The Fragile Crescent

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Articles & Testimony

Editor's Note: Martin Kramer is an authority on contemporary Islam and Arab politics, a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, and Olin Institute Senior Fellow at Harvard University. On April 30, he delivered a lecture at Harvard on the subject of Iraq and the future of the United States in the Middle East. The following is an excerpt from that lecture, originally published on Kramer's blog, **the Sandbox (http://www.martinkramer.org/sandboxnews.html)** .

The objective of the United States is to protect and advance its interests at the lowest cost, and from the greatest distance. That is easiest done when there is a stable structure of states with which to interact. A state is a convenient address -- a place to which you can dispatch diplomats or cruise missiles, to which you can sell arms or issue threats. In short, a state is an entity with which a state can conduct business, usually at arm's length.

The states of the Middle East are the legacy of the Anglo-French partition of the Ottoman empire that followed the First World War. The United States has regarded these successor states, however constituted, as basic building blocks of order. Washington did not draw the map of the Middle East, but it has been adamant that the map not be altered. At times, certain Middle Eastern leaders, acting in the name of this or that ideology, have attempted to wipe a state off the map. Nasser's Egypt absorbed Syria, Saddam's Iraq absorbed Kuwait, and Asad's Syria absorbed Lebanon. In each case, the United States used its influence or power to put the map back.

It has been axiomatic in Washington that the foundation of the pax Americana is the maintenance of a partition largely finalized back in 1922. The United States is even committed to putting Palestine back on the map, from which it disappeared in 1948. If only the map could be completed, so the thinking goes, the Middle East, like Europe, would cease to be preoccupied with identity, and move to more productive pursuits.

Not only has this "final status" eluded the United States. The irony is that the United States itself has delivered a massive blow to the map. In Iraq, it meant to destroy the regime and leave the state intact, but the state collapsed with the regime. The ramifications throughout the region are profound, if uneven.

They are not as significant for the states that draw upon a strong sense of territorial or ethnic or linguistic nationhood -- Egypt, Turkey, Iran. But what I call the "Fragile Crescent" has felt the shocks acutely.

The British and French divided this part of the Ottoman empire, but not into its smallest conceivable parts. In fact, many of the successor states in this area were mini-empires in their own right, modeled on the late Ottoman system, governed on the same principles, and often by the same elites. Iraq, in particular, was a scaled-down version of the Ottoman empire. David Fromkin in his book A Peace to End All Peace wrote: "The Allies proposed a post-Ottoman design for the region in the early 1920s. The continuing question is whether the peoples of the region will accept it." But precisely because the design was not entirely post-Ottoman, it somehow did function and most people grudgingly accepted it.

Now that design has been given a blow, and large pieces of the remaining order are threatened with further fragmentation. Put differently, the dissolution of the Ottoman empire has resumed.

There are three specific impacts of the Iraq war that are rendering parts of the political map an anachronism.

The first is the Shiite revival in Iraq and beyond, also known as the "Shiite Crescent," a phrase coined by Jordan's King Abdullah in a loquacious moment. The idea -- a Sunni one, not a Shiite one -- is of a Shiite band of population running from the Arab Gulf states through Iran, southern Iraq, leap-frogging Sunni parts of Iraq and Syria, and extending into Lebanon -- a trans-border, trans-ethnic belt of allegiance with Iran at its center.

The "Shiite Crescent" is one part hype, one part reality. There isn't a contiguous belt of Shiites like the one shown in newspaper graphics; Shiites outside Iran and Iraq are still surrounded by a Sunni sea. Nor are Shiites driven by a need to reconfigure the map. In key states in the "Shiite Crescent" -- Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain -- Shiites are not minorities: they seek to capture the state whole, not break it into parts. Still, wherever the Sunni-Shia rift runs through a state, that state is vulnerable. The "Shiite Crescent" may be a hyped Sunni slogan, but it highlights the growth of an allegiance that is both sub-state and supra-state, and that erodes the state order from without and within.

The second impact gets less attention: the Kurdish crescent. The Kurdish revival is as deep as the Shiite, but it is potentially far more subversive of the state order, because Kurds, unlike Shiites, are everywhere a minority. Iraq's Kurds already have a de facto state, and it is a going concern, which is unlikely to maintain more than a formal tie with the rest of Iraq, if that. The autonomy of Iraq's Kurds is a long-standing American commitment, which the Kurds are reinforcing through an extensive public relations and lobbying effort.

The more successful Iraq's Kurds are -- the more state-like they become -- the more this affects Kurds in Turkey, Iran, and Syria. The rather expansive map of "greater" Kurdistan is a logo map -- that is, a mental map inculcated via its representation on everything from keychains to commemorative plates. You will not find "Shiite Crescent" keychains, because the notion is Sunni, not Shiite, and Shiism is not a territorial nationalism. But Kurdistan is another matter: Kurdish nationalism has a strong territorial component, and it won't be put back in a bottle.

The third and last impact involves the movement of millions across borders: the refugee crescent . These are mostly Iraqi Sunnis who have fled the chaos of their country to Syria or Jordan, and who are waiting out the war. Their numbers are already substantial, and they could increase dramatically in various scenarios. As the Palestinian case demonstrates, refugees put more than a material stress on host states. They throw the legitimacy of the status quo into question. While populations are being separated in Iraq, a great mixing is taking place in Syria and Jordan, with outcomes that cannot be predicted.

In sum, the map has been undermined. The choice the United States will face with greater frequency and urgency is whether or not to sustain its traditional support for that map. Past challenges came from aggressive states encroaching on smaller ones, and aggressors could be cajoled, deterred, and punished. But transformation within states, in which the main actors are movements, insurgents, refugees, and secessionists, is another matter.

We have a natural proclivity to dwell on those problems that we somehow might fix or tweak with the tools we have. Iran's nuclear ambitions are a classic case. So is the Israeli-Palestinian issue. I have not discussed those problems this afternoon -- they are already being discussed elsewhere and everywhere. But it is precisely because the United States has so few of the tools it needs to deal with this sort of "new Middle East," that its strategic and policy implications are not being discussed anywhere. Perhaps now would be a good time to start.

Postscript: For my pre-war discussion of this same issue, go **here (http://sandbox.blog-city.com/sandstorm_borders_and_democracy.htm)** .

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