

Fuzzy Boundaries
Festschrift für Antonio Loprieno



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II

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New Uncertainties, Old Certainties

On Shifting Boundaries in the Middle East

Maurus Reinkowski

The End of Sykes-Picot

A man in his late twenties or early thirties with long black hair protruding under a baseball cap and an exuberant black beard hoists a flag somewhere in a desert landscape. A raised toll-bar can be seen at his back. The flag the man hoists, something white on a completely black background, looks a bit like a Jolly Roger flag. But there are no skull and crossbones on the flag, it is the *shahada*, the fundamental Islamic declaration that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is the messenger of God. The *shahada* written in white on a pitch-black background is the official flag of the *Islamic State* (previously *The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria*, later abbreviated as 'IS'). The man with the black hair and beard appears in an IS propaganda video released in June 2014, titled 'The End of Sykes Picot'. He is 'Abu Safiyya from Chile', as the man is introduced in a written description shortly faded in at the beginning of the video. Abu Safiyya after having hoisted the flag points to earthwork of sand, some three meters high and delineating the Iraqi-Syrian border: "Now we are on the side of al-Sham [i. e. Syria]. As you can see, this is the so-called border of Sykes-Picot. Alhamdulillah, we don't recognize it and we will never recognize it. This is not the first border we break, we will break all borders also" (Markaz al-Hayat li-I'lam 2014).

Iraq and Syria, which had been established states for decades, are on the verge of collapsing. IS controls important parts of today's Syria and Iraq, and claims to rule as a caliphate over substantial parts of the Middle East, including the holy sites of Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. The strength and appeal of IS is bolstered by its military successes and militant negation of the existing state order, as well as present-day power relations in the Middle East and the group's intention to 'liberate' the holy sites. But why would a young man, preoccupied with the vicissitudes of life, from Chile to the shores of the Arabian Desert, be concerned about a murky detail of European diplomatic history – a treaty signed by two diplomats almost one hundred years ago? What is so significant about the agreement that was negotiated by the French François Georges-Picot and the Briton Sir Mark Sykes between November 1915 and March 1916 and concluded on May 16, 1916?

With the approaching end of World War One and the increasing certainty of the demise of the Ottoman Empire, the European powers attempted to establish a new order in the

Arab-speaking provinces of the Ottoman Empire, which is to say in modern-day Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel/Palestine, as well as in the northern, western and eastern fringes of the Arab Peninsula. All the states, which can be seen as forming the core of the Middle East, came into being within the framework of the new order imposed by the Entente powers after World War One. Under the terms of the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement that was struck when the outcome of the war was still uncertain, Great Britain and France convened to divide the Arab-speaking parts of the Ottoman Empire into two zones of influence. Britain was to obtain control of Palestine, Jordan, the southern parts of today's Iraq, and a small area including the ports of Haifa and Acre in what is today northern Israel. France was allocated control of major parts of south-eastern Turkey (an area with mainly non-Arabic speakers), the northern parts of modern Iraq, and the complete territory of today's Syria and Lebanon. The major ally Russia was part of the plan and was to be given control over the Straits (the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus, including the city of Istanbul) and large parts of Eastern Anatolia. The Sykes-Picot Agreement was only one among a bewildering multitude of promissory notes or contracts, such as the Constantinople Agreement (1915), the Treaty of London (1915), the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence (1915–16), the Agreement of St. Jean de Maurienne (1917), the Balfour Declaration (1917), the Hogarth Message (1918), the Declaration to the Seven (1918), and the Anglo-French Declaration (1918) (Fromkin 1989: 401). It was, however, the Sykes-Picot Agreement that became emblematic for the reshaping of the Middle East. The Bolsheviks, after having assumed power in Russia in late 1917, intentionally made the secret agreement public in order to denounce the imperialist designs of the two capitalist powers Great Britain and France. Since then, the Sykes-Picot Agreement has remained associated with those rudely imperialist designs for sharing the spoils of the Ottoman Empire. All these contracts and treaties fed into the new configuration of the Middle East that was finalized in 1922, with Great Britain and France entrusted by the League of Nations with two large mandates in the Middle East. The control of Israel/Palestine, Jordan and Iraq was granted to Great Britain, while Lebanon and Syria were entrusted to France. In the same year, the Turkish independence movement achieved its ultimate victory, epitomized by the 'Great Fire' of Smyrna in September 1922 and followed by the Treaty of Lausanne and the official foundation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923.

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness, apart from the 'compulsory exercises' conducted by historians in commemorating the centenaries of World War, that the events of the 1910s in the Middle East are more deeply linked to those of the 2010s than was previously thought. But what exactly is the connection between these two periods – besides some impromptu observations and IS's claims that it will break the national boundaries in the Middle East that had been created after World War One? Before addressing that question, we need to take a closer look at what is meant by the 'Middle East'.

Where is the Middle East? What is the Middle East?

When we refer to the 'Middle East', we do so with the attitude that what we are referring to is a self-evident matter of fact, while at the same time we are all more or less aware that there is

no well-defined 'Middle East'. The Middle East comprises a great variety of states and is characterized by the fuzziness of its geographical boundaries. The Middle East spans an extremely wide area that can be considered to encompass North Africa and South Asia. It is either narrowly defined as the region formerly under the possession of the Ottoman Empire, i.e. the eastern Arab world, with the inclusion of Turkey and Iran, or else understood in much more inflated terms, such as in the definition of the flagship journal on the history of the Middle East, the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. According to this journal, the Middle East includes – besides the complete Arab world – Afghanistan, Iran, Israel, Turkey, the Caucasus, Transoxania (a historically important cultural region covering present-day Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, southern Kyrgyzstan and southwest Kazakhstan), Muslim South Asia from the seventh century to the present, parts of Central Asia, Russia and Europe that have strong Middle Eastern ties or contexts (IJMES 2000).

If the term 'Middle East' is so extremely diffuse and agreement on even the rough boundaries of the region being referred to is impossible, why do we continue to use it with such persistence? The most obvious reason is that finding an alternative practical name seems almost impossible. 'Western Asia' might be the most appropriate substitute, but it does not convey the same intense and conflict-ridden feeling as the term 'Middle East' does. Obviously, 'Middle East' implies much more than a simple geographical definition. The 'Middle East' as a term was coined in 1902 by Alfred Thayer Mahan, a US military historian, and was quickly popularized by the British Times journalist Valentine Chirol. From the moment it was coined, three elements have been constitutive of the 'Middle East'. First, it implies the perspective of Western Europe, as only from a European (Western) perspective can the region be reasonably interpreted as being somewhat in the middle of 'the East'. Second, it connotes a strategically important region, but also one that is marginal in terms of power relations. Third, the fuzziness of its borders is also constitutive of the 'Middle East'; to quote Davison (1959/1960: 675): "Intentional vagueness sometimes has advantage as a tent-like cover for unformulated possibilities of future action or inaction". Such was the case, for example, with the Eisenhower Doctrine in 1957, the first US doctrine referring explicitly to the Middle East, but a Middle East defined in very vague terms: "Therefore, the warning to Moscow was intentionally ambiguous but clear: Washington could intervene anywhere in the region or nowhere, depending on the perceived threat and possibility for success" (Khalil 2014: 341).

In this essay, 'Middle East' is used in a limited sense. It is defined as the region that was a part of the Ottoman Empire in circa 1900, stretching from Libya through Egypt and Syria to Iraq and including the states of the Arabian Peninsula, plus (as will be discussed below in more detail) the Republic of Turkey. This definition is not only applied because the author of this essay has a strong penchant for Ottoman history. It is also chosen because we see that the fault lines of today's Middle Eastern conflicts are very much concentrated in the area that had been reshaped by the Entente powers after World War One. Thus in this essay Iran is largely left aside, or rather it is treated as a kind of external agent, such as Russia. Iran achieved the stabilization of its borders from the 16th century onwards, much earlier than all the other Middle Eastern states. This early achievement might – amongst other factors – play into the hands of Iran's growing influence in the present-day Middle East.

From 'Negative Stability' to 'Negative Instability'

The Middle East is a region full of new uncertainties. For the first time, the foundations of the state system that had been established after World War One seem to have become shaky. The Arab countries, well-known for their ossified societal and political structures, have entered a period of upheaval. Political scientists who had been waiting for a 'wave of democracy' in the Middle East for a couple of decades had long since given up on the idea of a change toward the better and started to concentrate on gaining an understanding of the remarkable persistence of authoritarian regimes. In late 2010 and early 2011 the people and the elites in the Arab world, the 'experts' and interested observers around the world were confronted with a sudden change. The 'Arab Spring' started in December 2010 in Tunisia and spread to Egypt in January 2011. It soon made itself felt in many other countries, most prominently in Libya, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain. Since 2011, sufficient time has elapsed for us to dare to undertake a first stock-taking. The Arab Spring that had raised high hopes for positive change in the Arab Middle East quickly lost its appeal in 2011 and 2012. In Bahrain, with the help of Saudi military forces, civil unrest was quickly crushed in March 2011. In Yemen, Ali Abdullah Salih, who had been in power in North Yemen since 1978 and had ruled over the united Yemen Republic since 1990, finally had to step down in January 2012. Yet his resignation did not open the way to a more stable and democratic political life in Yemen, quite to the contrary. Muammar al-Gaddafi who had come to power in Libya in 1969 would have probably been able to suppress the opposition against him due to the enormous wealth amassed by the innermost regime circle. But the international community turned against the isolated dictator. With the air support of an international alliance, Libyan militia men swept Gaddafi from power and finally killed him in October 2011. Since then, Libya has spiraled into a quagmire of various fractions vying for power, among them Islamist groups. Syria is the most depressing case. The confrontation of peaceful civic unrest with harsh state oppression degenerated rather quickly into a pernicious war. However, in contrast to Gaddafi's almost complete isolation, Bashar al-Assad has been able to count on the support of Iran and Russia (with the latter feeling that it had been duped by the Western powers in the previous case of international intervention in Libya) and Hizbullah, Iran's ally in Lebanon. Many other actors have come into play in Syria. We are at the present confronted with a intimidatingly confused picture of war alliances and constellations that is furthermore compounded by the interplay with the conflict in Iraq. If we have to wait for the 'ripe moment,' i. e. that moment when the conflicts have burnt out in the way that none of the parties involved can expect any further gain from continuing to fight (Zartman 1991: 16), then there is still a long way to go in Syria. Indeed, we may speak of Syria's 'Lebanonization.' In the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990) internal and external factors were entangled in a most convoluted way, such as is the case now in Syria.

For decades one may have had a rather gloomy picture of the Arab states, but it was a 'reliably' negative situation. Today, in 2015, we have to state that this notorious 'negative stability' that seemed to give way to a 'positive instability' in early 2011, has either returned to 'negative stability' (and indeed in countries such as Egypt to a 'more-negative-than-before negative stability') or simply to 'negative instability' such as in Libya and Syria. What could be easily

predicted in the early months of the Arab Spring, i. e. that we would have to wait patiently for the Arab world to transform itself finally for the better, but that there would be a long interim period of turbulence (Asseburg 2011: 20 ff.), has doubtlessly become reality. However, in doing so, it has not reaped the benefits of increased democratic participation that was predicted to accompany this development.

Old Certainties

If we are now facing new uncertainties, we may ask what were the ingredients of the Middle East's old certainties? A first obvious approach to this question would be to identify internal and external factors that helped maintain the ossified old order.

In 2002 the *Arab Human Development Report* introduced a series of five reports leading up to the year 2009 by stating the major deficits in the Arab world, which included amongst others a 'freedom deficit'. "There is a substantial lag between Arab countries and other regions in terms of participatory governance. The wave of democracy that transformed governance in most of Latin America and East Asia in the 1980s and Eastern Europe and much of Central Asia in the late 1980s and early 1990s has barely reached the Arab States. This freedom deficit undermines human development and is one of the most painful manifestations of lagging political development." (AHDR 2002: 2). However, indicators that measured the quality of state activity or economic prosperity in the 1980s and 1990s showed that Arab states performed better than many other states. Despite the havoc wreaked by the conflicts in states such as Libya and Syria, the *Human Development Index (HDI)* for 2014 shows the Arab world to be economically rather progressed and to be largely on par with Eastern European countries (HDR 2014: 34). In terms of political criteria, however, such as 'Voice and Accountability' in the (otherwise economy-driven) World Bank's *Worldwide Governance Indicators*, the Arab world shows a much less convincing performance (WGI 2013), forming part of a huge *authoritarian belt* reaching from North Africa to China.

Political scientists agree that the nature of the regimes inhibits the Arab world's political development (Schlumberger 2008: 40). Authors have referred to various underlying factors for the persistence of authoritarian regimes, such as (a) the pervasive connection-seeking and corruption (*wasta*) as the 'hidden force' in Middle Eastern societies (Cunningham/Sarayrah 1993), (b) neo-patriarchy, a patrimonial rule in the Weberian sense, degenerated and 'modernized' at the same time (Sharabi 1988), or (c) the character of 'rentier states.' Rentier states are states that "derive most or a substantial part of their revenues from the outside world and the functioning of their political system depend to a large degree on accruing external revenues that can be classified as rents" (Schwarz 2008: 604). Thus not only are Saudi Arabia and other oil-exporting countries rentier states, but also states such as Egypt, which draw political revenue from their strategic importance. A setback of these theories is that they tend to essentialize the regimes in the way that they appear as unbreakable having developed elaborate means to preserve power (Pawelka 2008: 50). This type of 'confident pessimism' propounded by the political scientists seemed to have been refuted by the early phase of the Arab Spring, but has to a certain extent been rehabilitated by the events of the last two or three years.

A further one of these old certainties is the never-ending conflict-proneness of the region. But one has to acknowledge that its major ingredient, the Israel-Palestine conflict, has to be conceived largely as an external factor caused by events, the most pernicious among them is the Shoah, responsibility for which lies far beyond the people in the region itself. Terms such as the 'Middle East conflict' are often no more than euphemisms for the Israel-Palestine conflict. The Palestine question is not only central to Western imaginations of the Middle East, it has also "captured the imagination of diverse Arab populations from North Africa to Yemen more strongly than any other Arab cause in the decolonizing age of the twentieth century" (Makdisi 2010: 5). The unsolved question of how to make Israelis and Palestinians live together respectively, how to separate them, how to share the precious little land of Israel and Palestine, has become one of the well-established 'certainties' about the Middle East.

Nevertheless, a reasonable analysis of Middle East politics will not seek to draw a clear boundary between 'external' and 'internal' factors. For example, from a geological point of view, the oil wealth of the Middle East is to be regarded as an 'internal' factor. It could also be argued that the authoritarian regimes in many Middle Eastern states are supported by petrol rentier income, again a largely internal factor. On the other hand, it is obvious that the Middle East's oil reserves play a large part in international politics and in the foreign policy of the United States (the major hegemonic power in the Middle East), which is determined by the necessity to secure the supply lines for petrol.

It is worthwhile dwelling in more detail on the relations between the United States and the Middle East. If we speak about the 'United States' and the 'Middle East,' we are operating with two terms and entities that are hardly comparable with each other, as there is a huge imbalance of power, in political, economic, academic-scientific and military terms, as well as in many other respects, between these two entities. Not only is the United States far more powerful than the Middle East, it also exerts more power in and on that region than any other. While this may sound like a truism, it is worth remembering that the predominant role of the United States within the region was established only relatively recently. After visiting Egypt, U.S. special envoy Patrick Hurley noticed in as far back as 1943 that Great Britain would then soon "no longer possess within herself the essentials of power needed to maintain her traditional role as the dominant influence in the Middle East area" (qtd. in Little 2008: 119). Yet, it was only at the end of the 1970s – and after some intermittent steps such as Britain's renunciation of the Palestine mandate in 1948 and its disastrous involvement in the failed Suez intervention of 1956 – that the United States, in light of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, finally assumed overall 'responsibility' for protecting Western interests in the Middle East, and in particular, in the Gulf area. The demise of the Soviet Union during the early 1990s then removed the United States' lone remaining competitor for influence in the region. In recent years, since the attacks of September 11, 2001, the Middle East has become more important than ever for the United States. It has become not only the central focus of American foreign policy, but has also come to perform an important function in America's understanding of itself. Faced with its own internal diversity and race issues, the United States "needed an 'outside' to mark its boundaries; that outside was the Middle East" (McAlister 2001: 259).

Shifting Boundaries in the Middle East

Apart from the boundaries defining the external contours of the Middle East, there are also the many boundaries within the Middle East itself. Some of them we have already mentioned (such as the national boundaries established by the Entente powers after World War One). The internal boundaries include the well-established difference between the *have-nots* and the *haves* in the Arab world, the latter group is to be identified with the oil-rich countries, in particular Saudi-Arabia and the Gulf countries. Israel and the surrounding states are separated by more than mere borders. Jordan, geographically most clearly separated from Israel by the Jordan rift valley, is the state that is least hostile towards Israel. Another neighbor of Israel, Egypt, is more and more occupied with its internal problems. Once the leading country of the Arab world, Egypt is especially endangered by one of the most daring experiments in the history of human kind, an experiment to determine how many dozens of millions of human beings can be sustained on one single river, every new-born Egyptian contributing to the consumption of land that is needed to sustain Egypt's existing population.

Furthermore, there are boundaries between the confessions; the Eastern Arab countries with sizable Christian minorities, the Copts in Egypt, the Greek-Orthodox in all of the Levant countries, the Maronites in Lebanon and the various Syriac groups in Iraq. In particular, the Maronites of Lebanon have been associated with the vice of 'sectarianism.' "Sectarianism can be defined as ascribing political aims or rights to religious communities that go beyond matters of worship and family." (Douwes 2009: 34). All the Arab successor states of the Ottoman Empire were artificial creations. Lebanon, however, was different from the rest in the respect that the Maronites, the dominant community at that time in Mount Lebanon (a mountain range that runs parallel to the Mediterranean coast in the northern part of Lebanon today), urged the French authorities to proclaim the state of Greater Lebanon and then welcomed its foundation in 1920 enthusiastically. In the following decades the Maronite political elite became tied to the Western world, with particularly negative results during the civil war in the 1970s and 1980s. Inside and outside of Lebanon, Muslim Arabs continued to view Lebanon as an entity created because of imperialistic schemes and in cooperation with the Maronites and therefore refused to acknowledge its legitimacy. Even the positive record of a democratic political culture has been linked to the particular circumstances of Lebanon's foundation. Ghassan Salamé in treating the paradox of a 'democracy without democrats' in the Arab world has explained the installation of democracy in Lebanon as a "power-sharing formula within the framework of new frontiers" and as a "quid pro quo of state survival, a protective strategem on the part of the ruling segment to ensure the state survival" (Salamé 1994: 97).

Confessional boundary making has in the last ten years or so substantially shifted away from the distinction Muslim vs. non-Muslim to the Sunni-Shia divide. This development is closely linked to the history of violence in the Middle East. The Shia faction in Lebanon, marginalized in the early decades of Lebanon, made itself visible during the Lebanese civil war and has meanwhile attained a political position largely commensurate with its demographic status. The demographic majority of the Shia in Iraq, still successfully suppressed by Saddam Hussein in the aftermath of the Gulf War in 1991, was able to rise to political dominance after the US occupation of Iraq

in 2003 – with the well-known effect of antagonizing the Sunni elites and community. If one believes in the ‘law of series’, then one might expect in the next years a more important role of the Shia communities in the Gulf states, in particular in Bahrain (where they form the majority) and in Saudi-Arabia. Manipulation of confessional identities, however, is the responsibility of the ruling elites: “In response to the Arab Spring protests, the Gulf ruling families, above all the Bahraini and Saudi ruling families, have played on and strengthened sectarian divisions between Sunni and Shia to prevent a cross-sectarian opposition front, something that seemed possible in the first days of the uprising in Bahrain, thereby creating a *sectarian Gulf*” (Matthiesen 2013: ix).

IS is symbolic of the shift in boundaries on various levels – and it breaks the limits of political imagination in manifold ways. Originally part of the international al-Qaida movement led by Ayman al-Zawahiri, IS declared itself independent in summer 2014, at the same time as its stunningly successful military campaigns, particularly in Iraq. Consequently, IS has been involved in many clashes with the al-Nusra front in Syria which still sees itself obedient to the al-Qaida network. Al-Qaida is a ‘trans-national’ network that strives to be active across national borders. In contrast, IS defines itself as an ‘anti-national’ movement and stands for the ‘Talibanization’ of conflicts in the Middle East. “Like the Taliban, IS successes are built around military competence that includes excellent command and control, sound intelligence, well prepared logistics support, training, high mobility, and rapid speed of maneuver” (Rashid 2014). IS has also radicalized ‘religious warfare’ by turning against both non-Muslims, such as the Yezidis in Iraq, and against Shiis, thereby clearly extending the boundaries of what it means to be an ‘unbeliever’.

The Muslim Middle East has known the presence of Christians and Jews since the sweeping 7th-century Muslim conquests of the southern Mediterranean lands from Syria to Gibraltar. In particular, the fate of the Jews in Muslim lands was much less precarious than that of their fellow believers in Christian Europe. The more detached position of Islam towards the Jews made the Muslims’ position towards the Jews more relaxed, whereas Christianity was torn by its ‘hate-love’ towards Judaism: “Relieved of this ambiguity, and spared Christianity’s eschatological disappointment once it had gained power, Islam was less inclined than Christendom to persecute the Jews and could more readily abide a vital Jewish presence in its midst” (Cohen 1994: 24). The existence of the ‘Jews of Islam’ only came to an end in the late 1940s and early 1950s with the founding of the state of Israel.

Christian minorities, however, have continued to exist until the present day, albeit with substantial losses. In Lebanon, the ‘paradigmatic’ Christian state in the Middle East the Christians’ percentage has been reduced from 60 per cent to almost its half in the 2000s due to higher birth rates among Muslims, but particularly because of massive Christian emigration. The eastern Arab world’s religious plurality is owed to the Muslim tradition of officially acknowledging non-Muslims as religious minorities combined with a sort of religious *laissez-faire*, thereby perpetuating the Ottoman state tradition of organizing confessional groups in semi-autonomous units. Remarkably enough, Turkey has been a prominent exception in the Middle East in the way that it attempted to rid itself of its Christian population during World War One, the Armenian Genocide being the most devastating part of this, and then expelled

(with the consent of the European powers) those that remained. While on the eve of World War One, Christians made up around 16.5 per cent of Anatolia's population, the percentage of Christians among modern Turkey's population has been reduced to a mere 0.2 per cent at the end of the 20th century (Stoll 1998: 41). One of the depressing consequences of the recent wars in Iraq and Syria is that the time of Christian minorities in Syria and Iraq will come to an end (although Christians might remain in very small numbers, such as in the Turkish Republic of the 20th century).

Syria and Iraq will be faced in the future with a situation comparable to that in Turkey; an almost complete loss of their Christian population, but serious internal strife within the Muslim community with the confrontation of Sunnis vs. Alawites in Syria, Sunnis vs. Shiis vs. Kurds in Iraq and Sunnis vs. Kurds and Alevites in Turkey. Thus, the lines of conflict in these three countries will become more similar in the years to come. It is therefore worthwhile to have a closer look at Turkey, the northern neighbor of Iraq and Syria.

Turkey in the Middle East

With the founding of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, Turkish national identity turned against its Ottoman past and its links to the Arab world. The founders of the Republic of Turkey, amongst them most prominently Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, propagated the idea of Anatolia as the ancient homeland of the Turks. The Turks, it was then argued, should concentrate all their energies on Anatolia instead of acting as clumsy imperialists (Atay 1957: 41). The history of the Ottomans in the Arab world was simply ignored or seen as an aberration.

Since the 1980s, 'Islamicizing' discourses in Turkey have come to prevail in public and it has become commonly held view that "from an historical point of view, there has been no essential contradiction between religion (Islam) and nationalism (Turkism) in Turkish political thought in general" (Cetinsaya 1999: 351). The idea of Muslim Turkey as a productive combination of Turkish and Islamic identity has become widely known as the 'Turkish-Islamic synthesis' (*Türk-İslam sentezi*).

With the break-up of the bi-polar international order in the early 1990s, Turkish foreign policy has become more dynamic. Turkish soft power is grounded in political strategies such as Ahmed Davutoğlu's famous concept of *strategic depth* (*stratejik derinlik*). Turkish active foreign policy is visible in institutions such as TİKA (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı/Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency), but also in persons with influence beyond Turkey itself, such as Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, the Secretary General of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation from 2005 to 2014. Turkish foreign policy is ambitious, a fact that is documented in the contention of Davutoğlu in 2011, then Turkish foreign minister, that "Turkey will be a world power within 12 years" (Davutoğlu 2011). Turkish foreign policy is active in many regions, such as Central Asia, but one of its 'natural' arenas of intense diplomatic activities is the former Ottoman possessions in southeastern Europe and in the Arab world. The term applied for this type of active Turkish foreign policy, deeply tinged with the idea of a Turkish-Islamic Synthesis, is 'Neo-Ottomanism'. The term 'Neo-Ottoman-

ism', a description first put forward by critical foreign observers, has been used for about twenty years as a negative label for an allegedly expansion-inclined and overbearing Turkish foreign policy. The term has become well-established in Turkish as *Yeni Osmanlılık*, however, and there are positive interpretations of Neo-Ottomanism by Turkish observers (Taşpınar 2008).

Until 2011, Turkish foreign policy was driven amongst other factors by Turkey's remarkable economic success since the early 2000s. However, it was its role model of successfully bringing together 'Islamic' values and a sound democratic record that was particularly admired by the Arab people. Turkey's deep disappointment not to be admitted to the 'Christian club' of the European Union (a complaint that had, by the way, a strategic purpose as one of its chief components) was compensated by anchoring Turkey in its historical Ottoman contexts. As the core territories of Ottoman Empire were concentrated in southeastern Europe one might have expected that Turkey will lean towards a southeast European identity. The relations between Turkey and the non-Muslim majority populations in southeastern Europe are, however, characterized by deep reservations on both sides; Turks still reproach the people of southeastern Europe of having betrayed their former patron, the Ottoman Empire, by repudiating many centuries of friendly coexistence. Public memory in southeastern Europe legitimized the newly founded states in the 19th and early 20th centuries by their alleged moral and cultural superiority over the Ottomans. Therefore, Turkey has restricted itself in southeastern Europe mainly to the role of a patronage state for the Muslim populations, in particular in Bosnia.

In contrast, Turkey has been able to present itself in the Arab world as a positive role model. As a consequence, since the 2000s, we can also observe a 'Middle Easternization' of Turkey. Since 2011, however, the process of Turkey's 'Middle Easternization' has increasingly become less driven by Turkey itself and more a process by which Turkey is driven. The conflict in Syria embroils Turkey in a very complicated way and has shifted the epicenter of Turkish politics to its southeastern borderlands.

The Kurds in Turkey, Syria and Iraq see a unique opportunity to correct the injustice done to them in the reconfiguration of the post-Ottoman world after World War One. The treaty of Sèvres of 1920, which was intended as a means for creating a new order in Anatolia, by allowing self-determination, to, among others, an independent Armenia and an autonomous Kurdistan, could not be implemented due to the resistance of the Turkish independence movement. The treaty of Lausanne of 1923 ignored the Kurds. Certainly, the Kurds were the largest population group among those whose rights were disregarded by the emerging order in the Middle East after World War One. The marginal status of the Kurds remained largely unchanged into the 1990s. Since the establishment of a no-fly zone in northern Iraq in 1997 ('Operation Northern Watch'), Iraqi Kurdistan was able to establish a quasi-state, with good relations, amongst others, with Turkey. In the future, Turkey will not only have to find an answer to the decades-old question of how to integrate the Kurdish population within Turkey, it will also have to face new challenges to its borders that were agreed in the 1920s.

1910s–2010s: Looking Back – Looking Forward

In this essay, I have tried to show that the history of modern Turkey and of the Middle East (as far as it had been part of the Ottoman Empire until 1918) cannot be understood without examining the cataclysmic transformation that the region underwent in the years 1912–1922. Beginning with the Balkan wars in 1912–1913, continuing throughout World War One and the Armenian genocide, and finally reaching its climax with the Turkish War of Independence, this is a decade of almost non-intermittent warfare in the Ottoman world. This decade of violence and destruction fundamentally transformed the Middle East. Or to be more precise, and considering that the region only came to be known under its current name from the 1920s onwards, it is this decade that created the Middle East as we know it, a Middle East that appears to be facing its unbecoming now. In fact, many of the episodes of ethnic cleansing, mass violence and genocidal dynamics that were briefly mentioned have returned to the region as we speak. The deserts of Syria and the mountains of Iraq are witnessing yet another episode of warfare against the civilian population and instances of genocidal violence as these lines are being written.

Even a perfunctory glance at the 2014–2015 political landscape of the Middle East and the Balkans, Anatolia and Palestine reveals frightening parallels with the early 20th century. Mass violence, often with genocidal intent, have re-emerged in this region since the 1980s. From the Kurdish War in Turkey, the anti-Kurdish genocidal Anfal campaign in Iraq in the late 1980s and the anti-Muslim massacres in Bosnia to the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo, the series of wars of destruction against the Palestinian people in Gaza by Israel and the genocidal attacks of IS against Kurds, Shia, Christians and Yezidis, the post-Ottoman region has come to be haunted by violence and destruction. The post-World War One arrangements, whether in the form of independent states in the Balkans and Turkey, or as mandate governments in the Middle East only barely suppressed the violence on which they were built, but all of them failed to face up to this history and were built on slippery ground.

Politics in the region today are conducted in the context of relatively weak local governments and state structures, which are often used by actors of greater imperial projects. These days the main actors are not France and Great Britain, but the United States, the European Union (even though France and Great Britain remain at the helm of interventions in the region) and a largely ineffective United Nations. However, the current dynamics seem to show some surprising parallels with the late 19th and early 20th century. Today's new forms of post-modern warfare – unmanned drones, supposedly surgical air strikes, and ruthless anti-terrorism operations – impact on the emergence of Islamist terrorists from Al Qaida to IS as did strategies of war and dominance in the earlier period.

While this essay is far from suggesting that history is repeating itself – which is certainly not the case – we have to emphasize that the constellation of fundamental questions, Western intervention and local radicalization in the Middle East today are more than just reminiscent of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. What is more, these resemblances are a reminder that the demise of the Ottoman Empire, with its European mandated eastern neighbors and the slightly better of Balkan states, is still unfinished business. Neither Macedonia, nor Kosovo,

nor Bosnia-Herzegovina can be seen as sustainable states with well-established borders. In the Middle East, the situation is even more daunting. Whether we will be speaking of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan in ten years from now, or whether completely revised territorial and political arrangements will be in place is, at this point in time, impossible to say. And even though the government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has made impressive strides towards Kurdish autonomy and group rights, Turkey's territorial integrity still faces challenges. The theme of 'violence and viability' remains a major challenge for this entire region; a challenge to find progressive political arrangements and establish a civil society consensus that would safeguard peaceful coexistence, social cohesion and the viability of difference in a territory under the conditions of a stubbornly unjust world order.

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