As Syria Crumbles, Only Iran Is a Sure Winner

by Andrew J. Tabler **(/experts/andrew-j-tabler)**

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A discussion of Syria's Sykes-Picot origins, the recent U.S.-Russia de-escalation deal, and the Sunni-Shia contest in the region.

The following Q&A with Washington Institute fellow Andrew Tabler was originally published as part of ***a Bloomberg article by Tobin Harshaw (https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2017-07-23/as-syria-crumbles-only-iran-is-a-sure-winner)*** *.*

Tobin Harshaw: OK, let's start at the beginning. I don't mean President Barack Obama's abandonment of his "red line" on chemical weapons, or the Arab Spring, or when Bashar al-Assad took over from his father. I'm talking about the Sykes-Picot agreement, the rather arbitrary division of the Middle East by Britain and France a century ago. What can this inglorious history tell us about today?

Andrew Tabler: Empires have a lot of problems -- they tax you, haul your young people off to wars you don't want to fight, etc. But the Ottomans at least gave the locals a lot of autonomy. It worked until the empire was headed to collapse. For example, you had areas where a village of Shiite Muslims could be a mile away from a Christian village, but they had distinct identities and little in common. It's very hard to take that literal mosaic of sects and cultures and turn it into a nation-state.

Harshaw: How do these fake borders bedevil us today?

Tabler: Syria never made sense even before World War I, never added up. One reason was this mosaic -- there was no Syrian identity. That made one of the most unstable mandates of the colonial age, and after World War II it was arguably the most unstable country in the world. There were seven or eight coups, it ceased to exist for three years when it joined with Gamel Abdel Nasser's Egypt to form the United Arab Republic. Syria was always unstable, and so what happened was when Hafez al-Assad took power in 1970 he used the national emergency of domestic tumult and declared emergency law that allowed his dictatorship. To justify it, he made the opposition to Israel the centerpiece. This idea that they were fighting Israel was used to prop up one of the most tyrannical systems in the

world. That caused them to be rigid and unable to react to reforms that could have enabled them to avoid the tumult of 2011.

Harshaw: They aren't the only ones to use Israel as an excuse for repressive rule.

Tabler: Yes, the Palestinian question, as it is called, has not been solved. Nasser liked to say of it, "No voice louder than the cry of battle."

Harshaw: What does that mean?

Tabler: It means more in Arabic, because the words for "voice" and "vote" are derived from the same root. So it means we are in a state of war and we will come back to these other decisions of governance later, but for now we are fighting and that justifies a state of emergency.

Harshaw: So, how does Bashar al-Assad differ from his father?

Tabler: Hafez was a brutal man, and hard to deal with. But he built his regime and controlled it and had a plan. Bashar has been all over the place. He promises a lot but doesn't deliver. The de-escalation agreement reached between President Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin in the southwestern corner of the country is a test case.

Harshaw: In what way?

Tabler: For the U.S., it's driven by a need to protect people on our side of the civil war and to keep Iranian forces out of southwest Syria. It is also a potential model for peace in the rest of the country. Now, in the middle of this, we defund the program to train rebel forces in Jordan and Turkey. Will we not allow rebels to defend themselves? It seems to be about limiting offensive actions by our proxies against the regime, because now those fighters will not be effective.

Harshaw: Is the de-escalation zone a model for how we pacify the whole country or do we want some sort of a grand bargain?

Tabler: It's a formula for dealing with the fact that neither the regime nor the opposition has forces to take all Syrian territory. It's a test. I'm skeptical because the Russians are heavily invested in the regime. It's a Gordian knot.

Harshaw: One assumes that cutting support for the rebels is of a piece with negotiating with Russia, which wants Assad to keep control of at least a large part of post-war Syria. What is Putin's endgame?

Tabler: The Russians have multiple opinions on Syria. If you talk to their foreign affairs ministry, you hear talk of reasonable negotiations to push for a diplomatic solution through the United Nations Security Council. If you talk with the defense ministry, you get a much different and more bellicose answer. And these two centers meet at the Kremlin. I think the Russians know they ultimately cannot shoot their way out of Syria completely. They want a deal, but the deal they want isn't just about Syria. For them, it's related to U.S. sanctions and their annexation of Crimea specifically. They like to horse trade, and we do not.

Harshaw: Do you think Putin would cut Assad loose in this horse trading?

Tabler: Maybe, but the question is whether the U.S. would pay the price of allowing Putin his land grabs in Ukraine in exchange for what we want in Syria.

Harshaw: So, the Islamic State is on its last legs in its self-declared capital of Raqqa in Syria. But even with its "caliphate" destroyed, it will live on. And we have a plethora of rebel groups as well as Iran-backed Hezbollah in the mix. What happens next?

Tabler: If things continue to go as they are, with the Iran-backed Assad regime filling up the vacuum in Syria and the

same forces doing that in Iraq, can you imagine what that will look like in a year? It will be a dramatically transformed space.

Harshaw: With Iran the big winner?

Tabler: The Shiite Crescent from Tehran to the Mediterranean we have been talking about and fearing for decades is going to be formed in front of us. I cannot see Syria's neighbors and our allies taking that lying down. The question is, what will they do?

Harshaw: Is there anything they can do?

Tabler: The easy thing is to open their borders and allow arms to go to the insurgency, because there is always an insurgency in the Euphrates Valley. We need to get them to be better at the proxy game -- meaning they need to look at what the Iranians are doing and learn from it. They need to create sub-state actors, not non-state actors, which is how the Iranians have been able to move the needle substantially.

Harshaw: Do we have those proxy forces available?

Tabler: No. It is one of the great challenges for the Sunni nations. In these broken states, the only way to assure your interests is through forces you can control and turn on and off. They don't have any. It's a major constraint on our policy so far.

Sunnism today reminds me a bit of the Catholic Church before the Jesuits -- you need to have a response to a movement that is challenging your followers. One way to view it is through European history, the 30 Years War. But that was a long time ago for us; in the Middle East it's still happening.

Harshaw: So you think that although the Russians have kept Assad in business, the Iranians are the ones who are going to reap the benefit?

Tabler: Correct. Unless somehow this can be reversed. I'm skeptical.

Harshaw: Are the Russians and Iranians natural allies at this point?

Tabler: Yes, in Syria and the entire Middle East. What this allows the Iranians to do is cut off Turkey and the Arabs to take on Israel. For the Russians it's about containing Turkey as well, but also about projecting their power in the region. They don't have good relations with the Arabs.

But in the end, a lot of this is about messing up U.S. policies in the Middle East. ❖

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