



Middle East Centre

# SYRIA-IRAQ RELATIONS STATE CONSTRUCTION AND DECONSTRUCTION AND THE MENA STATES SYSTEM

Professor Raymond Hinnebusch

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Reference	
Dağh	(Turk) Hill
Kuh	(Pers) Mound
Dere	(Turk & Pers) Valley
Tch, Tlul	(Arab) Tributary
Wadi	(Arab) Stream bed
Wādī	(Arab) usually dry
Elter	(Arab) Swampy or Dead
Bogha	(Turk) Defile
Tang	(Pers) Defile
Kang, Kasr	(Pers) Castle

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**Cover Image:** Map of Sykes–Picot Agreement. Royal Geographical Society, 1910-15. Signed by Mark Sykes and François Georges-Picot, 8 May 1916. Public Domain, wikimedia.



Middle East  
Centre

# SYRIA-IRAQ RELATIONS: STATE CONSTRUCTION AND DECONSTRUCTION AND THE MENA STATES SYSTEM

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## About the Author

Raymond Hinnebusch is Professor of International Relations and Middle East Politics and Director of the Centre for Syrian Studies at the University of St Andrews. He is the author of *The International Relations of the Middle East*, Manchester University Press, 2003; *Turkey-Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity*, co-edited with Ozlem Tur, Ashgate, 2013; *Sovereignty after Empire: Comparing the Middle East and Central Asia*, co-edited with Sally Cummings, Edinburgh University Press, 2011; *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, co-edited with Anoush Ehteshami, Lynne Rienner, 2001; *Syria, Revolution from Above*, Routledge, 2000; *The Syrian-Iranian Alliance: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System*, co-edited with Anoush Ehteshami, Routledge, 1997; *Authoritarian Power and State Formation in Ba'athist Syria: Army, Party and Peasant*, Westview Press, 1990; *Peasant and Bureaucracy in Ba'athist Syria: The Political Economy of Rural Development*, Westview Press, 1989; and *Egyptian Politics under Sadat*, Cambridge University Press, 1985.

*'It's the same situation as it used to be in Iraq... Everyone is afraid of one another'*  
Iraqi refugee fleeing Syria, 2014

## Abstract

This paper examines Syria-Iraq relations in order to explore wider issues of regional politics. It presents an overview of the historical stages in relations between the two countries since their formation, with the aim of using their changing relations as indicators of changes in both regional states and in the regional states system. The paper argues that state formation in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has followed a bell-shaped curve, first rising, then declining, and altering, in parallel, the character of the states system. Each stage in Syria-Iraq relations is emblematic of the state of the MENA states system at the time.

Syria and Iraq are near 'siblings' with key shared experiences. Firstly, their malformed construction under imperialism left behind fragmented 'artificial' states with built-in irredentism and powerful trans-state identities. Secondly, both states' formation advanced under Ba'thist authoritarian regimes via a combination of party-building, oil and war. Then, they also faced similar challenges from US hegemony in the region in the 1990s, albeit responding in quite different ways. Finally, beginning in 2003 in Iraq, with the US invasion, and in 2011 in Syria, with the outbreak of the Syrian Uprising, both states have suffered deconstruction under various combinations of internal revolt and external intervention. Syria and Iraq have again been reduced to weak states suffering more intense trans-state conflict, loss of territorial control and challenges to their borders. This, allied to the penetration of both by trans-state ideology, has placed Syria and Iraq at the epicentre of a widening sectarianism of the whole regional system.

This paper seeks to understand the state formation trajectories of Syria and Iraq. It builds on the foundation laid by several classic studies of Syria-Iraq relations, such as Patrick Seale's (1965) work on the struggle for Syria after early independence, Eberhard Kienle's *Ba'th vs Ba'th* (1990), which focused on the Pan-Arab period and Malik Mufti's *Sovereign Creations* (1996), which updated the narrative into the period of relative state consolidation. The paper carries the story forward to the current time.

The paper is organised in the following sections: 1) It first adumbrates an historical sociology lens for understanding the topic; 2) historic Syria-Iraq relations are then detailed as indicators of the evolution of the states and state system; and 3) Syria-Iraq relations just prior to and during the Arab Uprisings are examined, as iconic of the current condition of the states system.

## An Historical Sociology Approach and the Construction of the Syrian and Iraqi States

Historical sociology frames state formation as the product of an interaction of states and states systems. As Buzan and Weaver, in their *Regions and Powers* (2005) argue, the kind of state, 'pre-modern' or 'modern', prevalent in a region determines its distinctive dynamics. Yet, the system also shapes its state components. In the case of the Middle East, Western imperialism initially created the (flawed) states system against which the states have reacted, while continuing also to reproduce it.

Specifically, imperialism, together with the resistance and collaboration of local actors, 'made' a conflict prone and unstable states system. First, the Middle East was 'born' as an exceptionally penetrated (Brown 1984) periphery of the world capitalist system. Its ruling elites, in varying degrees, were initially imposed, co-opted or dependent on, and often more responsive to, global elites than its own citizenry. Second, arbitrary imperial boundary drawing resulted in incongruence between dominant identities and the new states. This built irredentism into the regional order and left the new states competing for the loyalties of their populations with powerful sub and supra-state identities. Many states were fragmented by rival sub-state identities; on the other hand, since the supra-state Arab and/or Islamic *umma* was a more compelling imagined community than the state itself, the wider Arab world became an arena of competition by rival states over regional leadership, largely via discourse wars, forcing all regimes to defend their legitimacy by being seen to act on behalf of an Arab or Islamic interest (Barnett 1998). Third, the Middle East states system made for an intense insecurity of its state components: it was 'born fighting', as Buzan put it, with the imposition of an Israeli settler state. Imperial boundary drawing produced a multitude of weak states afflicted with boundary disputes, while the juxtaposition of large stronger states and small mini-states built in destabilising power imbalances. Thus, from the outset, each state felt threatened both by neighbours and by internal, often-trans-state, opposition networks.

Yet MENA states were also 'born' with the material apparatus of governance over a fixed territory and, with independence, were accorded formal sovereignty. To be sure, initially, actual state sovereignty was weak, both in terms of external independence and internal territorial control. However, the 'original sins' of a flawed state system, external dependency, domestic opposition and inter-state threats, were major incentives for state building. In trying to assert actual sovereignty, Arab state builders gravitated toward neo-patrimonial practices that combined time-honoured indigenous state-building formulas, notably Ibn Khaldun's *assabiya* (elite solidarity built on primordial ties but also a shared nationalist or religious-ideological mission) with imported modern bureaucratic machinery, mass party organisation and surveillance technology. On-going struggles to capture the state apparatus were waged by groups and classes, with those having the strongest *assabiya*, both primordial and ideological, hence capacity to act together and mobilise numbers, tending to prevail.

In order to consolidate their rule, new elites had to co-opt key insiders, incorporate broader ruling coalitions through political institutions, build bureaucratic apparatuses penetrating territory and populations, create legitimating national identities, extract resources and defend their states against external threats. However, these state building projects were never more than partly successful and had their own costs and vulnerabilities. The initial populist authoritarian formula suffered from dependence on 'insider' elite *assabiya*, which tended to alienate 'outsiders', on rents for the material resources needed for state building, which were finite; and on nationalism for the legitimacy, which tended to embroil states in protracted conflicts.

Subsequent measures which were meant to address these flaws, such as the turn to neo-liberalism and crony capitalism had, however, their own costs that culminated in the Arab Uprisings. The Uprisings initiated a new phase of state deconstruction.

State construction (and deconstruction) took place in interaction with the systemic level. The multi-layered system in which MENA states were embedded was a source of both threats and resources for regime state-builders: the region was embedded in a global core-periphery hierarchy that was a potential source of both resources/protection and threats to states' security and sovereignty; there was also a trans-state arena based on shared identities in which states could generate legitimacy and seek regional leadership, but also often faced ideological subversion by rivals. Whether these arenas were mainly sources of threats or of opportunities and resources, depended on *the relative level of state consolidation*, which varied over time and between different states; consolidation was, in turn, partly a function of states' ability to access both material and legitimacy resources in these arenas

While the initially meagre resources at the disposal of most state builders sharply limited their co-optation capacity, the hydrocarbon rent boom of the seventies, greatly increased their abilities to buy loyalty and consolidate regimes. As regimes became stronger, they posed greater threats to each other and, as this generated a classic 'realist' security dilemma, the inter-state arena in which neighbouring states were perceived as threats or allies became more salient for state policy-makers. In periods when the states were weak, the dominant tendency among many MENA states was to bandwagon with a global power to get the material resources needed to cope with internal or trans-state threats. In periods of greater state consolidation, stronger, potential regional hegemons, for example Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt or Saddam Hussein's Iraq, sought to use trans-state identities to mobilise the region against the Western global powers. Which strategy regimes adopted toward the great powers depended not only on their relative capabilities - whether they had barely enough to defend their independence or enough to bid for regional hegemony - but also on whether their ruling coalitions had been left behind by imperialism or had come to power in rebellions against oligarchies left behind by imperialism.

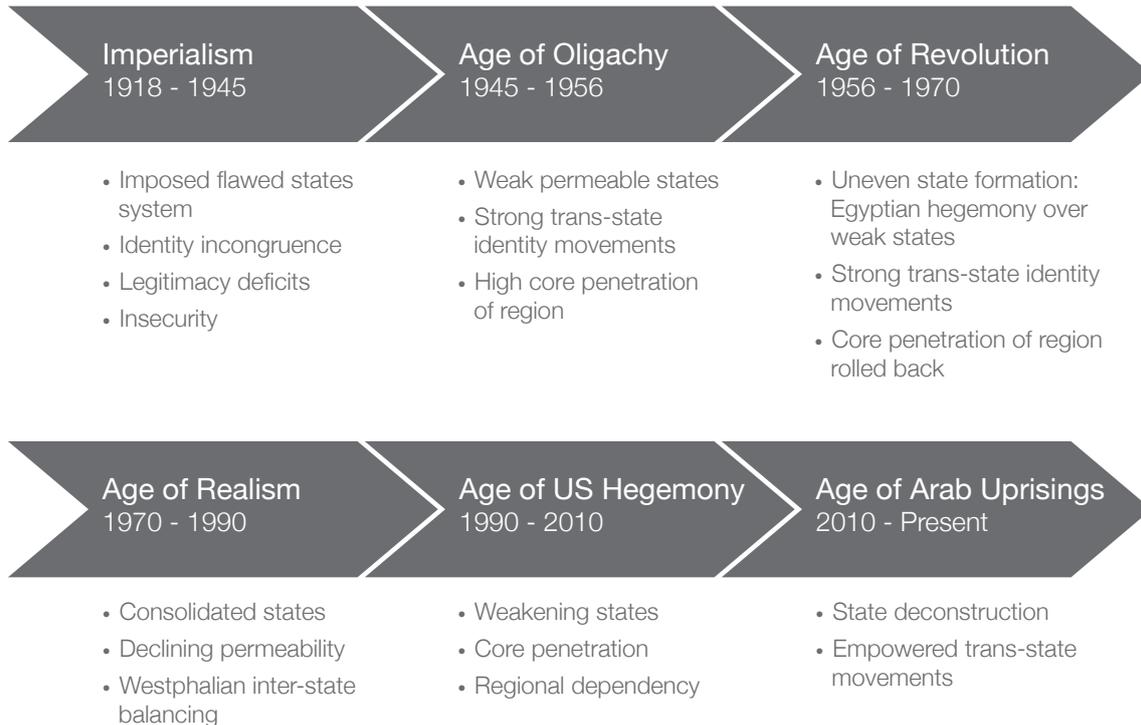
One can identify several phases in which the features of the states, the state system and inter-state relations have varied in systematic ways:

1. The immediate post-independence years, 1945-56, was a period of weak oligarchic states with high levels of penetration by external powers, especially the British hegemon, but also facing rising trans-state and domestic opposition;
2. The 1956-70 period of Pan-Arab revolution was one when most states were being destabilised by trans-state identity movements. The exception was Egypt, whose early lead in state formation, as the first successful populist authoritarian regime in the region, allowed it to establish itself as an Arab regional hegemon over much weaker rival states. This enabled Cairo to promote Pan-Arab norms and roll back the high external penetration of the region;
3. In the 1970-90 period of state consolidation, states, including Syria and Iraq, were able, largely relying on rent extracted from the international system (oil market, super-power patronage), to build up their bureaucratic and military capabilities. They therefore became more impermeable to trans-state forces but also more threatening to each other in a regional multipolar system, that approximated Westphalian 'realist' features;
4. The 1990-2010 was a period of weakening states which became, in an era of neo-liberal globalisation and US hegemony, increasingly dependent on the core to contain domestic and trans-state opposition;

- The 2010+ period of the Arab Uprisings witnessed a combination of exploding domestic/trans-state opposition and external war or intervention that deconstructed weakening states and turned several major actors in regional politics, notably Syria and Iraq, into arenas of trans-state identity wars.

These phases and their impacts on Syria-Iraq relations are summarised in Chart 1 and further detailed below.

**Chart 1 - Evolution of the MENA Region: States, States System, Inter-State Relations**



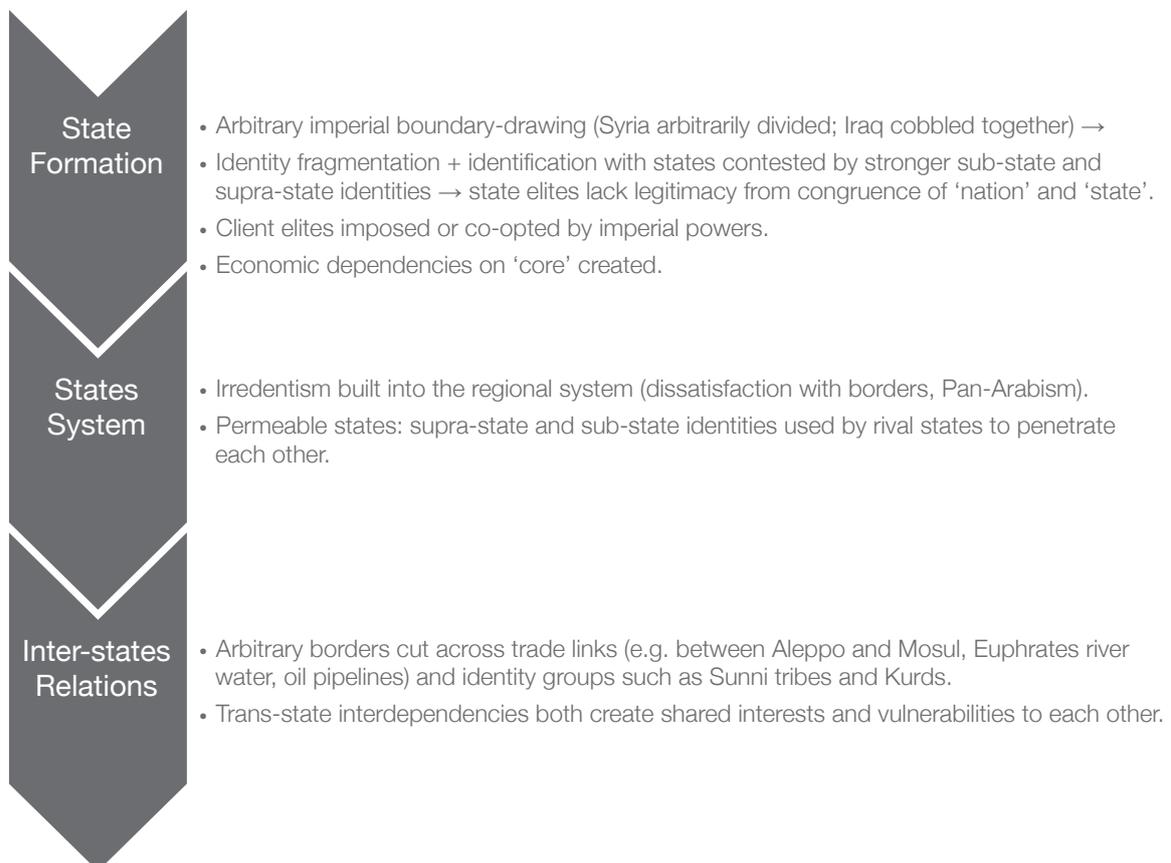
Over this period, the relative strength of the state evolved in a bell shaped curve, first rising toward a peak in the eighties and then declining (Hinnebusch 2014). State strength was also inversely related to the power of trans-state movements and core penetration of the region; the stronger the state the more autonomy it enjoyed from these forces. This, in turn, shaped variations in the features of the inter-state relations: the weaker the state, the more the inter-state power struggles were conducted by trans-state legitimacy wars, subversion and co-optation by global powers of regional client elites via material resources or military protection; the more consolidated the states, the less vulnerable they were to penetration and the more likely they constitute military threats to each other. The latter generated 'Westphalian' power balancing via military build up and alliance formation. As Wendt (1992) argued, the kind of anarchy prevalent in a states system is 'what states make of it'; but what they can make of it depends on their own relative levels of state formation.

# The Evolution of the States System and Syria-Iraq relations

## Origin of the States System

The arbitrary imposition of the regional states system at its post-WWI founding, built flaws into its fabric, notably the fragmentation of the region into a multitude of weak states which suffered from contested borders and identities. In Iraq and Syria these vulnerabilities were exaggerated. The arbitrary border between the two cut across tribes and severed trade links, notably between Aleppo and Mosul, and parts of what became eastern Syria could just as well have been assigned to Iraq. Persisting trans-state interdependencies – e.g. Euphrates river water, oil pipelines, and shared identity groups that crossed borders (Kurds, Sunni tribes) – were both opportunities for cooperation and vulnerabilities usable against each other. Iraq's borders, from which Kuwait was detached, limited its access to the Gulf, its economic lifeline, and Syria lost its ports on the Mediterranean. Both states, being arbitrarily created by imperialism, struggled to acquire the loyalty of their populations; while Syria was arbitrarily truncated, with the separation of Palestine, Lebanon and Jordan, Iraq was artificially cobbled together, combining three communally different regions which shared no history of statehood or common identity: the Sunni Arab centre around Baghdad; a majority Shi'a south; and the Kurdish north in a state of chronic insurgency (Dodge 2003). Syria's intense feeling of irredentism and insecurity led it to seek integration into a large Pan-Arab entity; the solution to Iraq's identity fragmentation, as promoted by its state builders, was also Arab nationalism. It was no accident that it was in these two states, with their intense irredentist grievances, that the radical nationalist Ba'th party won power. Chart 2 summarises how the imperial founding of the MENA states system shaped inter-state relations.

**Chart 2 - Founding of the MENA States System (1918-1945)**

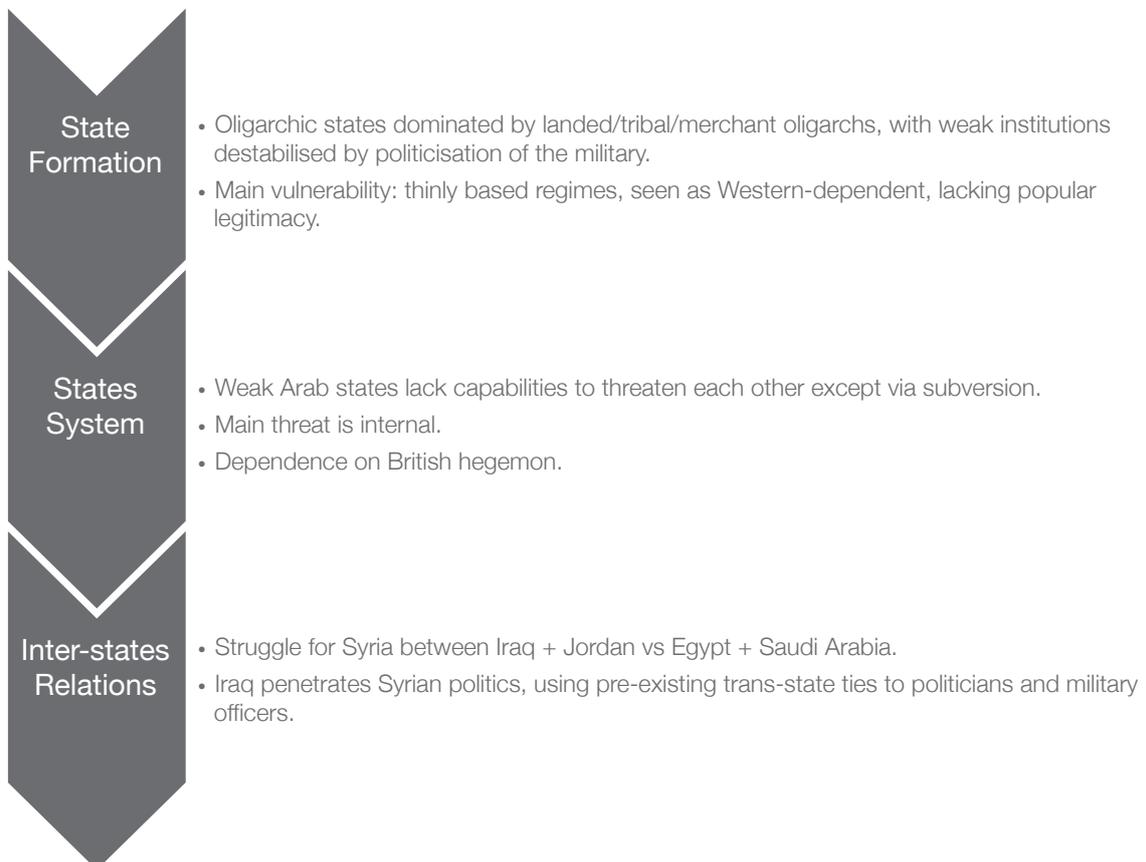


## Weak States under Oligarchic Rule (1945-55)

In the first decade after independence, most Arab regimes were weak landed, tribal and merchant oligarchies, whether republican or monarchic, ineffectively incorporating the rising middle-class and discontented peasantry, and suffering competition from sub-state and supra-state identities. The main external security threats were the stronger non-Arab states, Israel, Turkey and Iran, but for the weak Arab regimes, the most immediate threat was from domestic opposition, often encouraged by rival states. The region remained intensely penetrated by the ex-imperial powers, with ruling elites frequently seen to be Western clients vulnerable to de-legitimation as Arab nationalism gathered momentum. Iraq was particularly vulnerable to de-legitimation as the Arab lynchpin of British efforts to create a regional security system that would maintain Western interests and influence in the post-independence period.

During this period, Iraq was the materially stronger state, owing to its somewhat more cohesive institutions, greater material resources (oil) and larger army, while Syria became the focus of a regional tug of war over international alignments in the emerging Cold War. Iraq was able to penetrate Syria via politicians, especially through those in the Aleppo-based People's Party whose business and family connections crossed the border. Pro and anti-Iraqi military officers carried out repeated coups, notably those of Colonels Husni al-Za'im, Sami al-Hinnawi and Adib al-Shishakli, in the early 1950s, destabilising the country. Indicative of the region's irredentist impulse were the efforts of Hashemite Jordan to absorb Syria into a 'Greater Syria' that would re-unite its fragmented parts under King Abdullah I of Jordan and the attempt of Iraq to incorporate Syria, through its 'Fertile Crescent' scheme, into a wider union under Baghdad. Syrian regimes aligned with Egypt and Saudi Arabia to balance against this Hashemite threat (Maddy-Weitzmann 1993). Chart 3 summarises the features of the period.

**Chart 3 - Age of Oligarchy: Early Independence (1945-55)**



## The Era of Pan-Arab Revolution (1956-75)

The mid-fifties to mid-seventies was a period of revolution in which middle-class military officers and radical parties challenged, and in many places deposed, the oligarchic regimes. This unleashed an era of 'praetorian' instability in which fragile state institutions were now contested by rival military cliques and failed to absorb politically newly mobilising strata. In Syria, governments rapidly succeeded each other, beginning with the left-leaning coalition of the late 1950s, followed by the union with Egypt (1958-61), the 'Separatist Regime' (1961-63) and the unstable Ba'th regimes of 1963-66 and 1966-70, with almost all overturned by military coups. In Iraq, the post-revolutionary regimes of Abd al-Karim Qasim and the Arif brothers were buffeted by street riots, insurgencies and coups by officer cliques aligned with warring political forces, for example Iraqi Ba'thists, Nasserists and others. In both states, parliaments were too weak or unrepresentative and the army and political parties too fragmented to support strong governments. The exception was Egypt, where charismatic leadership under Gamal Abdel Nasser and corporatist institutions stabilised a strong regime and allowed the country to bid for regional hegemony.

An Arab Cold war between Egypt and its rivals, particularly but not exclusively the surviving monarchies in Saudi Arabia and Jordan, was conducted largely via discourse wars and subversion, with most still-unconsolidated states highly vulnerable to such trans-state interference. Egypt's rivals alternated between appeasing Nasser and seeking Western help to balance against him (Kerr 1971). Among the republics, inter-state competition in this period took the form of 'competitive unionism', with either a stronger state (Egypt, Iraq) using Pan-Arabism to try to bring weaker ones into its sphere of influence, or a weaker state (Syria) using it to defend itself or get support from a stronger state (Mufti 1996). Arab nationalist 'outbidding', whether over the issue of union, anti-imperialism or anti-Zionism, was also typical.

### Dealing with British Imperialism

In the 1950s, the main issue faced by states was how to deal with British imperialism and specifically, the Baghdad Pact. Created in 1955 by Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey and Britain, the Baghdad Pact was a security agreement ostensibly aimed at containing the Soviet threat to the Middle East but also used by the British as a vehicle to retain their influence in the region. Championed by Hashemite Iraq and opposed by Nasser, it unleashed a 'struggle for Syria', which was seen as pivotal to the outcome (Seale 1965). The battle inside Syria between pro-Iraq and pro-Nasser forces swung Syria toward Cairo but also destabilised the country. In this struggle, the rising Syrian left, led by the Ba'th party, which amassed influence in parliament, the army and a nationalist coalition government, saw Iraq under the Hashemite monarchy and British tutelage as a surrogate for imperialism. These emerging differences in the social composition and ideologies of the ruling coalitions in the two states pulled them apart in their responses to the West. In 1958, Iraqi subversion was a factor in pushing Syria into the United Arab Republic, a protective union with Egypt. This move left Baghdad isolated and vulnerable to the overthrow of the Iraqi monarchy that year. By the 1960s, military coups had initiated revolutions in both states. While the Syrian revolution was more 'from above', Iraq's was accompanied by much more intense grassroots mobilisation wherein multiple rival identities and ideologies were at odds (Kurdish, Communist, Ba'thist, Nasserite), producing a decade of instability.

## Dealing with Pan-Arabism

In 1963, Ba'thist officers seized power almost simultaneously in Syria and Iraq, resulting in a brief episode in which Syrian and Iraqi politicians shared power in trans-state party institutions that took decisions on governance in the two states, notably the historic 6th Pan-Arab National Congress in Damascus. This episode was iconic of the relative weakness of state-centric identities, compared to trans-state (Arab, Ba'thist) ones. With the Pan-Arab Ba'th in power in both countries, the powerful normative expectation was that the unity of the two countries with Egypt would follow, thereby creating a powerful Arab nationalist state. Hence, for both Ba'thist Syria and Iraq, the main issue throughout the sixties would be how to reconcile their ideological commitment to Arab unity with their fear of Nasser's dominance over a unified state. The two Ba'th parties jointly entered negotiations with Nasser for an enlarged United Arab Republic, in which their combined weight could balance Nasser's stature and Egypt's size. However negotiations failed; Nasser insisted on his pre-eminence but the Ba'thists, after their unhappy experience of the first UAR, did not trust him to share power with them. With the failure of a wider unified UAR, Syria and Iraq then prepared to unite without Egypt. However, with the ousting of the Ba'thists in Iraq by the pro-Nasser officer, Abdul Salam al-Arif, Baghdad entered a loose alignment with Cairo. In Syria however, the Ba'thists prevailed over the Nasserites in a prolonged contest in the army and on the streets, and were soon on the offensive, using the trans-state Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC) pipeline to pressure Iraq's weak military regime (Kerr 1971).

## Ba'th versus Ba'th: Wars of Legitimacy

In 1966 the Syrian Ba'th split as rural officers under Salah Jadid, who wanted to make 'revolution in one country', ousted the older generation of urban and more unionist-oriented founders of the party, Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar. In 1968, the Ba'th party again seized power in Iraq under Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr and Saddam Hussein, with Aflaq taking refuge in Baghdad, which supported his legitimacy against the radical Ba'thist regime in Damascus. By now, the Iraqi and Syrian Ba'ths were bitter rivals for Ba'thist legitimacy. Each had rival Pan-Arab leaderships (National Commands) but only one could be legitimate, and hence each attempted to subvert the other. Some Sunni Syrian Ba'thists, resentful of the Alawi dominance of the new Syrian regime, looked to Baghdad as their patron. In 1969, the Syrian regime again divided over the fall out from its 1967 war defeat by Israel. The country split between the radical wing of the Ba'th party and the 'moderates' under Hafez al-Assad who, in his struggle with his rivals, sought support from Iraq, promising to reunite the two party branches. However, when in 1970 al-Assad seized power at the expense of the radicals, he reversed his tune. In the seventies, Syria's Ba'th was able to attract elements of the Iraqi Ba'th wary of Saddam Hussein until he finally purged all rivals in 1978.

The split in the two regimes allowed each to back dissidents in the other in trans-state political struggles, indicative of the still modest level of regime consolidation. Legitimacy mattered in these struggles because there were, at this point, limited material incentives with which to buy loyalty. Unity was, however, impractical because the two regimes' ruling cores were in-groups constructed around personal and sub-state loyalties – Alawis in Syria, Sunni Takritis in Iraq – and neither could trust the other enough to share power in unified institutions. This was owing to the practices of intra-Ba'th politics, in which factional manoeuvring, often via command of armed units or the security apparatus, usually prevailed over institutional rules and those who got the upper hand could be expected to purge their rivals (Kienle 1990). The features of the states, state system and (Syrian-Iraqi) inter-state relations in this period are summarised in Chart 4.

**Chart 4 - The Age of Revolution (1956-75)**



## War, Oil and Regime Consolidation (1975-90)

A third stage of increased state consolidation in the MENA region was evident from the mid-seventies. The incentive for such consolidation, in the cases of Iraq and Syria, was the weakness of similarly fragmented states locked in revolutionary instability, now exacerbated by external threats from Israel and Iran. War and war preparation spurred advances in similar army- and party-centred defensive state formation. Wars involving Syria and Iraq also precipitated the oil price explosion of 1973-86 that gave regional states the means to consolidate themselves and expand their military capabilities - which, however, only increased the security dilemma for each individual state.

### **'Hard' Authoritarian State Building under Ba'thism**

Against this threatening regional background, the ruling alliances of Ba'th parties and armies in the two states devised very similar hard authoritarian regime-building formulas using dual 'modern' and 'traditional' strategies (Tripp 1996). 'Presidential Monarchies' were consolidated through a policy of inserting personal followers, united by primordial *assabiya* (Alawi in Syria, Takriti in Iraq), in the security forces and by the leaders' balancing between the army, the Ba'th party and state-dependent new bourgeoisies. More cohesive ruling cores were now much less vulnerable to the factional splintering that had, in the previous period, enabled the two Ba'thist rivals to attract partisans in the other's regime. Leninist style party apparatuses and corporatist structures incorporated cross-class and cross-sectarian bases of support, reaching into the villages. Armies were now disciplined and professionalised, and reliable chains of command turned them from sources of coups into pillars of the regimes. Expanded *mukhabarat* enjoyed better surveillance technology. Enlarged bureaucratic apparatuses penetrated and better controlled the territory of the state, which became less permeable and susceptible to trans-state ideological penetration (Mufti 1996; Dawisha 1978; Dawisha and Zartman 1988).

Both regimes achieved autonomy of the dominant classes by 'socialist' reforms breaking the oligarchies' control over the economy. Rent from oil or foreign aid, greatly increasing the government share of GDP, also gave further regime autonomy of society. This was especially so in Iraq where the 1970s nationalisation of the oil industry and oil boom gave the regime massive patronage resources and enabled industrialisation and infrastructural penetration. By contrast, in Syria the 'socialist' redistribution of upper-class assets was more important (Mufti 1996: 194, 202-04). In both states, education and state employment expanded the state-salaried middle-class, while agrarian reform created a state-dependent co-operatised peasantry. Under a populist 'social contract', in return for support or acquiescence, the state provided jobs, free education, subsidised foodstuffs and labour rights. The expanding bureaucratic strata's command of public resources gave them stakes in the particular interests of their individual states. New state bourgeoisies positioned at the heart of the state and the transformation of part of the surviving private middle-sized business sectors into dependent clienteles thriving on state monopolies, commissions, contracts and inputs, turned fractions of these upper-middle strata into regime constituents (Perthes 1995: 146-154; Khafaji).

The regimes' consolidation drives had foreign policy consequences. Both regimes remained threatened by deep-seated sectarian-ethnic cleavages that they had to address. In these mosaic societies, the main alternative to sub-state sectarianism, and the most potentially unifying ideology, was Arabism. It was used to consolidate the state, by bringing together Arabic-speaking Sunnis and Shi'as (or Shi'a-offshoots such as Alawis). However, its downside was the exclusion of non-Arab minorities, above all the Kurds. In both Ba'thist states, ideological legitimacy therefore depended on foreign policy being seen to be in the service of Arab nationalism. In Syria, the Assad regime's legitimacy depended on the struggle with Israel. Iraq, increasingly recognised as the strongest

Arab power, revived its ambition to be the Prussia of the Arab world, keeping it entangled in the Arab-Israel conflict, but also leading to war with Iran (during which common Arab identity kept the Iraqi Shi'a from defecting to Shi'a Iran) and to Saddam's invasion of Kuwait.

As state construction matured, the once fragile republics showed an ability to survive intense crises, including defeat in war. In the early eighties, Syria survived back-to-back Islamic rebellion and conflict with an Israeli-American *combinazione* in Lebanon. Iraq survived the enormous pressures of the war with Iran and did not split along communal lines as might have been expected. Saddam Hussein's regime also survived defeat in the Gulf war (1990-91), the subsequent economic blockade and loss of full territorial control. This should not disguise, however, that underlying vulnerabilities remained contained, not overcome: the over reliance on in-group *assabiya*, on rent and on militant nationalism.

States were relatively consolidated internally and less vulnerable to trans-state ideology. As all states' power capabilities generally increased as oil rent or foreign aid enabled exceptional arms purchases, regional states became greater threats to each other. Locked into intractable conflicts on the non-Arab periphery, Iraq and Syria became national security states. Iraq's regime was consolidated in the crucible of the war with Iran, while Syria's was buttressed by the war with Israel in 1973 and again in Lebanon in 1982. War drove an upward trajectory in the size of armies, with Syria and Iraq achieving exceptional levels of military mobilisation, increasing from 6.4 and 6.7 per 1000 of the population respectively in 1955 to 36.2 and 62.4 in 1987 (Gause 1992: 457-58).

Generally, as state consolidation gave ruling elites greater autonomy from society and decreased their vulnerability to trans-state ideology, while threats from neighbouring states increased, geopolitical reasons of state started taking precedence over Pan-Arab ideology in foreign policy making. Syria and Iraq, states that had recently been arenas of regional power struggles among stronger states, had now become actors able themselves to affect the regional power balance. Realist power balancing, via arms races and alliances, against external threats was increasingly recognisable in both states and in the region as a whole. In several cases, the failure of balancing and the upsetting of the power balance led to war – which tended, at least partly, to restore the balance – as, notably, revisionist bids by Israel (1982 invasion of Lebanon) and by Iraq (1979 invasion of Iran) were blunted by a counter-balancing Syria-Iran alliance (Ehteshami and Hinnebusch 1997).

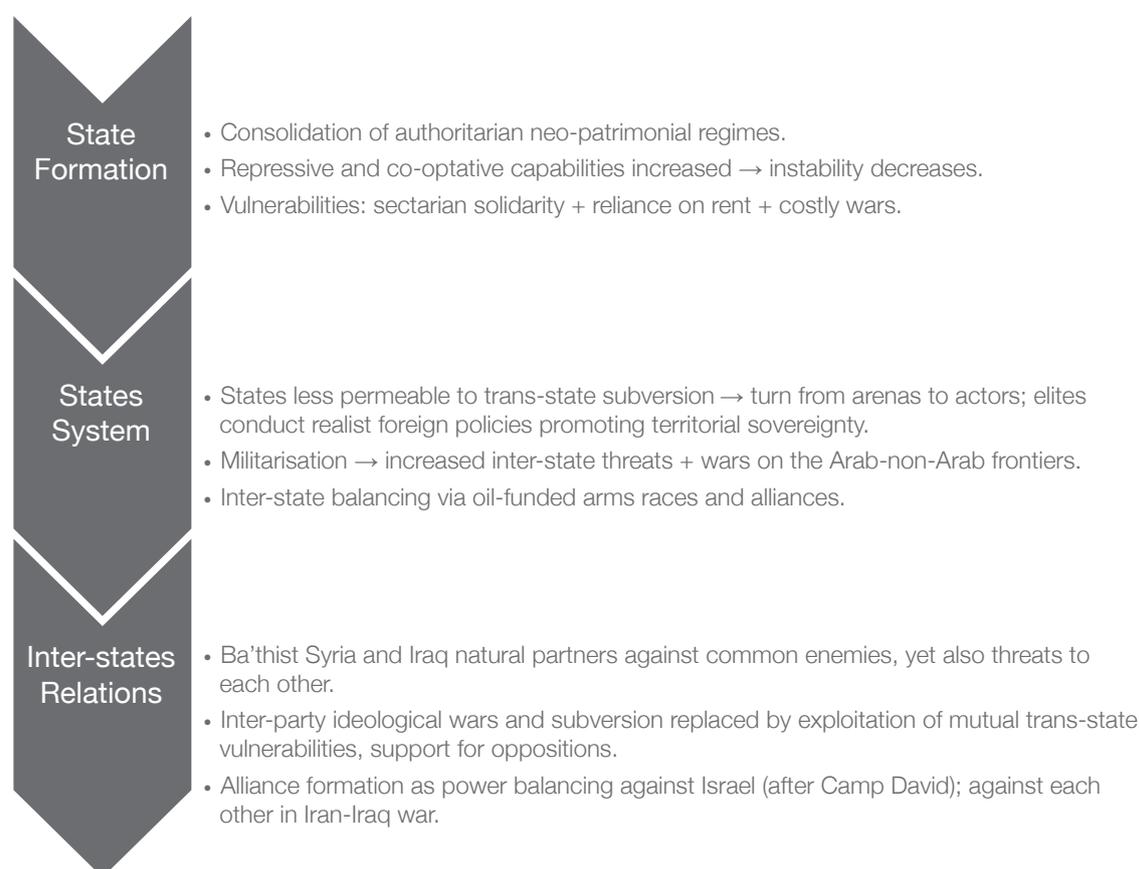
### **Alignment Convergence and Divergence**

Syrian-Iraqi relations in the 1970s mirrored the period of transition from the age of Arabism to that of state consolidation that the region was undergoing. As Kienle shows, Ba'athist Syria and Iraq were natural partners (e.g. against Israel), yet also still rivals for Pan-Arab leadership able to threaten each other's Pan-Arab legitimacy. Hence, they alternated between alignment convergence and divergence. Each was sufficiently consolidated to resist the challenges from the other, but each continued to play the Arab nationalist card to legitimise themselves in their rivalries. In 1973, the conflict with Israel, touchstone of Arabism, brought the two rivals together. Iraqi troops were sent to the Syrian front line, but when Syria entered the peace process, Iraq adopted the rejectionist card and denounced Syria. Iraq opposed Assad's 1976 intervention against the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) in Lebanon in the name of its superior Arabism, mobilising the Iraqi faction of the Lebanese Ba'th party against Damascus. The two Ba'ths were again briefly driven into alliance and unity negotiations by the threat of an Israel empowered by Egypt's separate peace. They converged at the Baghdad summit of 1978 to get Egypt expelled from the Arab League and to pressure the Gulf states into providing subsidies to Syria as the main front-line state in the war with Israel. Each Ba'th leadership had to show its constituents that it was serious about unity, but each still felt too threatened by the other to actually share power in a combined state (Kienle 1990).

Yet, as the two states became less penetrable through ideological subversion, their interactions took different forms. From the mid-seventies, Syria and Iraq used their trans-state interdependencies against each other: Syria manipulated the flow of Euphrates water to Iraq and both used the trans-Syrian oil pipeline from Iraq against the other, with Syria, the financially weaker party trying to extort a share of Iraq's growing oil wealth through raised pipeline fees. Then, during the Iran-Iraq war, realist-like power balancing fully emerged. Syria aligned with Iran against Arab Iraq, in seeming violation of the Arab national interest that Ba'thism claimed to embody. Certainly, by the 1980s, perceived external threats rather than Pan-Arabism were driving alignments. Thus, for Iraq, the main threat was revolutionary Iran, which was trying to exploit sectarian cleavages to promote a Shi'a uprising against the Sunni-dominated regime. For Syria, Israel was the main threat and Islamic Iran a strategic ally, especially after Tehran fostered Shi'a resistance to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. In revenge, Iraq hosted the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, which tried to mobilise the Sunni majority against the Alawi-dominated Ba'th in the early 1980s, while Syria hosted anti-Baghdad Kurdish and Shi'a factions contesting the Sunni-dominated Ba'th in Iraq. Iraq later supported the Maronite General Aoun's opposition to the Syrian presence in Lebanon. While in the seventies the main leverage each regime had over the other was manipulation of Arab nationalism in inter-Ba'th politics, by the eighties each exploited the others' sectarian vulnerabilities and supported non-Ba'th oppositions in the rival state.

The main consequence of this period was the considerable extent to which the generalisation of external insecurity, state consolidation, and reason of state brought the regional system into closer approximation to the Westphalian model. This process was crowned by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. This injected a much-increased level of military insecurity into inter-Arab politics, in which competition had hitherto largely been at the political-ideological level. The features of the states, the state system and Syrian-Iraqi inter-state relations in this period, the Age of Realism, are summarised in Chart 5.

**Chart 5 - Age of Realism (1975-90)**



## State Vulnerability and US Hegemony (1990-2010)

### Post-Populist Republics

In a fourth stage, fully apparent by the 1990s, MENA state building projects passed their apex and entered a 'post-populist' stage which shrank their social bases and legitimacy. The main driver was domestic economic weaknesses. Particularly in the MENA's republics inefficient public sectors, the exploitation of economies for military and political ends, and populist distribution policies had enervated capital accumulation and led to the exhaustion of statist import substitute industrialisation. This drove moves to open economies towards private and foreign capital: the so-called *infitah*. Oil rent had financed a burst of state building that resulted, with the oil bust from the mid-1980s through the 1990s, in overdeveloped states exceeding the capacity of their own economic bases to sustain. Balance of payments crises and debt greatly increased vulnerability to external pressures from Western donors and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for structural adjustment. At the same time, a transformation in the social base of the republics was taking place, with the old populist coalition being replaced by new *infitah* (internationalist) coalitions. As the public sector was exhausted as a source of wealth and careers, the state bourgeoisie looked to economic liberalisation to diversify the state's economic base and enable it to transform itself into a property owning class. The private bourgeoisie saw new opportunities in *infitah* to acquire foreign partners and public sector assets. To elicit private investment, investors had to be favoured over the mass public; hence *infitah* was typically accompanied by a rollback in welfare measures and privatisation of public sectors. Attracting foreign investment also meant abandoning the anti-imperialist nationalism that had helped legitimise the republics. As regimes reneged on the populist social contract on which they had built their legitimacy, those marginalised became available for anti-system mobilisation by Islamist counter-elites. While repression and co-optation contained their political threat, the gradual Islamisation of society at the grassroots undermined the social bases of secular regimes.

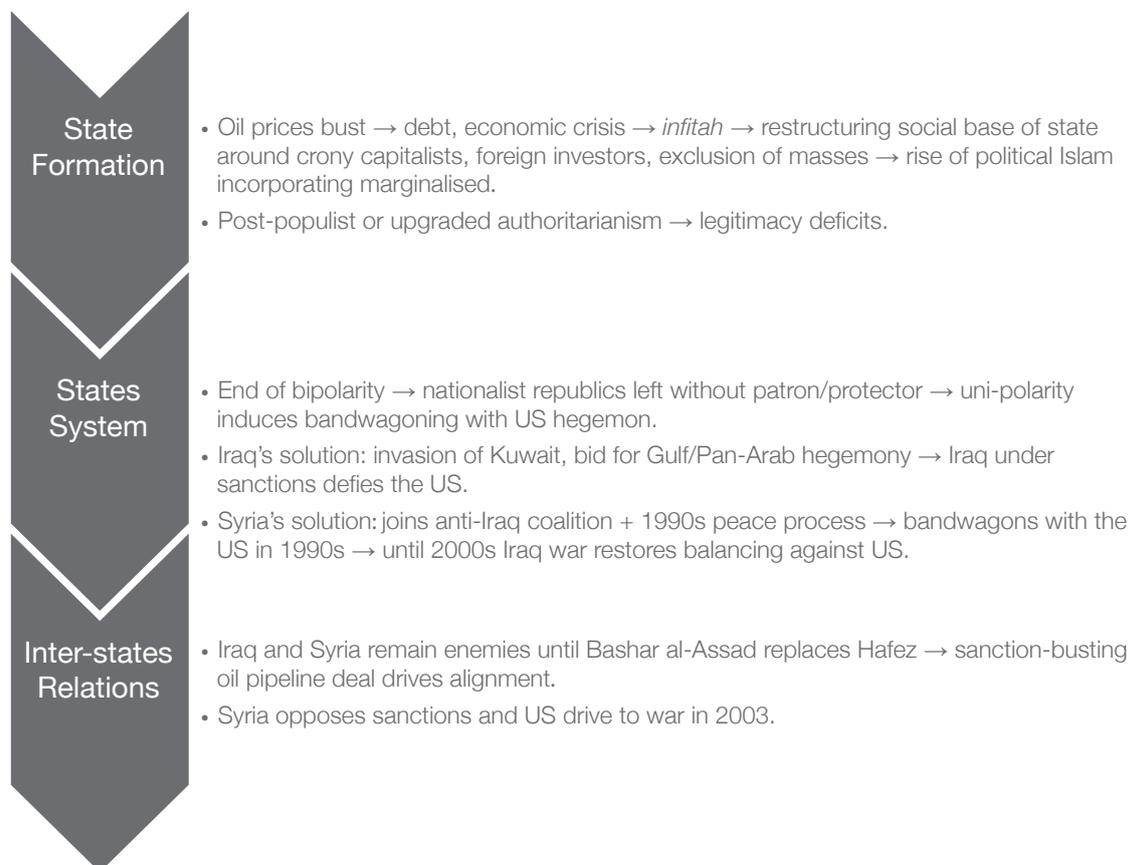
### Divergent Responses to the End of Bi-Polarity: The 1990s

Ba'thist Syria and Iraq were more resistant to economic *infitah* than the other republics: the remnants of socialist ideology coincided with entrenched statist interests, access to oil revenues, suspicion of economic penetration by the West, and nationalist refusal to bow to the IMF. In both states, milder indigenous versions of *infitah* were developed, notably with the opening to the private sector in late-eighties Syria and privatisations in Iraq. However, the world-shaking systemic transformation from bi-polarity toward uni-polarity posed a serious challenge. The greater dependency of their legitimacy on Arab nationalism compared to other Arab states, put Syria and Iraq potentially on collision courses with increasing US intrusion into the region. The decline and the collapse of the Soviet Union left them without the political protection or military patronage they needed to safely pursue foreign policies that challenged Western interests. The loss of an alternative East bloc market also meant, once buffering oil rent declined, that there was no alternative to reintegration into the world capitalist market. Iraq, with its enormous oil resources, was better positioned than Syria to resist these pressures; but it was perhaps Iraq's oil and the arms it purchased, that led it into ruinous wars that enervated the state. Iraq's economic vulnerability at the end of the Iran-Iraq war, exacerbated by the economic warfare waged against it by the Gulf monarchies, intersected with Saddam's ambitions for regional hegemony, to propel Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

Assad's alignment against Iraq after its invasion of Kuwait showed how far Pan-Arabism had ceased to constrain states. As Soviet patronage declined, Assad seized the opportunity to join the Gulf war coalition as a way of building credit with the sole remaining superpower, the US, and re-enlisting US diplomacy on behalf of a land-for-peace settlement with Israel. This was very unpopular in Syria, especially in the eastern tribal regions bordering Iraq, but the regime contained the dissent, albeit not without cost to its legitimacy.

Thus, Syrian and Iraqi responses to systemic changes initially diverged: Iraq's solution to economic vulnerability and the end of bi-polarity – the invasion of Kuwait – led to its military defeat and sanctions but also continuing defiance of the US hegemon in the 1990s. Syria's solution was to join the anti-Iraq coalition, the 1990s peace process, and to seek integration into world capitalist market, hence bandwagoning with the US. This initially generated a sharp divergence in their tangents, largely a function of their different geo-political survival calculations. Had Syria's engagement in the US-sponsored peace process that followed the Gulf war led to a settlement with Israel, the country's historic Arab nationalist tangent might have been permanently eclipsed. However, by 2000 when Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father, it had failed, thereby soon restoring Syria's traditional balancing against the US and driving a temporary convergence with Iraq in the early 2000s. Chart 6 summarises the changes in the states, states system and Syrian-Iraqi inter-state relations in this period.

**Chart 6 - The MENA Region under US Hegemony (1990-2010)**



## Toward State Deconstruction (2003-?)

The stage of state deconstruction overlaps with that of US hegemony in the region. The US was against Iraq both established its hegemony and initiated Iraq's deconstruction. Deconstruction in the region's other authoritarian republics, including Syria, was however a result of the Arab Uprisings. Deconstruction would prove most exaggerated in Iraq and Syria (also Libya) where state formation had always been particularly problematic. In Iraq and Syria it was the result of varying combinations of external intervention and internal rebellion against these once 'strong' regimes, with the former more important in Iraq and the latter in Syria. The outcome was the debilitation of central governments' power and territorial control, a surge of sub/trans-state fragmenting identities, and the turning of both states from key actors to battlegrounds of the regional power struggle. In each case, regime deconstruction opened the way to interventions by the other; in the 2000s the Syrian regime intervened in a collapsing Iraq; after 2011, the Iraqi regime intervened in a collapsing Syria.

### Iraqi Deconstruction

In Iraq, deconstruction was the combined work of US sanctions throughout the 1990s, the invasion of 2003, and sectarian or separatist movements that were in existence well before then. Sanctions had greatly weakened the central government, debilitated the middle class, destroying the social contract and forcing people to fall back on their communal groups for support. The Saddam regime also deliberately fostered tribalism as a substitute for the deteriorating Ba'th party (Baram 1997). At the same time, the US sponsored an autonomous regional government in the Kurdish north while, in parallel, exiled Shi'a leaders and their followers were positioned in Iran and Syria.

The US invasion of Iraq empowered these centrifugal social forces by its decapitating of the regime, its dissolution of its pillars, the party, army and bureaucracy, and its debilitation of the central government, which lost control of the territory of the state. The US co-opted new Iraqi elites largely along sectarian and regional lines and designed a constitution that distributed posts and resources along modified consociational/federal lines, institutionalising separate identities at the expense of the former Arab identity of the country. In parallel, no strong Iraqi identity emerged to replace Arabism and unite the disaggregated parts of the country (Baker 2012; Harling 2012; Rosen 2010). The rise of armed resistance to the US, the vacuum that enabled Sunni Islamist radicals to infiltrate the country, the empowerment and co-optation of the tribes (*Sahwa*) by the US military, the capture of the reconstructed military and security forces by Shi'a militias, the near independence of the Kurdish north, the dependence of the new government on the US and Iran, and, with the withdrawal of the US, the deep influence of Iran, all spelled the end of Iraq as a cohesive sovereign state. Moreover, despite elections, the tendency of Shi'a demographic majorities to translate into a permanent Shi'a monopoly of power and the authoritarian power consolidation practices of the Nouri al-Maliki government alienated the Kurds and the Sunnis. This led to a resurgence of the sectarian conflict that had briefly receded (Dodge 2012; International Crisis Group 2013).

The fragmented Iraqi state could neither articulate an agreed national interest nor a foreign policy position that would make it an effective actor in the regional power struggle. Rather it became, with Lebanon, a battleground of inter-Arab politics. External actors sought to penetrate Iraq via their local proxies, while Iraqi actors sought to manipulate or draw in on their side external actors in a way quite indicative of a weak penetrated state, similar to Lebanon and to Syria before 1963.

Indeed, Iraq, along with Lebanon, was the main battleground of the 2003-11 regional struggle between the rival US/Saudi-led (moderate/Sunni) and Iran-led (resistance/Shi'a) axes. On the one hand, the Sunni powers did not accept pro-Iranian Shi'a rule in Baghdad. Over half of heads of

states, including GCC rulers, boycotted the Arab Summit meeting in Baghdad in 2012. The Saudis perceived Maliki as an Iranian proxy and backed his rivals among the Sunnis. Indeed, Maliki's coalition included a number of people who held dual Iraqi-Iranian citizenship, while one of the main Shi'a actors, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, had been closely linked to Iran. Iraq's Shi'a political elite, their mindsets still shaped by a persecution complex from the period of Saddam, were so threatened by Saudi, and Qatari financing of Sunni Islamist proxies to counter Iranian influence, that they were driven further into the Iranian camp. Similarly, Turkey also developed intimate ties with Iraqi Sunni politicians and the Iraqi Kurds, pulling them away from the influence of Baghdad (Arun and Abeer 2010).

The formation of the Iraqi government after the 2010 election was a pivotal opportunity for outside powers to affect Iraq's tangent. Turkey had helped in the formation of the trans-sectarian *Iraqiyya* coalition led by Ayad Allawi to contest Maliki's premiership, while Iran tried to broker a Shi'a majority bloc to keep the Sunni-backed *Iraqiyya* out of power. Ottaway (2011) noted that the US and Iran, having both invested in the Maliki regime, de facto contributed to keeping him in power even though his party came second in votes to *Iraqiyya*: Iran persuaded Muqtada al-Sadr's Shi'a movement to back him, while the US convinced Allawi to join a coalition under him. Saudi Arabia reputedly tried to block cross-sectarian coalitions of Maliki with, for example, Allawi and the *Sahwa* Uprising tribes. The Kurdish parties were also divided. While the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) was aligned with Turkey, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) supported Iran. Insofar as the Iraqi government could act, the rivalry of outside powers gave it some scope to balance between them.

### **Syria and the Iraq War (2003)**

In the early 2000s, Iraq was suffering under sanctions and Syria, with the failure of the peace process, was in dire need of new resources to sustain its regime. This drove the Assad and Saddam regimes to a modus vivendi after decades of rivalry. Their opening of the long closed oil pipelines between their countries enabled Saddam Hussein to escape sanctions by exporting oil to Syria, which obtained it at a discount, while exporting its own oil at international prices and earning a windfall of several billions of dollars. Syrian businessmen also began to enter the Iraqi market. This brought Syria into conflict with the US, which was trying to keep Iraq isolated.

Syria opposed the US invasion of Iraq. It sought to deny its legitimacy at the UN where it was on the Security Council. It also allowed fighters, especially Islamists, to cross into Iraq and join the resistance to the US occupation. It aimed to tie down the Americans and discourage the neo-conservatives' ambition to make Syria their next target. Not only did this bring further US animosity, but it also dangerously allowed militant trans-state Islamic discourse and jihadi forces in Syria to activate. While encouraged to exit to Iraq, this policy revived forces later would boomerang on the Syrian regime after the start of the Syrian Uprising. At the same time, Syria's borders remained open to Iraqi refugees fleeing the violence, as well as elements opposing the invasion, especially members of the Iraqi Ba'th Party.

In parallel, US pressure, together with Syria's interest in preventing the spillover effect of an Iraqi disintegration on its own similarly multi-communal state, brought Bashar al-Assad to seek a modus vivendi with post-invasion Iraqi governments. Syria was particularly wary of the Iraqi Kurds, some of whose leadership it hosted before the invasion, including Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, because of their alignment with the US and promotion of Kurdish autonomy. Watersheds in the restoration of relations with Iraq were the visit of US-appointed Iraqi Prime Minister Allawi in 2004, agreement on a railroad from Mosul to Aleppo and resumption of diplomatic relations in 2006 (Wieland 2012). Syria also received Prime minister Nuri al-Maliki, Iraqi officials, tribal leaders and Shi'a

politicians such as Muqtada al-Sadr and Abdel-Aziz al-Hakim. In 2009, the Syrian and Iraqi prime ministers exchanged visits and signed economic and political cooperation agreements.

Reapproachment was interrupted later that year, when Maliki accused the Syrian-based Iraq Ba'th Party of plotting a series of devastating bombings in Baghdad, recalled Iraq's ambassador and demanded that Syria hand over a hundred Iraqi Ba'thists living in Syria, which Syria refused. Before and after Iraq's 2010 parliamentary elections, Syria became a venue for bargaining by rival Iraqi leaders. The leaders of the *Iraqiyya* bloc, Tariq al-Hashimi and Ayad Allawi, the main threat to Maliki's hold on power, courted Syrian support and the Iraqi refugee vote. After the vote, Assad initially supported Allawi and brokered a meeting with Muqtada al-Sadr to explore a coalition between the two. The Syrian regime also permitted a public conference of the Younis al-Ahmad wing of the Iraq Ba'th party, which supported Allawi and sought reintegration into Iraqi politics (Starr 2010). With Saudi Arabia also backing Allawi, Syria was now on the Sunni side of a regional power struggle usually depicted in mere sectarian terms. Yet, in the end, Assad switched his support to Maliki, earning him gratitude, which paid off in the latter's refusal to isolate him after the start of the Syrian Uprising.

During this period, the struggle over Iraq and Lebanon hardened the two rival regional axes; the pro-Western one led by Egypt and Saudi Arabia, tacitly including Israel, and the Iran-led one including Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas. Their strengths were tested in the Lebanon (2006) and Gaza wars (2008-09), in which Israeli military power failed to subdue the latter. The Syrian regime under Bashar initially seemed successful in using its nationalist foreign policy to legitimise itself within and to successfully balance against US/Western power. This however, proved fleeting.

### **Syria's Deconstruction**

In Syria, a similar outcome to the state deconstruction in Iraq, albeit owing to a somewhat different combination of external and internal forces, unfolded almost a decade later. At Bashar al-Assad's 2000 succession, there was considerable optimism that he would initiate political reforms. However, his concentration on addressing the economic vulnerabilities of the regime bequeathed to him by his father and his preoccupation with warding off threats from the West inadvertently led to destabilisation of the regime. The regime's special vulnerability had always been its dominance by Alawi officers in a Sunni-majority society. This was initially overcome by nationalisation and land reform, which broke the dominance of the Sunni oligarchy and gave the regime the means to win over popular constituencies, especially peasants, via a populist social contract and a nationalist foreign policy. However, the exhaustion of the public sector as an engine of development meant the regime could only be sustained by rent accessed through foreign policy, at which Hafez al-Assad was very adept.

However, such strategic aid declined after 1990, and when Bashar al-Asad came to power, Syrian oil revenues were also set to decline. The urgency of economic crisis forced the adoption of neo-liberal measures that favoured investors including a shaving of the welfare state and the contraction of economic opportunities for the middle and lower classes. At the same time, the regime's defiance of the US in Iraq and Lebanon brought isolation from the West, making the regime dependent on Gulf investment. This drove a boom in tourism and real estate in big cities, fuelling growing inequality. The regime's original constituency, a countryside suffering severe drought, was neglected. Population growth drove the numbers of unemployed youth well beyond the capacity of the declining state to absorb. At the same time, in order to establish his authority within the regime, Assad purged prominent Sunni politicians and concentrated power in his family clan. He also curbed the role of the party and peasant/worker unions, where opposition to his reforms were concentrated, thereby debilitating the regime's organised social base. To compensate for this, the regime

sought to co-opt crony capitalists profiting from economic liberalisation; it also sought to harness moderate Islamic groups to counter both the secular opposition and radical Islamists, inadvertently contributing to the spread of grassroots Sunni Islamism; however, it did not take the next step of politically incorporating these new constituencies through party pluralisation.

The opposing sides in the Syrian Uprising reflected the regime's reconfiguration of its social base. It began in the deprived rural towns and suburbs, and then spread to medium sized cities, for example Homs, where small manufacturers were victims of trade liberalisation, and Hama, the traditional bastion of Sunni notables long resentful of the regime. By contrast to the 1980 *Ikhwan* insurgency when the Sunni village, still incorporated into the regime, sided with the regime against the urban-based Muslim Brotherhood, in the 2000s, the debilitation of the party/peasant union infrastructure allowed Islamist rebels to mobilise rural support. The regime's support was comprised of crony capitalists, urban government employees and the minorities, although of these, the Kurds were split. The main cities, Damascus and Aleppo, where an investment boom, a take-off of tourism and the new consumption were concentrated, remained largely quiescent months into the uprising.

When the Uprising started, the president still retained considerable personal legitimacy as a nationalist and reformer. Had he chosen to respond with major political concessions, Syria's civil war might have been avoided. However, Assad's security solution, the brutal repression of peaceful demonstrators, caused what had been localised protests demanding reform to spiral into a major uprising calling for the overthrow of the regime. In parallel, Assad deployed a sectarian discourse, denouncing protestors as jihadi terrorists, generating minority solidarity and relying on Alawi militias to brutalise protestors. Although the protests began with a cross-sectarian discourse, they took on an ever more Sunni Islamist cast, partly in reaction to the regime's sectarian strategy. The *ulama* of the Damascus suburbs and small towns, as well as Muslim Brotherhood connected elements, mobilised protestors around Friday prayers, with resistance committees springing up around mosques. Regime repression, in time, led to the formation of an armed resistance among Sunni army defectors and others who managed to access weapons. Eventually, a massive exit of the upper middle and middle classes left a vacuum filled by radical Islamist fighters, many of them transnational jihadists.

While the uprising was essentially indigenous, the opposition's strategy was always to get external constraints on regime repression or, that failing, outside intervention. External forces increasingly sought to use the uprising to their advantage. Qatar used its Pan-Arab TV channel Al-Jazeera to amplify the uprising from the outset, while the Saudis funnelled money and arms to the tribes and jihadis who flooded in from across the region to fight the regime. The regime's only chance of slipping out of this tightening stranglehold lay with its links to Hezbollah to the west and Iran to the east. It increasingly relied on Hezbollah, whose fighters helped it stabilise itself and on Iran, which supplied financial support, training in counter-insurgency and arms. Iraq, however, was the pivotal connection with Iran and its decision to stay out of the anti-Assad coalition was decisive. It acted as a transit link from Iran and provided the regime with cheap oil after its oil fields came under opposition control. For Sunnis, it was obvious that a defensive Shi'a belt had been constructed to turn back a Sunni Islamist revolution.

Thus, Syria became a regional battleground, framed in Sunni-Shi'a terms, quite similar to Iraq. Moreover, a certain 'Somalisation' of Syria took place, with the regime controlling Damascus and a corridor north to the Alawi areas, the far northeast falling under Kurdish control, and parts of the east under tribal control with links to Sunni tribal areas of Iraq. This failed state became a breeding ground of trans-state jihadist and salafi Islamic groups, in particular various al-Qaida avatars that spilled over from Iraq to fill the power vacuum, most famously, the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS).

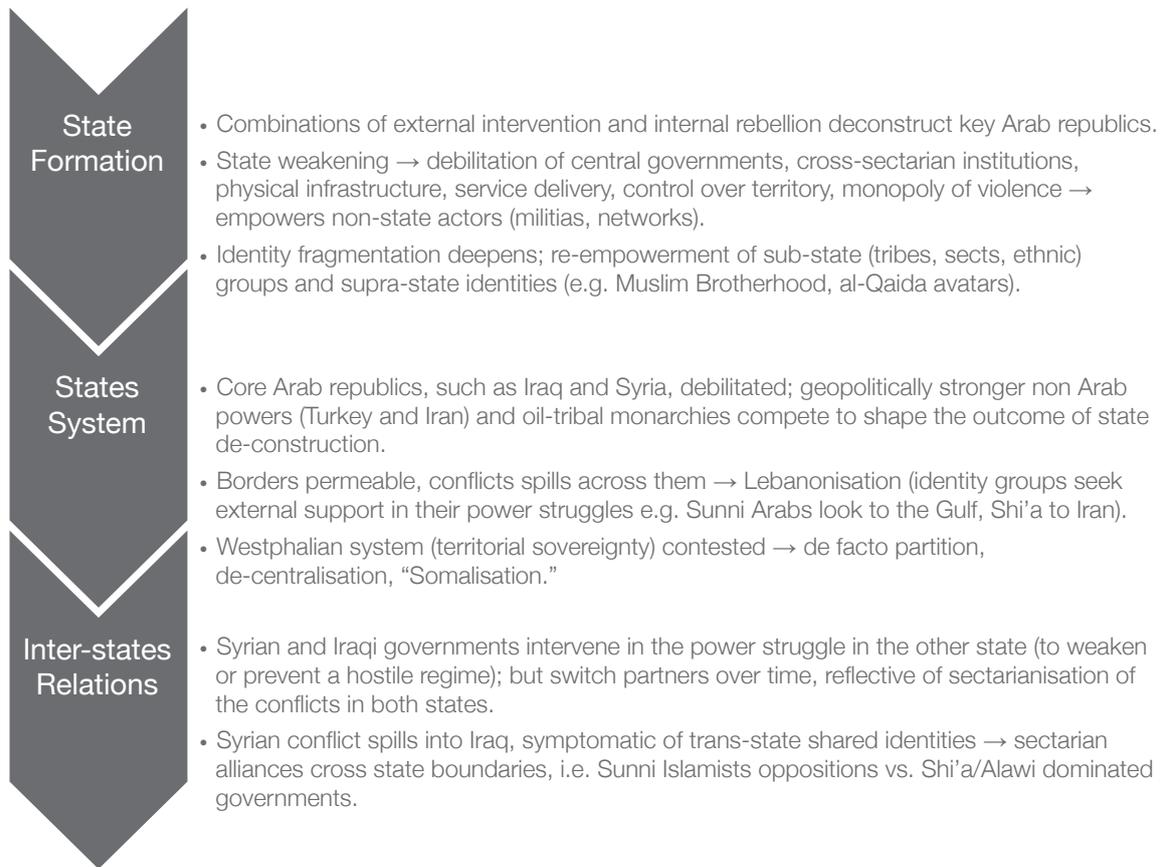
## **The Iraqi Government and the Syrian Uprising**

Iraq initially attempted to balance between competing demands on it over Syria, taking a minimalist non-partisan stand so as not to inflame the cleavages within its own population. The government of Nuri al-Maliki had only recently accused the Assad regime of involvement in terrorism in Iraq, but its fear that the rise of a Sunni-dominated government in Damascus would strengthen the already alienated Sunnis in Iraq's western provinces soon became its overriding consideration. In Maliki's words, 'I'm not defending the regime. Change must take place. But if Bashar is toppled and salafis come to power, Iraq will face a sectarian war'. Iraq abstained from the Arab League vote in 2011 to suspend Syria's membership, rejected the US call for Assad to go, opposed further sanctions and the overthrow of the Syrian regime by force and argued that the crisis should be resolved by political reforms. While other Arab states downgraded ties with Assad, Iraq moved in the opposite direction. It hosted official visits, expanded business ties and provided material support, including much needed diesel fuel. Particularly remarkable was Iraq's willingness to evade US and EU demands to cut Iranian arms deliveries to Damascus. Already the US had accused the Maliki government of helping Iran circumvent international sanctions. Washington even demanded regular inspections of Iranian planes crossing Iraqi airspace to intercept arms bound for Syria. Both the US and the EU warned that aid was contingent on this cooperation. To ward off these pressures and over-dependency that the US could use as leverage over him, Maliki signed a \$4.2bn arms deal with Russia. Having invested so much in Iraq, the US could not readily cut off aid without sacrificing its remaining positions in the country (Ruhayem 2012). However, Iraq kept its lines of communication open with some Syrian opposition groups and Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari rejected claims that Iran was shaping Iraq's policy toward Syria.

## **Trans-state Spillover**

At the start of the Syrian uprising, observers spoke of a 'new struggle for Syria', but meddling by outside powers in Iraq via Iraqi proxies became so extensive that one could also speak of a parallel struggle for Iraq, with each affecting the other. Indeed, the struggles increasingly merged as Syria's conflict rapidly spilled over into Iraq. This was symptomatic of the trans-state shared identities between the two states. Public opinion in the western Sunni-majority provinces of Iraq was supportive of the Syrian uprising. Fighters and supplies crossed from Anbar province, an arms supply route from Saudi Arabia. The Euphrates River Valley intimately connected Syrian and Iraqi tribes, with Syrians along the river speaking an Iraqi dialect. During the US-led occupation of Iraq, the tribes and mosques of Deir al-Zur had provided significant support to insurgents in Anbar province; now Euphrates Valley tribes sent money, weapons and thousands of fighters to support their Syrian cousins. With historic familial and financial links to ruling elites in Gulf states, they were conduits of the latter's anti-Assad and anti-Iranian policy. On the other side, Sadrist militias travelled to Syria to support the regime. Syrian insurgents attacked Syrian regime forces taking refuge in Iraq, even killing Iraqi troops, an explicit episode of violent spillover. There was also a flow of refugees to Iraq, some of them Syrian and some Iraqis who had fled civil war in Iraq and were fleeing again the similar scenario in Syria (Knights 2012; Wieland 2012:206; Abeer 2012).

**Chart 7 - The Age of State Deconstruction (2010- )**



### State Re-making?

The merging Iraqi and Syrian conflicts had potential state re-making implications (Stansfield 2013). As Barkey (2012) points out, Syria and Iraq are both at the 'cusp' of Arab-Kurdish, Persian-Kurdish and Turkish-Kurdish divisions: 'Before it has run its course [the Syrian uprising] could...even alter the region's post-World War I territorial boundaries'. While only minorities in either state wanted a re-drawing of the boundaries of their states, and most retained some identification with them, armed and proactive minorities took advantage of the debilitation of states' territorial control to advance alternative projects. Syrian activists called for a revolution in Syria and Iraq that would 'quench the fire of Magi [in reference to Shi'as and Alawis] *'Souria wal Iraq, thawra tufte' nar el Majows'*. In 2014 ISIS seized Mosul and proclaimed a caliphate straddling western Iraq and eastern Syria. It rapidly acquired some of the attributes of statehood including heavy weaponry, oil resources, control over cities, the ability to enlist wide Sunni disaffection, from tribes to ex-Ba'thists and, most remarkably, the defeat it inflicted on the Iraqi army. Ironically, many of the supporters of ISIS had been trained and armed by the US in the late 2000s to fight against al-Qaida in Iraq, while its forces were heavily armed with US weaponry captured from the Iraqi army.

In Syria, after having been weakened by attacks from more Syria-centric elements of the Islamic opposition, including al-Qaida avatar, *Jabhat al-Nusra*, ISIS turned the momentum acquired in Iraq to surge back across the border and put its rivals on the defensive. It benefited from a bandwagoning effect, as many disparate groups pledged fealty: ISIS had superior material resources, financial and military, provided by Gulf donors or seized from the failing Iraqi and Syrian states. It had a powerful religious message, a claim to protect Sunnis, and to provide a modicum of order and welfare where it governed. Many also submitted out of fear of ISIS's murderous reputation. Indicative of the high level of inter-state permeability was the penetration by ISIS fighters as far west as Lebanon. ISIS' vulnerability, however, was that it governed the most tribal areas of Iraq and Syria and its fortunes therefore depended on not alienating the tribes as it had done in its earlier incarnation in Iraq in the mid-2000s when its extremist conduct gave the US the opportunity to mobilise the tribes and Sunni towns against it. Ultimately, however, the Iraqi and Syrian states can only recover from the ISIS challenge by much greater inclusion of the disaffected Sunnis, a task that in 2014 seemed beyond their capability.

ISIS brought the non-Sunni dominated Iraqi and Syrian regimes further together, manifested, for example, in a Syrian air raid on ISIS forces in Iraq which was welcomed by al-Maliki. The ISIS threat also increased their dependence on Iran, the power most immediately threatened by radical Sunni Islamism. The al-Maliki regime was also able to enlist some US support, a classic balancing between Washington and Tehran that appeared to be crucial to regime survival.

The Syrian uprising also strengthened the Kurds' national and separatist ambitions. Syrian Kurdish regions became effectively autonomous of Damascus, with trans-state links to the Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq. Moreover Iraq's Kurds took advantage of the defeat of the Iraqi army by ISIS to seize Kirkuk and raise the spectre of independence, which, combined with possible demonstration effects among Kurds in Turkey and Iran, could be a first step toward carving a new Kurdistan out of the states system that a hundred years ago denied Kurdish national aspirations. If the unmaking of the Versailles imposed-Westphalian system is still unlikely, it is no longer unthinkable.

## Conclusion

The troubled trajectories of the Levant states are ultimately rooted in the ‘original sin’ committed by the imperial powers at the end of WWI in what Fromkin (1989) called a ‘peace to end all peace’. By arbitrarily dividing up the region, they left behind a system of weak states suffering from incongruity between identity and boundaries and a pervasive irredentism. This was exposed by the immediate and repeated rise of both separatism (e.g. Kurds) and of movements and states bidding to re-unify the region, whether in ‘Greater Syria’, ‘Fertile Crescent’ or Pan-Arab schemes.

Reaction against this order stimulated the era of Pan-Arab revolution in the 1950s and 60s in which weak oligarchic regimes were overthrown and more legitimate but initially highly unstable republics emerged. Politics in Iraq and Syria was trans-state, revolving around ideological issues of anti-imperialism, Arab unity and Ba’thist legitimacy. But a rising trajectory of state formation was underway and in the 1970-80s, war and oil led to consolidation of quite similar Ba’thist *neo-patrimonial* leader-army-party states, incorporating, via rent and party organisation, widened constituencies and which were more immune to trans-state penetration by the other. Paradoxically, under Pan-Arab Ba’thism, the normalisation of the states system appeared entrain as the centralisation of power over coercive and distributive apparatuses in Damascus and Baghdad, plus wars with Israel and Iran, strengthened state-centric identities. The new power of state identities could be seen in the ability of Syria and Iraq to wage war with huge conscript armies prepared to fight for the states against their enemies (most striking was the willingness of Shi’a Iraqi Arabs to fight for Iraq against Shi’a Iranians in the Iran-Iraq war). Syria-Iraq relations moved toward realist-like power balancing, exploiting mutual interdependencies and, as these Ba’thist siblings saw each other as increased threats, forging checkerboard alliances against the other.

This peak in state building was reversed by the 1990s with the fall of oil prices, the end of the Cold War and the rise of US hegemony and neo-liberal penetration of the region. In response, Syria and Iraq sought opposite solutions to state vulnerabilities: war for Iraq and *infitali*/peace process for Syria. Both failed, and major watersheds in the destabilisation of the regional order were the two US wars that debilitated and then destroyed the Iraqi state, unleashing sectarianism at the expense of state identity and upsetting the regional balance of power. The post-Saddam shift of Iraq into Iran’s orbit alarmed Sunni powers who conducted a campaign to revive trans-state Sunni identity against what they called a ‘Shi’a Crescent’, stretching from Iran to Lebanon. The ‘Crescent’, in turn, tried to construct a counter-narrative in which they constituted a ‘Resistance Front’, defending the region against Western and Israel-aligned regimes. For a period, backed by Pan-Arab satellite TV and Hezbollah’s demonstrated prowess against Israel, they held the ascendancy.

This ended when the Arab uprising spread to Syria, where the Iraqi scenario was replicated. The Assad regime’s use of anti-Sunni sectarianism and excessive violence against protestors, combined with the counter-fostering by Gulf states of Sunni movements fighting the regime, generated semi-sectarian civil war. With the collapse of order, many Syrians sought protection in contrary sub-state or trans-state identities, such as Syrian Alawi vs. Sunni Islamist. In Iraq, in parallel, the growing exclusion of Sunnis from the al-Maliki regime propelled them into the hands of radical Sunni Islamists. To be sure, a majority of citizens in both states, including Islamists, continued to identify with their states. But the fluidity of identity, the states’ loss of territorial control and their declining capacity to provide, not only material benefits, but even basic security, gave trans-state Islamic activists an unprecedented window of opportunity to promote an agenda explicitly aimed at the overthrow of the regional states system.

Thus, both Syria and Iraq were again reduced to weak states penetrated by trans-state ideology, similar to the first three decades after independence. However, with much higher levels of mobilisation, militarisation, and sectarianisation, trans-state conflict was now more intense and violent than the low level subversion of the earlier period. Also symptomatic of the deeper collapse of states was the loss of territorial control by regimes to insurgent movements, resulting in a de-facto partition, or 'Somalisation', of both countries (Dukhan 2013). This opened the door for the profoundly revisionist ISIS to challenge the very borders of the two states in the name of a trans-state jihad against regimes it considered to be 'Shi'a'. If Iraq and Syria had previously been key actors in the promotion of an inclusive Pan-Arab identity, they now became the epicentre of a widening sectarian fragmentation of the whole regional system.

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## Forthcoming Publications

### **Climate Change in the Jordan River Basin**

Dr Michael Mason

This paper presents the findings of the research project led by Dr Mason in collaboration with Birzeit University, addressing climate vulnerable rural communities within the national territories of the watershed of the Jordan River (Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory) which is perhaps the most physically and politically stressed river basin in the world, critically applying a human security approach. The aim of the research is to develop improved policy responses for climate risk management within the Jordan River Basin through a better understanding of the linkages between climate change, adaptation and human security.

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### **New Trends of Women's Activism during and after the Arab Uprisings**

Dr Aitemad Muhanna-Matar

Based on a research project funded by Oxfam GB and led by Dr Muhanna-Matar, this paper analyses and presents findings based on five empirical country studies conducted in Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Yemen and the occupied Palestinian Territory (oPt). The research reflects on the form of women's leadership that developed during and after the Arab Uprisings and how it could contribute to redefining and re-strategising women's activism and empowerment and its effect on social and gender transformation in Arab Countries.

