

The New Struggle for Syria and the Nature of the Syrian State

Eberhard Kienle

THE OLD STRUGGLE FOR SYRIA

In his seminal *The Struggle for Syria* published in 1965, Patrick Seale dwells extensively on the role that external powers and actors played in the politics of the country after independence (Seale 1965, 1986). Covering the period from 1945, when the departure of the last French troops transformed virtual into actual political independence, to 1958, when Syria and Egypt temporarily merged to form the United Arab Republic (UAR), Seale's classic shows in great detail how various Arab and non-Arab states, some of them neighbours, others further afield, vied for influence in the newly decolonised republic. Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iraq, even (Trans) Jordan, all sought to bring Syria into their own orbit by supporting 'friendly' domestic forces, helping them to gain power or to consolidate their generally precarious grip on the country. Turkey, Israel, France and the United Kingdom pursued similar aims, but obviously were unable to underpin their efforts with Arab nationalist rhetoric. As Middle Eastern politics were increasingly influenced by the superpower rivalry that marked the post-Yalta world order, the United States and the Soviet Union became

E. Kienle (✉)

National Center for Scientific Research, Paris, France

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major players in the Syrian pitch. This is the story of Malcolm Kerr's *Arab Cold War*, another seminal study of the politics of the Middle East that focuses on the 1960s and 1970s (Kerr 1972). To quote Seale,

...it is as a mirror of rival interests on an international scale that she [Syria] deserves special attention. Indeed, her internal affairs are almost meaningless unless related to the wider context, first of her Arab neighbours and then of other interested powers. It is no accident that Syria should reflect in her internal political structure the rivalries of her neighbours since, as I hope to show, whoever would lead the Middle East must control her. There are many reasons for this view: one is the strategic position of Syria, guarding the north-eastern approaches to Egypt, the overland route to Iraq from the Mediterranean, the head of the Arabian peninsula and the northern frontier of the Arab world. Another is that Syria can claim to have been both the head and the heart of the Arab national movement since its beginnings at the turn of the century, both the generator of political ideas and the focus of countless dreams and patriotic fantasies. Part, at least, of this heritage falls to whoever rules her. (Seale, 1965, 1f)

However, political forces and actors in Syria were not simply the pawns of sinister and power-hungry foreign powers. Frequently, Syrians took the initiative and actively sought external support in order to contain their domestic rivals or to prevail over them. The author of *The Struggle for Syria* adds:

Syria's internal politics were unusually complex and her indigenous contribution to the guiding ideas of Arab politics particularly rich. She must not, then, be thought of as the passive victim of other people's quarrels. At times, indeed, the reverse is the case: discord in Syria is exported to her neighbours and beyond ... It is this two-way traffic in and out of Syria that forms the subject of this study. (Seale 1965: 3)

Ultimately, the struggle for Syria boils down to actors in a politically divided state entertaining privileged relationships with external actors, sometimes responding to their solicitations, sometimes courting them. Both external attempts to find Syrian allies and Syrian attempts to find external allies reflected the political opportunities and constraints that characterise a country whose population is deeply divided—to the extent that Michel Seurat, one of the most astute students of post-independence Syria, openly wondered whether this population formed a 'society' (Seurat

1980: 89). Frequently Syrian actors were closer to actors who were not Syrian citizens and who acted from outside Syrian territory than they were to other Syrians. Such closeness could be considered as 'merely' strategic or even tactical, had it not involved a considerable amount of mutual trust—trust to work together against other Syrians.

Thus, after overthrowing President Shukri al-Quwatli in 1949, Syria's first military ruler, Husni al-Za'im, quickly sought Iraqi support to contain potential Egyptian interference in favour of his elected predecessor. While al-Za'im soon reverted to the Egyptian option, his co-conspirator Sami al-Hinnawi who toppled him after only a few months once more sought Iraqi support to consolidate his position in Syria. The most vivid illustration remains of course the establishment of the United Arab Republic (UAR) in 1958, which, contrary to popular belief, was not initially advocated by President Gamal Abdel Nasser. In February of that year, a delegation of Syrian military officers and members of the Ba'ath Party travelled to Cairo to ask the Egyptian president to agree to the merger of the two states. Presented as the first step towards the political unity of all Arabs, the request was largely motivated by the Ba'ath's fear of being sidelined by the rise of the Syrian communists and persecuted after a possible right-wing coup to stop the advance of the left (Seale 1965; Kerr 1972).

PARALLELS WITH TODAY

Seale's account depicts a situation that very much resembles the one that prevailed soon after the beginning of the current Syrian war in March 2011. No doubt, initial contestation by and large divided the population in supporters and opponents of the regime (and, of course, bystanders). However, with the passage of time, additional cleavages became apparent (and possibly emerged) between the various opponents, in particular after the summer of 2011 when armed resistance turned from a sporadic into a permanent and finally dominant feature of the conflict. Each of the armed groups pursued its own agenda with little or merely tactical coordination with other such groups. Differences were sometimes political and ideological, but more often derived from their competition for power and influence. No doubt because armed groups more than peaceful protesters depend on supplies of resources from outside—most crucially weapons and ammunition—they also need to establish closer relations with external actors, who in turn seek to instrumentalise them for their own objectives

(Pierret 2013; Phillips 2016). The same logic applies to the rulers of Syria who started the cycle of violence and counter-violence. As the various armed groups managed to establish their control over specific parts of the territory, political fragmentation *ipso facto* took on a geographical and demographic dimension.

The need for resources felt by contending actors inside Syria combined with the calculations of their external suppliers led to a variety of alliances (of sorts) that enabled the former to obtain material support and the latter to influence events or at least to believe that they did. While the regime increasingly relied on its ties with Hezbollah, Iran and Russia, the various armed opposition groups received material support from Turkey, Jordan, the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the West. It is also worth noting that part of the support from the GCC came from non-governmental sources. The armed groups sided with one or several external actors, simultaneously or successively, and so did the external actors themselves. For instance, this kind of special relationship tied the governments of Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia to the Free Syrian Army, which roughly became the armed wing of the Syrian National Council, the main representative body of the opposition in exile. Other such relationships tied Turkey to *Ahrar al-Sham*; the (largely but not exclusively Kurdish) Democratic Union Party and its People's Protection Units to Russia and the United States (who nonetheless disagreed about almost every other aspect of the Syrian conflict); and the Islamic State to private donor networks in the Gulf States and to its sympathisers and supporters around the world, including Europe and North America (Pierret 2013; Phillips 2016). In some cases the external actors called the shots, on other occasions domestic actors refused to comply. Without much success, the United States (US) and its allies made their support conditional on greater coordination among the opposition groups; on other occasions the United States brought their Kurdish allies to respect Turkish interests in its fight against ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). Saudi Arabia managed to influence, reshape and broaden the major representative body of the Syrian opposition in exile, though without enhancing its effectiveness (Phillips 2016).

As in the early years after independence, Syria today is an internally divided country where competing actors entertain privileged relationships with external actors and indeed pursue their own foreign policies. Though (still) a state in terms of international law and formally recognised as such, it is failing once again to act as a unified actor on the international scene

and indeed as a state as far as a variety of internal matters are concerned. The obvious difference between the 'old' and the 'new' struggle for Syria resides in the means that are employed by the contenders. In the 1940s and 1950s, they largely mounted intrigues, plotted military coups and sought to buy political support (cash in hand), while in the current conflict, they resort to open military conflict and armed (surprise) attacks against each other and against civilians thought to be supporters of their adversaries.

CONTRAST WITH THE REIGN OF HAFEZ AL-ASAD

Both the old and the new struggle for Syria sharply contrast with the reign of Hafez al-Asad who managed to transform Syria from a passive object of competing neighbourly desires into an active historical subject pursuing its own coherent interests and policies. No longer did Syria's environment shape Syria, but Syria now shaped its environment. More precisely, it was al-Asad and his ruling group who transformed Syria into a strong actor on the international scene as they progressively crushed competing power centres in the country. But, rather than reflecting the 'national interest', their policies at home and abroad merely reflected the interests of this group that had successfully managed to impose itself.

After staging two successive—and successful—coups, first discreetly in 1969, then openly in 1970, and ditching his former allies, Hafez al-Asad managed to provide his government with sufficient domestic support to stay in power and to project this power beyond the country's borders (Batatu 1981; van Dam 2011; Seale 1988). In 1973 Syria and Egypt launched the October (or Ramadan) war to break the stalemate that had prevailed since the 1967 war and thus prevented a negotiated settlement of the conflict with Israel. Although the Israeli army could reverse initial Syrian and Egyptian gains, the war led to disengagement agreements on the Golan and the Sinai in 1974. In the end Syria refused to sign a peace treaty with Israel which might have enabled it to regain control of the Golan. However, Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in 1977, the Camp David Accords of 1978, the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt of 1979 and the return of Sinai to Egypt were the direct results of the military effort jointly prepared with Syria (Quandt 2005).

In 1976 Syria intervened militarily in the Lebanese Civil War, imposed its will on the warring factions, permanently stationed its troops and secret services in the country and thereby dominated its politics for the next

29 years. The intervention illustrated Syria's strength all the more as it first stopped the advance of Palestinian forces and their Lebanese allies who were opposed to the political status quo in the country and later prevented the largely Christian advocates of this same status quo from imposing their agenda with strong Israeli support. Yasser Arafat and his supporters were expelled twice from Lebanon during the presence of the Syrian troops, first in 1982 and then in 1983 (Petran 1987; Traboulsi 2012; O'balance 1998). In fact, military action against the Palestinians was taken even though it threatened to shake the very legitimacy of the al-Asad regime, which rested on Ba'athism as an Arab nationalist ideology and thus by extension on the defence of the Palestinian cause. Not much later, in the war between Iraq and Iran that raged from 1980 to 1988, Damascus supported the latter, while all other Arab capitals supported the former. Primarily determined by the conflict with its Iraqi counterpart, the position of the al-Asad regime was remarkable as it put Syria at odds with the rest of the 'Arab world' whose wider interests, like the more specific ones of the Palestinians, officially formed the backbone of al-Asad's legitimacy (Kienle 1990). Syria stuck to its decision throughout the war, even though it lost the financial and material support hitherto granted by the wealthy oil-producing states in the Arab peninsula. Partly motivated by the continued *mésentente* with Saddam Hussein, Syria condemned the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and participated in the international coalition to liberate the country in 1991. More generally, this policy reflected al-Asad's acute awareness of the end of the Cold War that not only deprived Saddam Hussein of Soviet support but also forced—and enabled—Syria to embrace the 'New World Order' as defined by the then US President George H.W. Bush. After condemning Hussein's move in Kuwait, al-Asad quickly defeated General Aoun who had been challenging the authority of Syria and its allies in Lebanon with Iraqi support and then tightened his own grip on the country. The liberation of Kuwait initiated the demise of the Iraqi rulers and even the Iraqi state, drove a nail into Saddam Hussein's future coffin and thus strengthened Syria. Last but not least, al-Asad and his supporters managed to keep Turkey on its toes by providing a rear base to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and hosting its leader Abdullah Öcalan from 1979 to 1998 (Kienle 1990; Hinnebusch 2015).

The survival of the al-Asad regime, its rapid consolidation and its resilience against challenges such as the Hama uprising in 1982 and the coup attempted by Hafez's own brother Rifat a year later may be explained as a result of an efficient strategy combining repression, co-optation and

legitimation (Merkel and Gerschewski 2011). The extent and severity of repression has been amply documented by human rights observers such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, testimonies like those by Yassin al-Haj Saleh (Haj Saleh 2012) and of course the massacre of some 10–30,000 people during the shelling of Hama. Strategies of co-optation aimed not only at the Ba'ath's traditional constituencies of small-scale owners of capital, middling peasants, public sector workers and civil servants but increasingly at a new category of entrepreneurs who were benefitting from the controlled policies of economic liberalisation known as the (first) *infitah*. Reinforced by the effects of co-optation, its legitimacy was based on its constant rhetorical defence of the Palestinian and Arab cause and more generally the embrace of anti-imperialism and social justice defined as an 'Arab version of socialism' that became sufficiently elastic to accommodate the rising new entrepreneurs. However, the flexibility of the legitimation strategy and the underlying attempts to simultaneously co-opt employees and employers, and thus labour and capital, also sowed the seeds of social conflict and contestation that culminated in the 2011 uprising.¹

Ultimately, however, the presumed strength of the al-Asad regime—more apparent than—and by implication that of Syria was the result of favourable external and indeed global conditions, at least from the moment al-Asad appeared to external actors as a convincing ally. External moral and material support facilitated repression as well as co-optation, even though it also allowed the regime to pursue policies like the containment of Palestinian forces in Lebanon that could be seen as contradictory to its official legitimation strategy. Thus the Soviet Union staunchly supported Syria throughout the Cold War, providing significant development aid, including building the Tabqa dam on the Euphrates, weapons, markets and political support. The USSR also sought a window into the Mediterranean and an Arab ally with a common border with Israel (even though such proximity also entailed risks).

This support only weakened towards the end of the Cold War when the new Secretary General of the Communist Party, Mikhail Gorbachev, asked al-Asad to pay for weapons in cash. It is no doubt the decline in Soviet support, prompted by the growing exhaustion of the USSR, that heightened al-Asad's awareness of global changes and led him to move closer to the West. In 1979 Syria also entered into an alliance with the new Islamic Republic that had replaced the monarchy in Iran. However, the benefits of this alliance became manifest only after the end of the Iraq-Iran War in

1988. During the war, they were more than offset by the loss of support from the other Arab states that all sided with Iraq, as did the Soviet Union. Although on a far more moderate scale than generally assumed, Iran provided military aid and economic support in the form of tourists, oil, trade and investment (Kienle 1990). Thanks to its however limited participation in the liberation of Kuwait in 1991, Syria found itself on the right side not only of the declining USSR but also of the United States and the rest of the West.

Prompted by the collapse of the Soviet Union and consistent with overtures to the West, the new wave of economic liberalisation in the 1990s known as the second *infitah* in spite of its limited and selective nature further convinced the winners of the Cold War that Syria was open for business and ready to enter the era of globalisation that was supposed to consecrate the worldwide victory of capitalism. Domestically it led to considerable expectations and indeed first arrested the decline in economic growth perceptible since the mid-1980s and then led to its increase in the 1990s, the latter also boosted by the production and export of oil. By favouring and tying parts of the private sector closer to the regime, it temporarily stabilised the position of the latter before alienating its less well-off constituencies. Strengthening crony capitalism on the one hand and economic marginalisation on the other in the longer run, the second *infitah* initiated a trend towards growing material inequality, eroded the social fabric of the country and thus contributed to the contestation that began in 2011. Moreover, the regime implemented a degree of political window-dressing such as slightly less controlled parliamentary elections and some human rights improvements that somewhat enhanced its international reputation. Finally, the now merely rhetorical nature of its hostility towards Israel further contributed to the overall impression of a regime on the mend.

However, even under Hafez al-Asad, Syria's strength had been apparent rather than real. Cracks were visible to whoever wanted to see them under the polished surface of a regional power increasingly embracing what is commonly referred to as modernity. In Nazih Ayubi's terms, Syria was a fierce rather than a strong state (Ayubi 1996): its strength resided in hard talk and in heavy-handed repression rather than in economic performance and social, or rather societal, cohesion. Syria indeed remained socially as divided as it had been in the days of the old struggle for Syria. The Ba'athist rhetoric of Arab nationalism papered over but failed to lessen divisions that separated geographical regions of the country, town

and countryside and, in spite of its socialist colouring, social groups based on criteria such as income, wealth and status. More importantly, it failed to unite its initial and traditional constituency of small-scale owners of capital, peasants, civil servants and army officers (the latter two frequently hailing from the first two) that formed the backbone of al-Asad's regime. Rather, the political ascendancy of these 'intermediary classes' prompted and exacerbated the competition for power and resources among their members in which loyalties based on regional, family and religious (sometimes also linguistic) ties were heavily mobilised. The increasing emphasis on Arab nationalism and unity thus coincided with deepening societal divisions that have been analysed by numerous authors including Nikolaos van Dam, Raymond Hinnebusch, Hanna Batatu, Alasdair Drysdale, Michel Seurat and Elizabeth Picard.² Most strikingly, these cleavages appeared in the struggle for power in Syria (i.e. the theme of the monograph of the same name published by Nikolaos van Dam) that pitted Sunni, Druze, Isma'ili and Alawite officers against each other throughout the 1960s. Identity-based dynamics of solidarity and exclusion led to the successive purge of the Sunnis, Druze and Isma'ilis from most important positions in the armed forces. Important as they have been, such cleavages based on regional, religious and family ties do not account for all the forms of factionalism in Syrian politics, which had become awash with examples of disagreements among family members and alliances across religious divides.

Marked throughout its history by changing but ever-present societal divisions, the Syrian state was further weakened by the longer-term effects of the second *infitah* already referred to. Initially, the additional measures of economic liberalisation adopted in the 1990s no doubt increased economic growth and thus directly and indirectly enabled the regime to draw on additional resources to pursue its interests both domestically and abroad. The combination of partial economic liberalisation and crony capitalism allowed the regime to direct material benefits towards its supporters and broaden the circle of beneficiaries who remained indebted to it and under continued authoritarian rule frequently continued to depend on it. Co-optation and its trickle-down effects strengthened a regime that continued to have the means to repress dissent if necessary and to prop up its legitimacy. However, the combination of selective economic liberalisation and crony capitalism gradually proved to be detrimental to the material conditions of growing parts of the population, dashing the hopes of many who (unreasonably perhaps) had hoped to be among the winners.

The co-optation of some increasingly led to the 'de-optation' of others; support from the beneficiaries of these policies was matched by defections from among the regime's old support basis of small-scale owners of capital and peasants left out from the windfalls, as well as civil servants and public sector workers. While the loyalty of the latter two categories could in part be bought through salary rises, workers in the informal sector that was naturally boosted by economic liberalisation fell through the cracks. The inflow of capital and investments also strengthened the position of entrepreneurs vis-à-vis that of the regime. At the same time, increasing economic exchanges with the outside world increased the exchange of ideas, in some quarters weakened officially defended values and norms, and thereby increased the diversity of thought as well as of social and cultural practices. Official statements, including the foundations of regime legitimacy, were challenged, and these challenges resulted in a Huntingtonian dilemma in which the rulers had increasing difficulty in reconciling competing and contradicting demands for material and symbolical resources emanating from different parts of the population (Huntington 1968). Finally, attempts to guarantee Syria's position in a world marked by global exchanges, the search for foreign investment and international recognition put limits on the overt recourse to repression. As a result, the Syrian regime increasingly faced diverse internal challenges that illustrated the Potemkinian nature of its apparent strength.

THE STRUGGLE AS A MIRROR OF THE STATE

Like the old one, the new struggle for Syria is closely related, indeed premised, on the societal cleavages that divide Syria. The fact that domestic actors enter into alliances with external ones to contain or even defeat other domestic actors is proof of cross-border links that are stronger than solidarity with fellow Syrians. Such cross-border ties are no doubt a common phenomenon in the politics and international relations of numerous countries. For instance, competing parties in democratic elections frequently get symbolical or rhetorical support from like-minded parties in neighbouring countries. In contemporary Europe the parties of the extreme right, in spite of their nationalist agendas, have been supporting each other in the run up to parliamentary and presidential elections. Similarly, most of the rest of the European Union supported the Remain camp in the 2016 Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom. Conversely, Donald Trump advocated Brexit in the 2016 presidential campaign, while

European leaders sided with his competitor, Hillary Clinton. However, in these cases external support for domestic actors is ultimately mediated by the electorate as a whole and thus, except for the case of monarchies, by the sovereign. In contrast, Syrian actors allied themselves with external actors without referring the case to the ultimate judgement of all Syrians and preferred to impose these alliances on fellow Syrians. The strength of cross-border ties with external actors compared to cross-country solidarity with other Syrians shows that Syria is a 'territorial' rather than a 'nation' state, in Bahgat Korany's terms (Korany 1987). More precisely, it is a state in the sense of a territory defined by borders, a population and a polity claiming legitimacy and attempting to rule this territory and population. However, unlike in a nation state, the population does not form a—however imagined—community of solidarity including all and only the inhabitants of the territory, a community that is stronger than any other community at infra-state level (Anderson 2006).

It is certainly true that in part the new struggle for Syria has been waged by armed groups that have established themselves by force in various parts of the country and which do not necessarily represent either the local population or its interests. Some of them reach out to the local inhabitants, attempt to co-opt them or include them in asymmetrical alliances. Others act like occupation forces in a foreign country. However, the current conflict(s) cannot be reduced to struggles among groups without any social base in the areas from where they act. Loyalist forces have enjoyed popular support in significant swathes of the country, including the North-West, parts of Aleppo and Damascus. Conversely, the People's Protection Units clearly recruit (though not only) from the Kurdish-speaking population in the North of the country where they fight ISIS and the al-Asad government. However, the issue is not whether or not the armed groups represent the local population. The important fact is that the armed groups operate from areas where they are able to claim some kind of connection with the local population that they can instrumentalise: for instance, there are no armed rebel Sunni groups in non-Sunni areas, and there are no armed Kurdish groups in non-Kurdish areas.

Syria remained a territorial state during the reign of Hafez al-Asad. The skilful recourse to repression, co-optation and legitimisation facilitated by an international climate favourable to his administration strengthened Syria in appearance rather than in reality. As they failed to mitigate the societal divisions among Syrians and to promote an imagined community encompassing all Syrians, Hafez al-Asad's policies also failed to transform

Syria into a nation state that might have been more stable. Continued authoritarian rule moreover prevented the territorial state from gaining additional legitimacy that it could have gained through more participatory decision-making procedures. Devoid of overarching bonds of loyalty and democratic procedures, Syria remained a weak state.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE OLD AND THE NEW STRUGGLE FOR SYRIA

In spite of their similarities, the old and the new struggle for Syria differ in four major respects. The first difference pertains to the importance of identity politics in the sense of solidarities based on cultural markers such as religion, language and the representation of family ties (which, even if real, need to be subjectively felt to provide the foundations of commonalities). In the new struggle for Syria, ties between internal and external actors frequently build on subjectively shared cultural markers. The most notable exceptions are ties with major global actors in America and Europe. Thus Sunni Muslim groups in the country receive support from Sunni Muslim governments and non-governmental actors in other Arab countries (with the notable exception of the Egyptian government), Turkey and further afield. The largely Alawite rulers receive support from Shi'ite actors such as Iran and Hezbollah, even though the effort to redefine the Alawites as 'Shi'ites' remains a precarious project of uncertain outcome. In contrast, in the old struggle for Syria, cross-border ties between internal and external actors hardly ever built on such sectarian similarities or considerations. At the time competing political actors in Syria mainly hailed from its Sunni Muslim majority whose allies in other Arab countries and in Turkey by and large also belonged to their respective Sunni Muslim majorities. Iran was not yet part of the game, and neither Hezbollah nor other major Shi'ite forces in Lebanon had yet come into existence.

Second, the new struggle is far more violent than the old struggle. In the latter, apart from the occasional assassination and execution, competitors mainly bought support, plotted conspiracies and intrigues and staged *coups d'état*. In the former, the parties to the conflict openly fight each other in what amounts to a fully fledged war, and they deliberately inflict suffering on civilians thought to support the other side. Most likely, the large-scale violence that marks the new struggle flows from the perception of the actors that the matter at stake is the defence not simply of interests but of identities and therefore of one's very existence.

Third, the old and the new struggle differ as to their impact on borders. In the old struggle, the external borders of Syria were either respected or attempts were made to unite Syria with other states. From the 1940s onwards, the Hashemite court in Amman lobbied for its Greater Syria scheme that aimed at the creation of a single state encompassing Transjordan, Palestine, Lebanon and Syria (and a close alliance, even federation, with Iraq), while its counterpart in Baghdad advocated its Fertile Crescent scheme that sought to unite these countries and Iraq in an 'Arab League' (to be distinguished from the Egyptian rival project that gave rise to the Arab League as we know it today). The latter project especially was popular in Syrian quarters that sought to check the influence of other Arab states (Kienle 1995). In 1958 the rulers of Syria persuaded the president of Egypt, Gamal Abdel Nasser, to establish the UAR already referred to above. Designed to ward off threats from the imperialist West and its alleged regional stooges (and even communism), it broke apart three years later. In 1963, an unsuccessful attempt was made to unite Syria, Egypt and Iraq and thus to strengthen the 'revolutionary' camp in the Arab East; following on its heels a plan to unite only Syria and Iraq also failed. In 1970 the al-Asad regime, still weak, joined a rather loose Federation of Arab Republics established by Egypt, Libya and Sudan that also floundered. Syria once more embarked on a tentative merger with Iraq in 1978 when the Camp David Accords threatened to arrest or even reverse the emergence of Syria as a strong regional actor. Faced with Egypt's 'defection' that tipped the balance of power further in favour of Israel, al-Asad cautiously sought a rapprochement with the Iraqi regime. The attempt ended in failure less than a year later when Saddam Hussein managed to concentrate all powers in Iraq in his own hands and visibly became a big threat like that of Israel. This being said, the al-Asad regime simultaneously expanded its jurisdiction 'informally', without redrawing interstate borders: illustrating its growing strength, its troops entered Lebanon in 1976 and according to its own account for almost 30 years attempted to end the civil war and prevent its resurgence (Seale 1965; Kerr 1972; Kienle 1990).

In contrast, the impact of the new struggle for Syria is messier, along the country's borders as well as within them. Something like a complete merger with a neighbouring country was envisaged by only one actor, ISIS, which considered Iraq as a part of its future realm and accepted the allegiance of like-minded groups in other parts of the Middle East such as Libya and the Egyptian Sinai. Such ambitions are reflected in its official name—the 'Islamic State in Iraq and Sham', the latter term referring to a

geographical area larger than the current Syrian state (in the competing acronym, 'ISIL' is rendered by the term 'Levant'). In actual fact of course, ISIS has only dominated some of the Northern parts of the two countries, even though it tried to abolish the border between them and paid roughly equal attention to its two major strongholds, Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria.

At the same time, however, the new struggle for Syria entailed the internal fragmentation of the country into areas more or less dominated by the regime and competing political powers. Based on their own forces of coercion, the latter occasionally provided services ranging from education and health to the administration of justice and here and there allowed participatory institutions to emerge. Sometimes these services coexisted alongside those provided by the central government or relied on personnel that officially continued to receive their salaries from the latter. Permanently shifting in response to military defeats and victories, the boundaries of these areas have gradually settled around larger zones of domination and influence such as the government-controlled Damascus-Latakia corridor and Hama and Homs in the Western part of the country, the areas under the control of opposition forces including the environs of Dara'a in the South and Idlib in the North, the mainly Kurdish areas in the North that the Democratic Union Party (YPG) intends to unite under the name of Rojava and of course the North-Eastern parts of the country ruled by ISIS. The increasing territorial fragmentation that only mirrors the political division of the country may entail lasting divisions and may limit the future reach of central government even after an end of open conflict, possibly giving way to decentralised structures of sorts (Yazigi 2016). Considering the general reluctance of the 'international community' to endorse permanent changes to international borders, fragmentation is however likely to stop short of the replacement of the Syrian state with a variety of smaller states (that would all be recognised internationally).

Fourth, the new struggle for Syria is also fuelled by the rise of identity politics in the rest of the world, in particular in Europe and other parts of the West. In the recent past, the classic nation states of Europe where states as legal and political entities coincided more than in many other cases (though often imperfectly) with nations as communities of solidarity and loyalty have lost their appeal to increasing numbers of their inhabitants, even citizens, who consider themselves marginalised and excluded and thus identify with other actors that claim to defend them. The erosion of the nation state in Europe as the main focus of loyalty and solidarity

pushes those who consider themselves excluded to migrate to lands where they expect to meet respect or even dominate. Disenchanted Muslims 'radicalise' into what is commonly called jihadists and are pulled into areas controlled by the 'truly' Muslim ISIS, while some disenchanted non-Muslims see in the ISIS the most radical challenger to the existing order and therefore 'Islamise' to join it.³

CONCLUDING REMARKS: FROM OLD TO NEW

Any explanation of the differences between the old and the new struggle for Syria seems to hinge on the growing importance of identity politics. Although they often divided populations (rather than 'societies') into mutually distrustful groups, societal cleavages based on religion and other cultural markers seem to have deepened under conditions of increasing insecurity and competition. Individuals who feel insecure seek security in communities based on shared cultural features such as religion that subjectively strengthen and protect them in the struggle for resources and power.

The creation of independent states in the process of decolonisation after World War II was one such moment in which competition exacerbated such societal divides; the inhabitants of these states could neither appeal to umpires nor rely on mutually accepted institutions which yet had to be built or at least endorsed. In Syria, but also in other countries of the Middle East, state power was definitely devolved from foreigners to locals, along with the power to allocate material and symbolical resources, even the power to define citizenship (Hourani 2002; Owen 2004). The political arena delineated by the borders of the new Syrian state, formerly mandatory Syria, was no longer manipulated or policed by France. Societal and political cleavages defined by cultural markers were exacerbated as the stakes increased; independence reinforced fragmentation all the more as neither foreign domination nor the struggle against it had produced an imagined community or a nation strong enough to neutralise infra-state loyalties and solidarities (Anderson 2006; Kienle 2016).

The other crucial moment coincided with the beginning of the current period of globalisation in the late 1980s. The end of the Cold War threw the countries of the old 'Eastern bloc' and their allies like Syria into the global arena of competition for investment, markets and other resources, an arena much larger than that of the Syrian state within which Syrians had been obliged to compete since independence. Domestic and foreign policies had to be adapted for the Syrian state and thus for Syrians to partici-

pate successfully in the new global game. Selective economic liberalisation to attract capital increased at least the perception of growing material inequality. It also led to greater social and cultural diversity, in particular between the internationalised beneficiaries of globalisation who tended to embrace 'foreign' practices and the others. Losers easily identified loss with identity, and cleavages based on cultural markers deepened and multiplied. No doubt, the interest-based alliance between Alawite officers and non-Alawite, largely Sunni, owners of capital and its ramifications cushioned both groups against the transformation of a societal division marked by religion into a fully fledged open conflict between Alawites and Sunnis. However, once the regime was openly contested, support and opposition for the conflict parties was increasingly framed in terms of cultural markers, either explicitly or implicitly. Even though the early contestation beginning in Dara'a was fuelled by social concerns and by repression, the fact that protesters were Sunnis raised the spectre of all Sunnis rallying in protest and thus of a Sunni-Alawite showdown. From the point of view of the regime therefore, protests had to be repressed fiercely, at the risk of further alienating the majority of Sunnis and in the hope of persuading all others who shared their economic interests with the regime into compliance.

NOTES

1. For the history and political economy of Syria under the al-Asads, see, for instance, Perthes (1995), Matar (2016), Haddad (2012), and Belhadj (2013).
2. van Dam (2011), Batatu (1981), Seurat (1980), Drysdale (1981), Devlin (1976), Hinnebusch (2001), Picard (1980), Wieland (2012).
3. Roy (2016), Kepel (2016), Dumas et al. (2016).

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