natural resources and support of authoritarian regimes enabling it, part desired for their modernizing attributes; and to resist them or, when possible, to transform them and make them their own. The hybrid nature of the states that resulted – partly driven by imperial interests, partly reflecting pre-existing local structures and practices – introduced a persistent legitimacy crisis that, like all chronic ailments, may prove the post-Ottoman order/disorder's undoing.

The 2011 Arab uprisings exposed their societies' deep fault lines and failures in governance, but the "people in the squares" in turn lacked the will and organization to provide an alternative vision; in most cases, their experiments in popular mobilization were either crushed or diluted, or they dissolved in civil war as beleaguered police states escalated repression

In a hundred years, the region experienced a gamut of political and ideological experiments, but almost invariably state systems, whatever their ideological veneer, were based on minority rule, militarized and repressive, and brooked no opposition to outside powers' extractive hunger. Military coups became the preferred means to gain power, especially in the late 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Autocratic rulers used military-security institutions to control societies, which crushed political life and, in a vicious cycle, disabled mechanisms ensuring the peaceful and regular rotation of power. Military rule became endemic. As regimes changed by force, civil institutions built by the colonial powers, such as national parliaments, courts and judicial authorities, however deficient, became degraded; this removed any semblance of checks and balances or technocrat-driven service provision, and left in place unaccountable kleptocracies fed directly or indirectly by oil rents.

As Middle Eastern societies were transformed, they gradually lost their creators' defining imprint. It would be wrong today to blame these societies' many ills on the governing structures they originally received. They assumed lives of their own, with their own internal struggles over ideology, politics and resource allocation. Yet these lives were also shaped in constant interaction with an outside world that was economically and militarily much stronger. This led to outside "problem solving" through military interventions, sometimes by invitation (most recently, Russia in Syria in 2015) but more often not (Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011 are recent examples). External interventions almost invariably compounded the dysfunctionality of governance rather than improving it.

The 2011 Arab uprisings exposed their societies' deep fault lines and failures in governance, but the "people in the squares" in turn lacked the will and organization to provide an alternative vision; in most cases, their experiments in popular mobilization were either crushed or diluted, or they dissolved in civil war as beleaguered police states escalated repression. Yet the quest for a better functioning state system persists in the Middle East; the absence of a solution merely invites a more vigorous popular rerun down the line. And the appropriate answer can be generated only from within each society; anything less will be as dysfunctional and vulnerable to external interference.

Better Orders Through Different Borders?

The popular uprisings' unhappy outcome allowed non-state actors to exploit the ensuing chaos to press their own ambition to modify and even erase borders they long rejected. These were two very different groups: the Islamic State and the Kurds. Both failed to achieve their objective.

Of the two, the Kurds' goal arguably was the less ambitious – even if it also has proved unattainable until now: having been denied statehood a century ago, Kurdish leaders never wanted more than what in their view everyone else already had: a state of their own. This would have entailed an adjustment of existing borders to accommodate a large minority population, and therefore a reduction in size of the Kurds' "host" states Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. None accepts being truncated, and internal turmoil in Iraq and Syria, in particular, has not produced a situation in which the Kurds could succeed.

The Islamic State had the larger ambition of creating a caliphate for Muslims worldwide. This would have required demolishing borders not just in the Middle East but much further afield. It would be a mistake to underestimate the potency and lasting appeal of such an ideological project, or the strength of jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda that are working patiently toward that goal. Yet it is difficult to see how it can succeed in a highly diverse Muslim world, with plenty of countervailing forces with greater or lesser local legitimacy.

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Of course, borders will change again, including in the Middle East, but it may take another earth-shaking event before that happens. In the meantime, the answer to unjust borders may have to come from the construction of better functioning political arrangements within them, based on revamped post-conflict social contracts and outfitted with governing structures able to equitably accommodate a highly diverse population's needs and to peacefully manage territorial disputes with neighbors. This, too, may look as if it is an unrealistic goal. But as Middle Eastern societies start pulling themselves out of conflict, as Iraq seems to be doing today, this is a question they must address. The way in which they answer it will determine the nature of the region's future orders and borders.

Endnotes

* This essay is a spin-off from a larger piece, as yet unpublished, about the MENA region's increasingly intersecting conflicts; some text may overlap. Views expressed herein are entirely my own.

1- For a concise conceptual approach to this period, see Toby Dodge, "The Danger of Analogical Myths: Explaining the Power and Consequences of the Sykes-Picot Delusion", LSE Middle East Centre Blog, 28 September 2016, at: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2016/10/10/the-danger-of-analogical-myths-explaining-the-power-and-consequences-of-the-sykes-picot-delusion/; and Nicholas Danforth, "The Kurds, Sykes-Picot and Quest for Redrawing Borders", Bipartisan Policy Center, 10 February 2016, at: https://bipartisanpolicy.org/blog/kurds-sykes-picot-redrawing-borders/. For a history, see James Barr, A Line in the Sand: Britain, France and the Struggle that Shaped the Middle East (London: Simon & Schuster, 2011).

2- The best general historical work on the Kurds remains David McDowall, A Modern History of the Kurds. London: I.B. Tauris, 2000.

3- In Turkish, the term is bölünmek – partition; in Farsi, it is jodayee talabi – separatism/irredentism. Both carry a strongly negative connotation.

4- See Ernest Dawn, «The Origins of Arab Nationalism,» in Rashid Khalidi, Lisa Anderson, Muhammad Muslih and Reeva Simon, eds., The Origins of Arab Nationalism (1991), pp. 3-30.

5- Of course, there are exceptions. Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait was driven by a rejection of that particular border and of Kuwait's independent status instead of being Iraq's 19th province.

6- See Walid Kazziha, Revolutionary Transformation in the Arab World: Habash and his Comrades from Nationalism to Marxism (London: Charles Knight & Co., 1975).

7- The Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan was an exception. The Hashemite king brought the group into politics in the early 1970s when he felt his reign threatened by Palestinian nationalism – a fine example of effective co-optation.

8- For an overview of modern jihadism, see Crisis Group Special Report N°1, Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, 14 March 2016. Also see, Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou, "The Militarization of Islamism: Al-Qā'ida and Its Transnational Challenge," The Muslim World, Vol. 10, No. 2 (April 2011), pp. 307-23.

9- A particularly tricky problem presents itself when the border is a natural waterway, whose course changes over time. Although the Netherlands and Belgium do not have a visible border in most places – only road signs announcing that you have just crossed it – one part of it is the Maas/Meuse. After the river bed shifted, and following lengthy negotiations, that part of the border was changed by mutual agreement in November 2016. See, Washington Post, 29 November 2016, at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/11/29/netherlands-and-belgium-to-end-lawless-border-oddity-by-swapping-land-peacefully/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.12755c68b8de. These negotiations took place between two very close allies within the overarching structure of the European Union. Compare this with the Shatt al-Arab that divides southern Iraq from Iran, its shifting course, the intermittent negotiations and short-lived agreements over the border's exact locations, and the conflict for which its contested nature provided a pretext: the Iran-Iraq war.

10- The Kurds' plight is that greater powers see an alliance with them almost invariably as tactical, whereas the Kurds see it as strategic. See Joost Hiltermann, "They Were Expendable", London Review of Books, 17 November 2016.

11- See Joost Hiltermann and Maria Fantappie, "Twilight of the Kurds", Foreign Policy, January 2018.

12- In the case of most of the smaller Gulf states, decolonization did not happen till the early 1970s.

13- See Peter Sluglett, "An improvement on colonialism? The 'A' mandates and their legacy in the Middle East," International Affairs, Vol. 90, No. 2 (2014), pp. 413-427.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joost Hiltermann is Program Director, Middle East & North Africa, at the International Crisis Group, an independent NGO dedicated to preventing deadly conflict, for which he has worked in various capacities since 2002. Before that, he was Executive Director of the Arms Division of Human Rights Watch (1994-2002) and database coordinator and research coordinator at the Palestinian human rights organisation Al-Haq in Ramallah (1985-1990). He holds a PhD in Sociology from the University of California, Santa Cruz and is author of A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq, and the Gassing of Halabja (Cambridge, 2007), and Behind the Intifada: Labor and Women's Movements in the Occupied Territories (Princeton, 1991). He has been a frequent contributor to The New York Review of Books, The London Review of Books, The New York Times, Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy, The Atlantic, Middle East Report, and other publications, and has given multiple talks on issues pertaining to the MENA region, including at Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Columbia, Brown, MIT, Tufts, NYU, Georgetown, among others.

ABOUT ALSHARQ FORUM

The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. The Forum does this through promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue, social justice, and public-spirited research.

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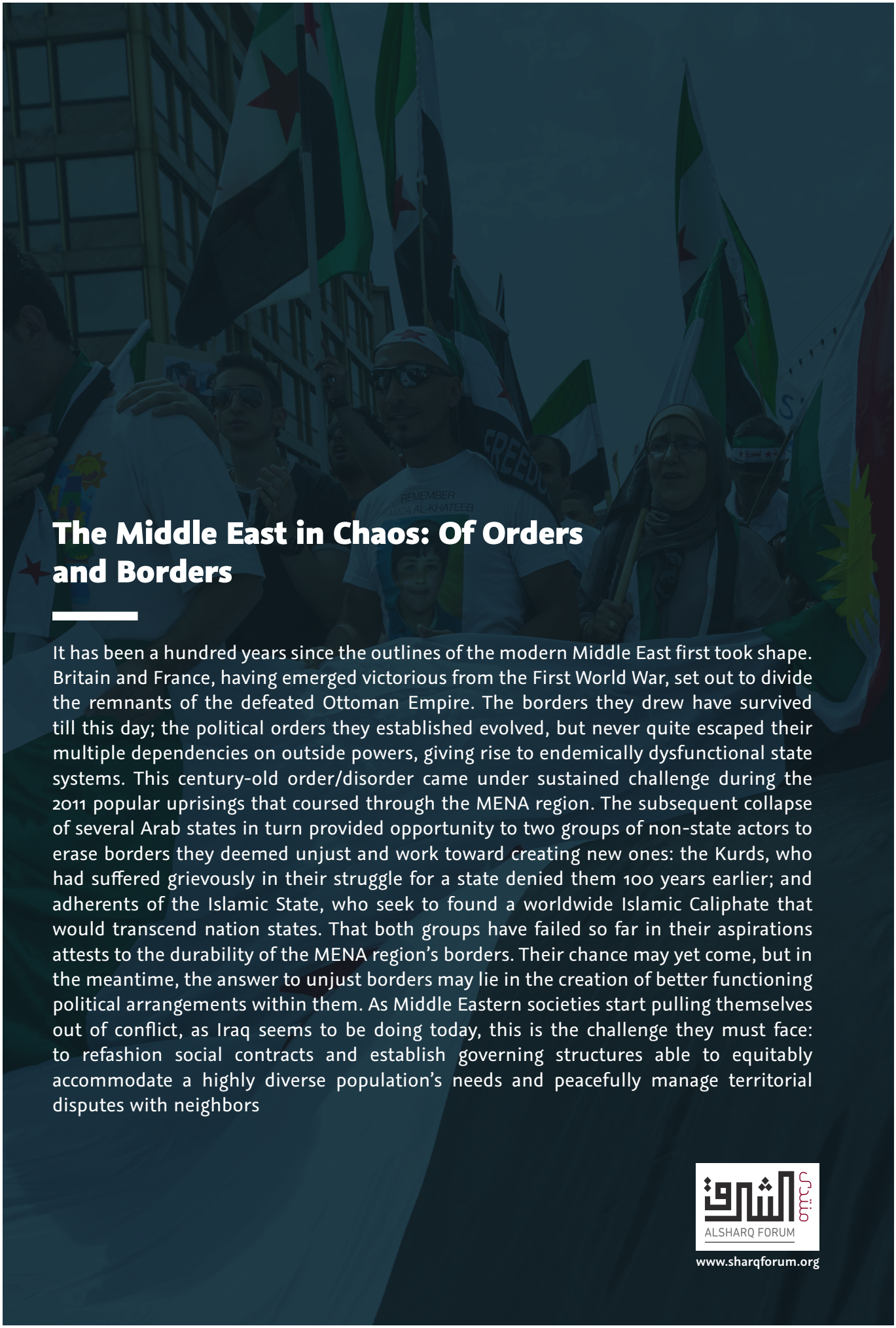

The Middle East in Chaos: Of Orders and Borders

It has been a hundred years since the outlines of the modern Middle East first took shape. Britain and France, having emerged victorious from the First World War, set out to divide the remnants of the defeated Ottoman Empire. The borders they drew have survived till this day; the political orders they established evolved, but never quite escaped their multiple dependencies on outside powers, giving rise to endemically dysfunctional state systems. This century-old order/disorder came under sustained challenge during the 2011 popular uprisings that coursed through the MENA region. The subsequent collapse of several Arab states in turn provided opportunity to two groups of non-state actors to erase borders they deemed unjust and work toward creating new ones: the Kurds, who had suffered grievously in their struggle for a state denied them 100 years earlier; and adherents of the Islamic State, who seek to found a worldwide Islamic Caliphate that would transcend nation states. That both groups have failed so far in their aspirations attests to the durability of the MENA region's borders. Their chance may yet come, but in the meantime, the answer to unjust borders may lie in the creation of better functioning political arrangements within them. As Middle Eastern societies start pulling themselves out of conflict, as Iraq seems to be doing today, this is the challenge they must face: to refashion social contracts and establish governing structures able to equitably accommodate a highly diverse population's needs and peacefully manage territorial disputes with neighbors

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