

Partition: It's time to recognise reality in Syria

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The creation of an Alawi-minority coastal canton is a sine qua non for cutting the Gordian knot that is the Syrian conflict, argues [Eric Kaufmann](#).



Vladimir Putin and Barack Obama emerged from talks this week predictably far apart on the question of Bashar Al-Assad's future. Russia wants him to remain as their client, recognising him as the country's leader. Britain and the US say he will never be accepted by a majority of Syrians, who want him to go. What neither side will countenance is the only feasible option: dividing the country into separate ethno-sectarian cantons.

Putin and Obama agree on the need to take on ISIL. But doing so now, when the war has come to be defined as Sunni versus Alawi – and other minorities – will only feed Sunni resentment and bolster the popularity of ISIL. A key first step is to create two arenas: one a coastal strip dominated by Alawis, Christians and sections of the urban middle classes; the other a Sunni zone, much of which is already controlled by opposition groups. Only with a safe and defensible canton will Alawis be willing to see Assad fall. Once the Sunni zone has been established, the West can assist ISIL's opponents without bolstering Assad or conferring legitimacy on IS.

In other words, intervention *only becomes possible* with the creation of a federal Syria operating under a power-sharing, or consociational, system.

Western policymakers and intellectuals have always been allergic to partition or ethnic power-sharing because the idea that politics should be based around ethnicity and sect cuts against cherished ideals of Enlightenment 'civic' nationhood. This ideal [collided with ethnic reality](#) in the former Yugoslavia, and the result has been the de facto ethnic cantonisation of Bosnia and Kosovo. Had the West been less stubborn, many lives could have been saved.

So too today. The creation of an Alawi-minority coastal canton is a sine qua non for cutting the Gordian knot that is the Syrian conflict. Kurdish, Alawi and Sunni federal units should maintain their defensive capabilities as long as mutual distrust remains high. No one pretends that power-sharing societies like Lebanon, Bosnia, Northern Ireland or Iraq are bastions of inter-ethnic comity. However, those that criticise its shortcomings should compare current arrangements against likely alternatives, not sunlit utopian uplands or a prelapsarian innocence. We must remember that, like democracy itself, ethnic power-sharing is the least worst option when a deeply-divided country has descended into ethnic conflict.

Over time, as Brendan O'Leary and John McGarry [remark](#), power-sharing institutions based on ethnicity or sect will 'biodegrade'. That is, as the underlying mistrust and ethnic separatism upon which ethnic power-sharing is based fade, a more ecumenical and civic understanding of nationhood can emerge, with unitary institutions replacing consociational ones.

Some aver that power-sharing entrenches ethnic division, but this puts the cart of politics before the horse of social change. In the Netherlands, power-sharing arrangements between Catholic, Protestant, socialist and liberal segments decayed in the 1960s when these identities lost their relevance. In the Canadian province of Newfoundland, the denomination-based system for allocating government posts also disappeared in the 60s, and the province's citizens voted out separate schools for Catholics and Protestants in 1998.

When a country has been rent by violent conflict along ethno-sectarian lines, the first imperative is to divide the combatants into safe and defensible political units under their own democratic governance. Inter-ethnic mixing and liberal nationhood is a nice-to-have, and should only arrive when populations are secure and ready to yield power to the centre.

The migrant crisis in Europe has led to frantic calls for some kind of 'action' against ISIL. Obama and Putin agree on little, but both are wedded to the dangerous fiction that Syria should remain a unitary state while ISIL is attacked. Yet these are precisely the obstacles to a solution. Attacking ISIL in the name of a united Syria under Assad's control is a recipe for disaster which can only prolong the tragedy that is today's Syria.

About the Author

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