How Syria’s Victory Reshapes Mideast

The failure of the U.S.-Israeli-Saudi “regime change” project in Syria changes the future of the Mideast, possibly ushering in an era of greater secularism and tolerance, writes ex-British diplomat Alastair Crooke.

By Alastair Crooke

Plainly, Syria’s success – notwithstanding the caution of President Bashar al-Assad in saying that signs of success are not success itself – in resisting, against the odds, all attempts to fell the state suggest that a tipping point in the geopolitics of the region has occurred.

We have written before how the Syria outcome dwarfs that of Israel’s 2006 war against Hezbollah, significant though the result of that war was, too.

Both events taken together have brought America’s unipolar moment in the Middle East to an end (though not globally, since the U.S. still retains its necklace of military bases across the region). The successes have corroded badly the reputation of the Gulf States and have discredited fired-up Sunni jihadism as a “go-to” political tool for Saudi Arabia and its Western backers.

But, aside from the geopolitics, the Syria outcome has created a physical connectivity and contiguity that has not existed for some years: the border between Iraq and Iran is open; the border between Syria and Iraq is opening; and the border between Lebanon and Syria, too, is open. This constitutes a critical mass both of land, resources and population of real weight.

The region will listen intently to what these victors will have to say about their future vision for the region – and for Islam. In particular, how Syria articulates the lessons for Middle Eastern societies in light of its war experience will have a profound import.

This discussion has barely begun in Syria, and has not reached a conclusion – and may not, for some time; but we can speculate a little.

At present, talk is divided between Levantism, which is based in the idea of cultural diversity, such as has existed – alongside periodic acute tensions – in Lebanon and Syria, and Arab nationalism. The framework for both concepts being understood to be a non-assertive secularism within a state structure, encompassing equality before the law.

Arab nationalism looks toward a wide Arab cultural unity, rooted primarily in the Arabic language. Levantism essentially was an Ottoman inheritance. Then (in
Ottoman times), there was no “Syria” (in the sense of a nation–state), but viliyat (Ottoman provinces), which were more like city-states that were permitted a large quota of self-administration and discretion for diverse societies and sects to live in their own cultural and spiritual ways, including the right to speak their individual languages. (Syrian diversity historically represented the legacy of many foreign occupations, with each leaving behind something of their DNA, their cultures and religion).

**Colonial Strategies**

Under the subsequent French colonial rule, the colonizers first created separate mini-statelets of these Syrian minorities, but when that policy failed, they reversed into forced unification of Syria’s diverse parts (apart from Lebanon), through a stratagem of imposing the French language instead of Arabic; French law instead of the Ottoman law and mores; and of promoting Christianity in order to undercut Islam. Inevitably, this created the pushback that gave Syria its characteristic suspicion of foreign intervention and its determination to recover a vision of what it was to be Syrian. (The French “regime-changed” Damascus in 1920, 1925, 1926, and 1945, and imposed martial law during most of the pauses in between the coups).

But the nationalism, which the French repression had provoked into life, pulled in two different directions: the Muslim Brotherhood, the major Islamic movement, wanted to grasp Syria as a Sunni Islamic state, while, in contrast, the more Westernized urban élites wanted to “take” Syria – as not exactly a separate nation-state – but more a part of the whole Arab world, and to be domestically organized as a unified, secular, and at least partly Westernized state.

As Patrick Seale noted in The Struggle for Syria: “Above all, [for the secular nationalists], disunity had to be overcome. Their answer was to try to bridge the gaps between rich and poor through a modified version of socialism, and between Muslims and minorities through a modified concept of Islam. Islam, in their view, needed to be considered politically not as a religion but as a manifestation of the Arab nation.

“Thus, the society they wished to create, they proclaimed, should be modern (with, among other things, equality for women), secular (with faith relegated to personal affairs), and defined by a culture of ‘Arabism’ overriding the traditional concepts of ethnicity.”

In short, what they sought was the very antithesis of the objectives of the already strong and growing Muslim Brotherhood. And by 1973, in an attempt to square the circle between conservative, assertive Sunnism and the nationalist “soft” Islam, the fatwa (by a Shi‘i cleric) asserting Hafez al-Assad to be Shi‘i
Muslim (rather than heretic as Sunnis viewed all Alawites to be), exploded the situation. (The French brokered constitution required that the head of state be “Muslim”).

A Cycle of Violence

The Muslim Brotherhood was beside itself in anger at the designation of then President Hafez Assad as Muslim, and thus began a cycle of bloody violence with organized terrorist attacks on the government, and on al-Assad’s inner circle—and retaliatory attacks by the government—which, in effect, is only now coming to a conclusion with the defeat of militant, jihadi Sunnism’s attempt to seize the state and to oust the “heretic” Alawite.

The outcome of this iconic struggle has profound regional implications (even if we cannot, now, see how the deliberations about the vision for the future of the Levant will finally conclude).

We can say, firstly, Islamism generally is the major loser in the struggle for the Levant. Both in Syria and Iraq, ordinary Levantine Sunnis have been sickened by intolerant, puritan Islam. This orientation of Islam (Wahhabism) that demanded (on pain of death) a linear singularity of meaning to Islam, which asserts its “truth” from the certainty conveyed from a mechanical, procedural, approach to validating selected “sayings” of the Prophet Mohammad (known as “scientific” Salafism), has failed.

Armed jihadism has failed to leverage this linear singularity as the “idea” with which to crush the polyvalent Levantine model and replace it with a rigid, monovalent literalism. Just to be clear, it is not just the non-Muslims and the minority Sunni and Shi‘i sects who have had enough of it: Sunni Syrians and Iraqis, more generally, have too (especially after the experience of Raqa’a and Mosul).

The public reaction to the Wahhabi interventions in both nations is likely to push Sunni Islam firstly to embrace polyvalence in Islam more tightly (even to the extent, possibly, of looking to Iran and its “mode of being” as a possible model); and secondly, to embrace further the Arab secular “way,” too. In short, one “fallout” may be a more secular style of Islam, in contrast to the Muslim Brotherhood’s emphasis on external, visible, exclusionary, identity politics.

But, if the Syrian and Iraqi nationalist Islamic impulse is over, what of the other “double aspect” to Syria – its legacy of Levantine diversity and polyvalence versus the secular nationalist perspective that diversity constitutes a primary cause of national weakness. And which sees its primary task as that of integrating the population into a single political and social
structure.

Israel’s New Scheme

Well, much in this latter respect will hang on Washington: the French colonists leveraged the Syrian minorities against the Syrian majority (in the French interest). And now America seems intent – with Israel pushing hard from behind – to leverage the Kurds against the Syrian State (in the interest of limiting the extent of Iranian presence within Syria, and even to try to break the contiguity between Iraq and Syria).

That latter prospect seems unlikely. The U.S.-Israeli Kurdish “project” in Syria may fail, as Kurds (much less concentrated in northeastern Syria than they are in northern Iraq), conclude that it would be better and wiser to come to terms with Moscow (and therefore find some modus vivendi with Damascus), rather than trusting to the constancy of American promises of autonomy – amid the almost universal regional hostility to this high-risk independence project. Ultimately, it must be obvious to the Kurds that it is Russia (and Iran) that represent the incoming tide into the northern tier states.

The Syrian Kurds never were in the Masoud Barzani camp and long have had working relations with the Syrian army and Russian forces (versus ISIS), during the conflict. It seems, in any event, that the U.S. main focus is shifting away from Syria to Iraq, as the locus in which they hope to push back against Iran. Again, the prospects there for the U.S. to achieve this aim are poor (Iran is well dug in) – and if mishandled, the Kurdish independence “project” easily could spin into violence and region-wide instability.

Barzani’s leadership is not secure (the Turks are livid at his double-cross of pretending that the referendum was only to strengthen his negotiating hand with Baghdad). And the risk of wider conflict, were Barzani to be removed from power, would be contingent on who ultimately succeeded to the leadership.

In sum, the U.S.-Israeli Kurdish “project” seems – paradoxically – more likely forcefully to strengthen the nationalist impulse across the Levant, Turkey and Iran and to make it more assertive – but not in the old way: there is no going back to the status quo ante in Syria. The processes of de-escalation and reconciliation facilitated by Russia – in and of themselves – will change fundamentally the politics of Syria.

A Shift Toward Diversity

If in the past, politics was top-down, it will now be bottom-up. This is where we see something of a synthesis taking place between Levantism and nationalism. The needs of local politics, in all its diversity, will be much more the future
drivers of politics. One can see already that this shift to bottom-up politics is already becoming apparent in Iraq, too. (Again, it has been accelerated by the war against the extreme jihadism of ISIS, but now may become further energized by Kurdish claims to disputed Iraqi territories.)

In some respects, the “ground” in Iraq – the mobilization of the people against these reactionary armed movements – is running ahead of, and away from the Iraqi political leadership, be it political or religious. The unrest may grow, and the government – any government – will have to bend to pressures from their base.

The Western leveraging of minorities against the state – now the Kurds – has already had a major geostrategic impact: that of bringing Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran into close political and military alliance in order to stop this “Kurdish project” from materializing and dissolving the outlines of major states, precisely at their most sensitive juncture.

Essentially, this represents another case where the interests of Israel do not coincide with those of Europe or America. The pursuit of this “Kurdish project” is empowering an alliance – including a major NATO state – that will be explicitly hostile to these American aims (though this does not imply any increase of hostility to the Kurds as a people – though that too may result). The alienation of these states would hardly seem to be in the Western interest, but nonetheless, this is what is occurring.

And finally, the “fallout” from the Syria conflict has prompted the northern tier states to “Look East” – as President Assad recently instructed his diplomats so to do. For Iran it may be primarily to China (as well as to Russia), but for Syria, it is more likely to be Russia in a predominantly cultural way, with China seeing Syria as an “important node” in its Belt & Road Initiative.

This represents a historic shift in the Middle East. Western officials may imagine that they have a hold over Syria by holding reconstruction funding hostage to having their way with Syria’s future: if this is so, they will as wrong about this as they have been on almost everything pertaining to Syria.

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