“LEBANONIZATION”: FRAMING POLICY FOR THE PUZZLES OF THE MIDDLE EAST

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Policy makers, academics and the media have characterized the post-Arab Spring era as a period of great upheaval, chaos and turbulence, at times making comparisons to the Balkans. These characterizations are relatively imprecise, unhelpful and inaccurate. Closer scrutiny reveals that an increasing number of countries are adopting historically familiar behaviors and outcomes. Parts of the Levant, North Africa and the Gulf are closely mimicking Lebanon. Recognizing and understanding these parallels makes Lebanon a valuable tool for the advisers who are informing current U.S. policy and preparing for future challenges.

THE BALKANS

Balkanization is a term commonly used to describe the fragmentation, splintering or breakup of a region or state according to ethnicity or sect. The term originated in the dissolution of the Balkan peninsula during the 19th century. The emergence of ethnic, sectarian and national identities contributed to the withdrawal of Ottoman forces in the area and the eventual emergence of several Eastern European countries. More recently, the term was employed to characterize the further breakup of the Balkans (i.e., Yugoslavia) and the emergence of Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Macedonia.

Balkanization recently appeared in the context of the Middle East, particularly regarding the situation in Syria. Articles in The New York Times, Jerusalem Post, CNN, and Arab and Turkish news outlets proclaimed that the Balkanization of Syria was imminent. The term, however, fails to accurately capture the empirical reality of the Middle East. Nation-states are not dissolving, despite being riven with divisions. A recent example is the failure of the Kurdish independence movement in northern Iraq. Furthermore, it does not appear that the international community and some regional and domestic actors will tolerate the dissolution of the Syrian, Libyan or Yemeni states. Borders in the Middle East, largely from the post-World War I era, are not being redrawn.

Lebanon, not the Balkans, provides a more precise model for the post-Arab Spring. The integrity of the Lebanese state
has endured periodic sectarian, ethnic and ideological conflict; civil war engulfed it in 1958 and 1975-90. Moreover, numerous external actors have used Lebanon as the setting for regional and international disputes. Except for talk of the possible fragmentation of the state for a few years in the 1980s, Lebanon has withstood these traumas and remained intact since independence in 1943.

Lebanon also provides a more comprehensive guide for current behavior and for identifying future developments in Syria, Libya, Yemen and Iraq. The weakness and collapse of these states closely parallel Lebanon during times of war and peace. Similarly, the four have become states without nations: autonomous administrative offices and a socioeconomic structure with only a weak idea of national identity. National identity must compete with tribal affinities, ideological movements, and sectarian and ethnic identities. This challenge undermines the cohesion of the society and the functionality of the state. The result is ultimately poor governance — exclusion of communities, corruption and a lack of accountability — that invites other actors to intervene. Lebanon’s 70-plus years of deep societal divisions and continuous external interference make it an appropriate basis for analyzing and understanding the ongoing conflicts in Syria, Yemen and Libya and the politics of Iraq.

THE PHENOMENON

Lebanon’s current reality — a state without a nation — predates its creation and independence. Beginning in the 16th century and intensifying in the 19th, relationships developed and deepened between the various sects of Mt. Lebanon and international actors. The French and the Maronite Catholics, the British and the Druze, and the Russians and the Greek Orthodox recognized the mutual benefits of a relationship. For example, the Maronites believed the French were their protectors in an environment they perceived as increasingly hostile. The relationship greatly contributed to the political and economic empowerment of the Maronite Catholic community and the realization of being a distinct community. The French used the relationship with their “Catholic brothers” to further their own influence, ideas and economic interests vis-à-vis the Ottomans, British, Russians and others. This patron-client behavior persisted after Lebanese independence. It is now explicitly demonstrated by the relationship between the Shia political party/militia Hezbollah and Iran, and to a lesser extent between the Hariri-led Mustaqlal Movement and Saudi Arabia.

Patron-client behavior sabotages the maturation of the Lebanese state and the cohesion of society. First, it exacerbates conflicts and divisions. Relationships with patrons often preclude or delay agreements between Lebanese actors, who believe the support of a patron provides them with immunity from repercussions and the ability to operate independently from the government and contrary to the interests of many Lebanese. It also engenders an unwillingness to offer meaningful concessions or compromise.

These tendencies are most evident during times of conflict, but they also occur in peacetime. In 1958, President Camille Chamoun believed the United States would immediately bail him out of domestic problems. A year earlier, Chamoun had signed onto the Eisenhower Doctrine, which pledged U.S. support to countries fighting communism. As violence
entadjustments that the government of Lebanon had been kidnapped by Hezbollah, Hariri “resigned” from the premiership while on a visit to Saudi Arabia.

Lastly, patron-client behavior begets an atmosphere of weak enforcement and a lack of accountability for political actors and parties. The Lebanese National Dialogue, initiated to overcome political impasses, produced the Baabda Declaration of June 2012, calling for disassociation by Lebanon from the Syrian civil war. Less than a year later, Hezbollah openly defied the declaration by militarily intervening in the conflict. Elements from Lebanon’s Sunni community also entered the ranks of the Syrian rebels; others have been accused of providing material support. No parties or individuals have been held accountable for violating the Baabda Declaration, regardless of repercussions for Lebanon.

The lack of accountability extends to thoroughly domestic matters. Several months of garbage accumulated on the streets of Beirut and elsewhere after the country’s main dump closed its doors in 2015. Despite numerous demonstrations and footage of trash literally flowing down streets into the Mediterranean, Lebanese politicians only found a temporary, ineffective solution. No permanent dump was agreed upon by the politicians, and piles of garbage began washing ashore onto the beaches after a storm in January 2018. Despite this spectacular failure, additional instances of environmental degradation, the inability to provide a full day of electricity and other outstanding issues, most Lebanese politicians and parties were re-elected to parliament later that year.

Lebanon is often considered the exception in the Middle East. This is no longer true. Deep societal cleavages and external
interference are becoming reoccurring phenomena throughout the region — in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya. Sudan, Algeria, Egypt and others may follow suit. The following sections demonstrate that Lebanon’s attributes, behaviors and outcomes are spreading. Policy makers need to acknowledge the reality of “Lebanonization” to construct effective policy for these critical geostrategic areas.

**ATTRIBUTES**

**Sectarian, Ethnic and Ideological Security Dilemmas**

Communities and ideological movements perceive themselves to be under continual existential threat due to the state’s lack of functionality. The notion exists on a spectrum that includes the loss of political power, the erasure of cultural norms, marginalization, discrimination, injustice and genocide. These perceptions are often derived from historical narratives and reaffirmed by recent experiences.

In Southern Libya, the Tebu, a non-Arab, largely nomadic group whose community encompasses parts of Sudan, Chad and Niger, are a prime example of the security dilemma. The Tebu’s non-Arab identity, lifestyle and location placed the community in a precarious position vis-à-vis the Ottomans. More recently, Muammar Qadhafi’s emphasis on an Arab identity, his war with Chad over the Aouzou Strip and his unwillingness to properly administer predominantly Tebu territory effectively marginalized the community. Qadhafi denied or retracted the citizenship of some Tebu, referring to them as foreigners. To facilitate the Arabization of Tebu territory under Qadhafi, the Tebu language was banned in public spaces. Furthermore, employment, education, housing and healthcare were not readily available to the Tebu.

The post-Qadhafi era has witnessed little relief for the Tebu. Statements by the National Transition Council and laws passed by the Libyan General National Congress condemning discrimination against ethnic minorities have proven meaningless. Both legislative bodies dissolved several years after the overthrow of Qadhafi. Moreover, many doubted the sincerity of the General National Congress’s intentions. Roughly 1,000 Tebu voters were removed from the election rolls in the lead-up to the 2012 General National Congress elections. The power vacuum and endless conflict following the overthrow of Qadhafi have led to Tebu claims of ethnic cleansing. As a result, the Tebu re-activated the Front for the Salvation of Libya and created the National Tebu Assembly to protect and assert their presence in Libyan territory.

**Inter- and Intra-Sectarian/Ethnic/Ideological Divides**

Politics and combat occur on two axes. The weakness of the nation-state produces intense competition between and within communities and movements regarding ministerial positions or control over territory. Immediate concerns and self-interest supersede the interests of the community, other groups and the state.

In Iraq, the regime of Saddam Hussein marginalized and oppressed its Shia and Kurdish populations, most egregiously in 1988 with the gassing of the Kurds and in 1991 with the brutal repression of the Shia. This subsequent engagement in the post-Saddam Iraqi political process has produced two realities: an increased division between communities, and greater fragmentation within each community. The establishment of a no-fly zone in 1991 over the predominantly Kurdish
north exacerbated a divide between Kurds and Arabs dating back to the creation of Iraq in 1920. The divide between Kurdish-administered lands and Baghdad remains. Relations are tenuous at best. Disagreements persist over constitutional provisions, boundaries, revenue sharing and oil.

In the Kurdish community, the most significant division exists between the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which represent two prominent Kurdish families — the Barzanis and the Talabanis. The prominence of these parties/families has not immunized them from criticism. Their corruption, nepotism and patronage produced further fragmentation of the Kurdish body politic. Most recently, Gorran, the Coalition for Democracy and Justice, and the New Generation joined a list of Kurdish Islamic and Communist parties challenging the KDP and PUK.

The political fragmentation of the Shia equals, if not exceeds, that of the Kurdish community. A growing number of parties and movements inhabit the Shia political landscape in the wake of governing failures and the emergence of ISIS. The 2018 parliamentary elections demonstrated this reality. Myriad parties and ideological movements were spread over four major blocs: Sairoon, Fatah, State of Law and Hikma. Included among them are representatives of the Sadrist Movement, the Badr Organization, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, the Islamic Dawa Party, Kataib Hezbollah and the Islamic Virtue Party.

The Patron-Client Syndrome

Religious sects, ethnic communities and ideological movements develop relationships with regional and international actors. Not always, but generally, the basis for these relationships is a shared religious or ethnic identity or an ideological bond. The intensity and nature of the patron-client relationship varies and can shift over time. Competition and divisions within sects, ethnic communities and movements can result in relations with multiple patrons.

The Yemeni civil war elicits considerable attention from regional and international actors, facilitating the emergence of an overt patron-client dynamic. Iran supports the predominantly Zaydi-led Houthi movement. The Zaydis and the Iranian government are Shia Muslims; however, they adhere to different branches of Shiism. Controversy over Shia leadership dating back to the eighth and ninth centuries split the community. Eventually this political dispute led to religious differences, though these differences appear to have been minimized or disregarded since the outbreak of conflict in 2011. Interaction between the Zaydis and the Iranian government entails political and spiritual relations, and economic, technological and military support. In August 2019, the Houthis appointed an ambassador to Iran.

The pro-Hadi or anti-Houthi movement receives most of its support from a Saudi-led, nine-state Arab coalition that receives arms from the United States, France and the United Kingdom, as well as logistical and intelligence support from the United States. The pro-Hadi forces constitute a mixture of groups, including the Southern Separatist Movement, tribes and Islamists that are overwhelmingly Sunni. Saudi interest in the conflict is not overtly religious. The coalition primarily focuses on military and political support for the pro-Hadi forces. The coalition launched air strikes against the Houthis beginning in 2015 and enacted a sea and land blockade.
of Houthi territory. The Yemeni army is being rebuilt with Saudi and UAE money. Members of the Saudi-led coalition were also involved in drafting UN Resolution 2216, which favored pro-Hadi forces.

**BEHAVIORS**

**Client Security, Empowerment or Patron Bailout**

In light of the perceived security dilemma, sectarian, ethnic and ideological parties utilize the support of an external actor to avoid defeat, ignore conciliatory measures, extract concessions or defeat an opponent. This patronage — rhetorical, spiritual, political, financial or military — alleviates pressure on the client to deliver, particularly pressure from supporters. The external support also renders legitimacy to the community, their leadership and their predicament.

In Syria, Russia and Iran — decades-long patrons of the Syrian government — bailed out the regime of Bashar al-Assad and his supporters in their war against rebels. Russian and Iranian support gradually intensified after the outbreak of civil war in 2011. This assistance became most apparent and critical in the summer of 2015. Russian air strikes appear to have saved the Assad regime, which prognosticators had claimed was on the verge of collapse. Russian and Iranian support reversed Assad’s fortunes and figured prominently in the defeat of some rebels and the reacquisition of territory.

Russia and Iran provide millions in financial aid, fuel, technical backup, intelligence, training, advice, weapons, troops and air support. At the diplomatic level, Russia vetoed 12 UN Security Council resolutions regarding the Syrian conflict. Not surprisingly, a negotiated settlement to the war appears to be an afterthought of the Assad regime. The Geneva and Astana peace processes and other talks have achieved little besides agreements (on de-escalation zones and between intervening actors) to temporarily alleviate violence or prevent a wider conflict.

**Patron Privileges and Influence**

External patrons/supporters utilize their relationships to export and strengthen strategic, security, economic and ideological interests. These manifest themselves as trade and military agreements, the importation of ideology (e.g., training of teachers and schools), the creation or expansion of military bases or the conducting of military operations from a client’s territory.

In Syria, Russia and Iran seek to advance economic, strategic and ideological interests as payment for their support of Assad and his regime. Its precarious state — the inability to effectively govern and maintain power throughout its territory — and its international isolation place Assad in a particularly vulnerable position vis-à-vis Russia and Iran. Furthermore, Syria must resuscitate a devastated economy and rebuild decimated urban and rural areas. This predicament allows Russia and Iran to increase their leverage over the Assad government and further weaken Syrian sovereignty.

Russia and Iran compete for roles in the eventual reconstruction of Syria as they slowly integrate themselves into the Syrian state. Both countries pursue advantageous economic agreements, utilize business councils to sign pacts and make investments in a variety of sectors. Private Russian companies have invested in oil and gas exploration. Iran and Syria have announced the joint manufacturing of an Iranian car. Iran also began leasing the port of Latakia in October 2019.
The advancement of economic interests is complemented by the shoring up of strategic interests. An agreement in 2017 extended the Russian lease of the naval base in Tartus for an additional 49 years. Russia provides Syria with jets, helicopters and arms. Iran extends lines of credit and trains and supports Syria’s National Defense Forces (loosely integrated local militias) and has introduced foreign Shia militias into the fighting. Continual Israeli raids targeting Iranian forces and Iranian-affiliated militias in Syria further demonstrates evidence of Iranian attempts to establish a long-term military presence.

Iranian influence extends to the ideological and political realms. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, considered by some Shia as the wilayet al-faqih, has spiritual and political clout beyond the borders of Iran. The Iranian-trained militias in Syria, particularly the Shia, are susceptible to his influence. They are a potential source for undermining Syrian sovereignty once the war ends. Similar concerns are warranted for communities that have greatly benefitted from Iranian assistance in healthcare and housing. Iran has also made it imperative to protect the Sayyeda Zainab shrine in the suburbs of Damascus because of its religious significance to the Shia.

In Syria, the Kurdish community in the northeast is possibly faced with this predicament. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an umbrella organization for the Kurdish-led People’s Protection Units (YPG), represent a significant component of the Syrian-Kurdish establishment. U.S.-Syrian Kurdish relations blossomed in 2014, when the United States realized the YPG was the only reliable force to fight ISIS on the ground in Syria. Since the territorial defeat of ISIS, Washington is wavering in its support of the YPG. On December 19, 2018, President Trump announced the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces from eastern and northeastern Syria. He subsequently walked back a complete withdrawal, arguing that the continued U.S. presence in Syria is necessary to prevent the re-emergence of ISIS and contain Iran. In October of 2019, U.S. troops were removed from areas in close proximity to the Turkish border. Turkish-backed Syrian militias filled the void left by U.S. forces and triggered clashes with elements from the SDF. U.S. troops were subsequently deployed to re-enforce positions around Syrian oil fields.

The U.S.-YPG relationship is a point of contention between the United States and the Turkish government. Turkish officials claim that the YPG is an extension of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), an internationally recognized terrorist group that has been waging an insurgency against Turkey from northern Iraq. Turkey is currently unable to convince the United States of the connection between the YPG and the PKK. The continued U.S. support of the YPG aggravates an already tenuous relationship between the NATO allies. The uncertainty of U.S.-Turkish relations and their intentions has led the YPG to explore relations with Bashar al-Assad.

Patron Rapprochement and Re-evaluation

Divisions, disputes or animosity among regional and international patrons can fade. The interests or priorities of regional and international actors change over time. These developments impact the options and behavior of the client. Without a patron, a client is less likely to hold out, since there is less bargaining space. This development can also force a client to seek a new patron.
OUTCOMES

Intransigence

The existence of the security dilemma and the presence of the patron/client dynamic make changes in the status quo on the battlefield or in the political system (elections, ministerial appointments and policy) difficult to achieve. These environments are beset by long periods of gridlock or stalemate. A community with a patron will not concede or compromise unless that move is perceived to be desirable. Similarly, the patron will not terminate support it perceives to serve its interests.

In Libya, a conclusion to its five-year civil war is not imminent. Enormous obstacles prevent a political resolution. An increasing number of divisions among Libyans and the involvement of more than a half-dozen external actors creates a multitude of competing interests. The intense commingling of domestic and external actors demonstrates the current futility of achieving a negotiated settlement.

The Government of National Accord (GNA), established through a UN-led initiative, currently receives little legitimacy in Libya and is not recognized by some countries in the Arab world. Summits sponsored by Egypt, the UAE, France and Italy have achieved no tangible results. The recent fighting around the capital of Tripoli is emblematic of a prolonged stalemate. The victories of General Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA) around Tripoli in April 2019 were supported by the UAE, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Russia. The UN-recognized GNA eventually pushed back the LNA to the outskirts of Tripoli with the assistance of Turkey and Qatar. Fighting around Tripoli continues at the time of this writing.

Deepening Divides

Over time, the patron-client dynamic exacerbates or worsens the divisions between and within communities, groups or movements. Their reliance on an external actor enables them to increasingly pursue an independent agenda. In Yemen, during the last few months, the anti-Houthi movement fractured. The empowerment of the Southern Separatist Movement through the support of the UAE has enabled them to assert their interests to the detriment of others in the anti-Houthi coalition. The separatists attempted to evict their former Islamist coalitions members (i.e., Islah) and seized Aden. The recent actions of the Southern Separatists further demonstrate that additional fragmentation is making a political solution next to impossible.

Ad Hoc, Temporary or Incomplete Solutions

The environments created by the aforementioned characteristics and behaviors impede effective resolution of outstanding issues. Governments and politicians become adept at “kicking the can down the road” or paying lip service to issues; shielded by external support, they face few consequences. Projects and policies often require the cooperation of several ministries represented by different parties or communities. Each group or politician desires full credit for the solution, due to self-interest. This competition and recognition leads to insufficient or incomplete solutions. Furthermore, the competitive environment is susceptible to severe corruption.

In Iraq, the government is failing to provide its population with adequate public services. For example, it is deficient in providing a full day’s worth of electric-
ity. Problems of this nature are most acute in the southern city of Basra, where violent demonstrations continue to flare up after two years. Baghdad instituted a temporary measure by importing electricity from Iran, but in 2018 the Iranians cut off the supply for failure to pay the bill. A $14 billion agreement with Siemens was signed in April 2019 to upgrade the electrical infrastructure. It is a promising development; however, recent history suggests serious obstacles await. The Great Basra Water Project, another internationally contracted project, experienced long delays and widespread corruption.

Absence of Policy/Rule of Law or Lack of Enforcement

The continual sabotaging of the state and society by external actors prevents the implementation and enforcement of laws and policies. Groups and communities refuse to abide by government dictates because they perceive them as representing another group or external actor. In Iraq, Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi’s decree to integrate all of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) into Iraq’s security services fell on deaf ears. In the wake of the collapse of the Iraqi army, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani called upon volunteers for militias to combat ISIS. It resulted in numerous militias that are largely sectarian, some of them receiving Iranian support. Several of the Iranian-backed militias responded angrily to the decree and failed to meet the July 31 deadline and its extension to September 30.

The failure to adhere to the prime minister’s decree draws increasing concern and action from the United States and Israel. Baghdad failed for weeks to prevent the shelling of U.S. diplomats, forces and private contractors who were invited to facilitate training the Iraqi army and rebuilding the Iraqi state. It ultimately led to the destruction of U.S. property, the killing of a U.S. private contractor, and the wounding of other U.S. contractors and soldiers. The United States retaliated by assassinating the leader of Iran’s al-Quds force, Qassem Soleimani, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the leader of Kataib Hezbollah, one of the militias unwilling to surrender its arms to the Iraqi government.

Vulnerability of Lacking External Support

The loss or absence of a patron increases the chances a community will be defeated and have to accept the status quo or make concessions. Without a patron, a community or movement has less bargaining space, further eroded if the community is divided. The likelihood that a community’s concerns will be considered, or that it will be given a seat at the negotiating table, greatly diminishes with the loss or absence of a patron.

In Iraq, the failure of the Kurdish independence referendum in 2017 demonstrates the significance of a patron for a community or movement. Since the negotiations at Versailles after World War I, the Kurdish people have pursued the establishment of an independent homeland. Denied self-determination at Versailles, the Kurds of Iraq, Turkey, Syria and Iran have continually challenged their respective governing authorities for independence. Throughout the 20th century, Kurdish movements received the support of Iran, Iraq and Israel in pursuit of their objective. However, this support was ephemeral and often contingent on regional developments. One notable example was the Algiers Accord of 1975, when the shah of Iran suspended support of Iraqi Kurdish movements in
exchange for a resolution with Iraq over the disputed Shatt al-Arab waterway.

Kurdish independence aspirations were resuscitated at the end of the 20th century. The establishment of a no-fly zone over northern Iraq in 1991 created a semi-autonomous Kurdish region ruled by the KRG (Kurdish Regional Government). Aspirations grew stronger with the overthrow of Saddam Hussein by the United States and the maintenance of the semi-autonomous region under the new Iraqi government. The fight against ISIS gained prestige for the KRG among the international community, especially members of the global coalition against ISIS. The KRG believed the international appreciation for their role in defeating ISIS would enable them to achieve international support for an independence referendum in September 2017. However, the international community and the KRG’s allies refused to recognize the referendum’s results. Instead, the Iraqi government in Baghdad stripped the KRG of its international airport in Erbil, seized disputed territory and placed Iraqi troops at its borders.

SIGNIFICANCE

Comparing environments has its greatest potential when extended to Lebanon, a laboratory where 70-plus years of deep societal divides combine with countless examples of external intervention. Lebanon’s usefulness is immediately apparent when analyzing the armaments outside the control of Iraqi authorities. The Lebanese have lived with this problem for decades, attempting to address it with the help of the international community. Its most recent manifestation began with the failure to disarm Hezbollah at the conclusion of the civil war in 1990 and has continued since the Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon in 2000.

What can be learned from this Lebanese case and applied to Iraq before a well-armed militia competes with the state? It is naïve to believe that Lebanon and Iraq will be alone in this predicament. Three states (Syria, Yemen and Libya) are consumed by conflict, one (Iraq) is on the precipice and three (Sudan, Algeria and Egypt) may soon join the others. Casualties, refugees, humanitarian disasters, WMDs, severe environmental degradation and terrorism remain outstanding issues. Close monitoring of these countries remains paramount, as the region continues to be both geographically important and a source of considerable instability.

The post-conflict realities of these states will be marked by two distinct phenomena: the persistence of substate identities and external interference. As already demonstrated, Syria, Libya and Yemen will not operate in the way they did before the Arab Spring — as traditional sovereign states.

The dynamics of Syrian governance have forever changed. Russia and Iran will continue to leverage their political, financial and military support of Assad. The inroads they have made into the Syrian economy and society during the war will continue and be exploited to their advantage. For example, Iran’s role in developing Syria’s National Defense Forces will be used as leverage against Assad. Not all of the personalities in the loosely controlled and integrated National Defense Force will be entirely loyal to him. Some members will use Iran to further their own interests.

The proliferation of ethnic and sectarian identity through the YPG, ISIS, al-Nusra, Shia militias and others will not dissipate overnight. Even during times of peace, entities will remain suspicious.
of each other’s intentions, further challenging the state’s ability to disarm civil-war participants, govern and achieve cooperation between and within groups. For example, the relative autonomy of the Kurds will not be easily sacrificed. Even if a compromise is eventually achieved between the Kurds and Assad, the YPG or its political manifestation will not hesitate to seek out external actors to maintain or improve their situation vis-à-vis Assad or whoever is in Damascus. The weakness of Assad or whoever holds power in Syria will constantly be challenged. It will lead to more corruption and the inability to fully implement policy at a national level. Similar scenarios will be the reality in Yemen and Libya.

**POLICY**

The recognition of an increasingly Lebanonized Middle East leaves U.S. policy makers with few viable options. This is a game of chess the United States cannot ultimately play well. It requires too great an investment with little or no payoff. This prognosis should discourage future extensive interventions and, somewhat ironically, help in shortening these conflicts and impasses. U.S. power in the region has not declined, but it does not have the capability to properly rebuild states. The framework presented in this paper highlights the severe challenges, pitfalls and entanglements of this endeavor. It is reinforced by memories of the failed U.S. experiences in Lebanon (1982-84) and Iraq. U.S. policy can only be improved by engaging the region at the state level. Priorities in this regard must be 1) maintaining maximum pressure on Iran; 2) working through and supporting allies; and 3) addressing divisions with and between them. There are no quick fixes. Sadly, these countries will limp along, like Lebanon, in their post-conflict eras.

**Iran**

In the minds of some individuals and countries, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) obscured the dangers posed by Iran to the region and beyond. Events during the last year — bombing oil facilities and targeting tankers — have re-illuminated those dangers. Iran exacerbates divisions in four Middle Eastern states and the Palestinian territories, has the potential to sow discord in other states (Kuwait, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia), and continues to threaten Israel. It is not in the interest of the United States or the international community to prolong the discord, allow more states to fail or enable a war between Israel and Iran.

The first U.S. priority must be to maintain the maximum-pressure policy of the Trump administration until a more comprehensive nuclear agreement is signed that also addresses Iran’s regional behavior. Its interference can be diminished if Iranian financial support to its allies is mostly thwarted. Upholding existing sanctions and implementing new ones on the Iranian state and personalities will intensify the strain on Iranian officials. They will eventually be forced to choose between their citizens and non-Iranians.

The focus of the policy should not be on fighting Iran and her allies in Syria, Yemen and Iraq. Iran and its allies cannot be defeated in these environments. An intensification of conflict will only further deepen divisions within those societies. Take for example the situation of the PMF in Iraq. Increasing military pressure on the PMF to disarm will push Iranian-backed groups further away from the government in Baghdad. A successful maximum-
pressure policy and comprehensive nuclear agreement will improve the regional situation, not resolve it. Poor governance and the endemic patron/client dynamic will endure. Its persistence will encourage other countries to fill the void left by Iran, though these countries (e.g., Turkey and Qatar) will not be as antagonistic to U.S. interests.

U.S. Allies
The second U.S. priority must be to work with and maintain good relations with its regional allies, Israel and Saudi Arabia. The realization of priority No. 1 (maximum pressure on Iran) requires their cooperation, though working with them is a double-edged sword. The United States does not need to encourage them to participate in pressuring Iran, since both consider Iran an existential threat. Unfortunately, they are not the staunchest of allies. Israel is known to operate independently of U.S. interests, and the unresolved Palestinian issue always pervades talk of increased cooperation. However, the United States needs Israeli air power to counter the Iranian presence in Syria and elsewhere. Israeli air strikes appear to be somewhat effective in holding Iranian forces and those of its allies at bay. This is a temporary solution, necessary until the maximum-pressure policy is fully realized.

Criticism of U.S.-Israeli cooperation is being eclipsed by criticism of U.S.-Saudi relations. The murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the humanitarian disaster in Yemen linked to the Saudi-led intervention elicit continual calls by members of Congress to end U.S. cooperation with the Saudi intervention in Yemen and re-evaluate the overall relationship.10 Thus far, Congress has unsuccessfully tried to block U.S. arms sales to Saudi Arabia. More recently, members introduced the Saudi Arabia Accountability in Yemen Act of 2018.11 It calls for a political resolution to the conflict in Yemen, addressing the humanitarian disaster, suspending certain weapons transfers and sanctioning those responsible for Khashoggi’s murder.

None of Saudi Arabia’s recent actions should be condoned, but what is a realistic alternative? Once again, the United States must choose between lesser evils. Saudi Arabia is not a staunch ally but necessary for opposing Iran. Congress’s actions and plans directed at Saudi Arabia are, however, ill-conceived. Denying weapons only hurts the financial and strategic interests of the United States. Furthermore, how many times can the United States withhold weapons from Saudi Arabia before the kingdom solicits them from China or Russia?

Washington cannot impose a political solution on the Yemeni conflict for two reasons. A political solution is currently unachievable with the fragmentation of the pro-Hadi/anti-Houthi coalition. There are too many competing interests. Moreover, if Saudi Arabia desired a political solution, would it not already be aggressively pursuing one? This question informs the second reason. The proposed legislation is unrealistic, as it completely ignores Saudi concerns. The developing relationship between the Houthis and Iran will not disappear after a political solution. Everywhere the Iranians have intervened — Lebanon, Iraq and Syria — their presence has grown. It is wishful thinking that this will not happen in Yemen. Saudi Arabia views Iranian encroachment in Syria, Iraq and Yemen as an existential threat. Two Iran-friendly states appear to be emerging on Saudi Arabia’s border. No country facing such a threat would willingly allow it to blossom.
The third and most challenging priority is to minimize divisions with and among allies. The wars, instability and political impasses will worsen and continue without addressing this priority. External support is prolonging conflicts by multiplying the number of interests involved and making domestic actors less willing to compromise. Syria is a case in point. An increasing reluctance by external actors to back rebels in Syria has led to the defeat of some of them and the gradual reacquisition of territory by the regime.

Minimizing the divide between the United States and its ally Turkey can be achieved in Syria. It is a less-than-ideal option, but necessary for the realization of the primary U.S. goal of a new nuclear deal with Iran. Like Israel and Saudi Arabia, Turkey is not the staunchest of allies. The Turkish government’s handling of its Kurdish population and its recent crackdowns on the media and dissidents are cause for concern. Furthermore, minimizing Turkish-American divisions in Syria requires the United States to disengage with the SDF, who have been pivotal in the territorial defeat of ISIS.

The Trump and Obama administrations were wise to keep the United States largely outside the Syrian civil war. The one area where they have engaged — eastern and northeastern Syria — is a ticking time bomb having more to do with the emergence of governing structures and Turkish intentions in this area than with ISIS. The continued presence of U.S. forces will inevitably require them to develop relations with the governing authorities, at the cost of further negative impact on Turkish-American relations.

The maintenance of these American forces is increasingly problematic, due to the region’s societal divisions and a history bereft of any independent governing. The Kurdish-led SDF are currently prominent throughout much of the region, but they are not an elected body or fully representative of the population. In eastern and northeastern Syria, Kurds account for far less than 50 percent of the populace. Large swaths of territory are predominantly Arab. Furthermore, there is no precedent of Kurdish rule in these areas, and elements of the Arab population and some Kurds do not support the SDF. These groups will seek out external backers if they believe they are not treated fairly. It is possible that the regime in Damascus will be pulled into the mix. This scenario will make it hard for the United States to remain neutral. Complicating matters further for the Americans is the Turkish plan to repatriate Syrian refugees and carry out other measures in the Turkish-constructed “safe zone.” Does the United States want to be complicit in a population transfer? Can its forces maintain neutrality regarding a Turkish-Syrian-Kurdish conflict?

Is maintaining a U.S. force in eastern and northeastern Syria worth it? The mere presence of American troops will not eradicate ISIS. It is a symptom of a more serious malady: Sunni Muslim political grievances largely emanating from poor governance in eastern Syria. Addressing that issue will take decades, and the United States is incapable of addressing the issue of local political grievances in any case. The United States is better off completely withdrawing, provided it can get concessions in exchange. There is an opportunity here to improve Turkish-U.S. relations if the United States can leverage it properly.

CONCLUSION

The future of a growing number of states in the Middle East is bleak. The
phenomena of substate identity and external interference are slowly becoming entrenched. One needs to look no further than Lebanon to envision the future. Almost 30 years after the conclusion of a 15-year civil war, the country is still beset with an ailing economy, a state within a state, disputes within communities that threaten to undermine the entire government, sectarian tensions, continual violations of its sovereignty, overwhelming environmental issues and endemic corruption. Acknowledging this reality will not solve the problems of “states without nations” in the short and medium terms. Their future is unavoidable. However, policy makers have the opportunity with a framework derived from Lebanon’s history to better manage the realities of Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen. A U.S. policy that approaches these places at the state level with a priority on minimizing Iranian influence and amending divisions with allies is the only viable way forward for an increasingly Lebanonized Middle East.

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