Borders Are Going to Be Redrawn in the Middle East

In triggering the civil war in Syria by openly interfering in its internal affairs on the side of the opposition, Saudi Arabia and Qatar put processes in motion that could very well have catastrophic consequences (including for themselves) in the Middle East and could radically reshape the map of the region in a manner not to the advantage of the conservative Arab monarchies. After all, historically the borders of many Arab countries, including those in the Arabian Peninsula, are largely artificial constructs cobbled together from fragments of the Ottoman Empire and based on Anglo-French agreements partitioning spheres of influence in the Arab world after World War I. And it was largely done without consideration for ethnic and religious factors. That led to the emergence of Arab states inhabited by large national and religious minorities. And the Arab Spring only brought old ethno-religious conflicts back with renewed force.

The emergence of a powerful Kurdish state with a population of nearly 30 million in the heart of the Middle East could be the most significant outcome of current events. Syrian Kurds by de facto are already autonomous of the central government in Damascus and are free of the armed opposition’s influence. Iraqi Kurdistan virtually seceded from the Arab part of Iraq in 1992 and is not just autonomous, but almost independent. A decisive secession is just a matter of time. All of this also stirred up separatist processes in the largest part of Kurdistan — in Turkey. Therefore, all of the prerequisites for the establishment of a Kurdish state already exist, and it is unlikely that the process can be reversed. After all, if peoples numbering in the tens of thousands have the right to self-determination, why should 30 million Kurds be deprived of it. And considering how Kurds have been persecuted and oppressed over the past few decades, especially in Iraq and in Turkey, that state is unlikely to be friendly disposed towards the Arab world.

Another significant outcome of the conflict in Syria could well be that country’s disintegration. If the Assad regime falls, the Alawites will not want to remain under the rule of the current Sunni opposition coalition, especially their radical wing, the Muslim Brotherhood. To avoid genocide by them, the Alawites will probably relocate to the areas where large numbers already live along the Mediterranean coast and declare their own independent state. Thus, Syria is actually threatened with splitting into at least three parts — Sunnis, Alawites and Kurds. And its many Christians will hardly want to live under Sharia law administered by the Muslim Brotherhood. Therefore, the fall of Damascus, if it happens, will not end the fighting in Syria; rather, it will trigger Syria’s disintegration through lengthy and bloody wars.

If that happens, the Sunnis in Iraq will naturally not sit idly by. They have already rebelled against the Shia-majority government in Baghdad while simultaneously providing support to the Syrian opposition against the Assad government that includes armed fighters. So it is quite possible that the Sunni parts of Iraq and Syria could merge into a single state, especially since the tribes in the border areas have common roots. That would make Iraq a severely truncated Shiite state that would gravitate even more strongly towards Iran in order to resist the increasing intervention from Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which see Shiites as the chief threat to their stability.

After all, there are 5 million Shiites living in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province, which produces almost all of the Kingdom’s oil. At least 20% of the country’s population lives there, and the Wahhabi authorities in Riyadh openly oppress them and discriminate against them. In Qatar, Shiites comprise up to 15% of the population (the so-called Iranian Arabs who resettled there in the 19th and early 20th centuries). And they do not enjoy equal rights with the local Wahhabi majority, although the discrimination against them is not as overt as it is in Saudi Arabia. In Kuwait, Shiites make up almost 40% of the population, although their situation is much better than that of the Shiites in
Saudi Arabia and Qatar. However, their sympathies naturally lie with their coreligionists. In Bahrain, Shiites comprise two thirds of the population, and they lack all of the political rights and democratic freedoms of the Sunni minority, members of which form the ruling royal clan. It was no coincidence that in 2011 Riyadh sent troops to Bahrain to suppress Shiite demonstrations, fearing that the regime would be overthrown and Shiites would take power and turn to Iran.

Therefore, we cannot rule out the possibility that, if Syria and Iraq disintegrate, the Shiites in the Persian Gulf Arab states would want to establish their own country. And since the region’s main hydrocarbon reserves are concentrated in Shiite regions, we can imagine what awaits the Wahhabi and Sunni monarchies in Arabia, which had resembled leagues of Bedouin tribes — herdsmen, fishermen and pearl divers — more than countries. The secession of Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province would be a key event, and the secession of Hejaz and al-Asir would follow. Especially since the people at the top of the monarchical clans in both Saudi Arabia and Qatar are either very old or very sick. Saudi Arabia’s King is almost 90 years old, and the Crown Prance is nearly 80. Qatari Emir Hamad is suffering from a severe form of diabetes, as is his son, the Crown Prince. Thus, a severe internal crisis could develop in both the regimes even without revolutionary events in the region.

Yemen is also on the verge of collapse. The resource-rich South does not want to be ruled by the northerners, especially since the two parts of the country were united only 20 years ago and had different political systems.

There is no point in discussing Lebanon. Its endless sectarian conflicts are a consequence of the country’s overly variegated religious map. It will disintegrate into Sunni, Shiite and Christian quasi-states if Syria’s current regime collapses.

Thus, historical factors are surfacing again and are making the complex situation in the Middle East worse. The Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia and Qatar clearly did not understand that they would awaken national movements and exacerbate the age-old Sunni-Shiite conflict by escalating the “Arab” revolutions. The redrawing of the map of the region is fraught with the collapse of the monarchies of Arabia and the replacement of their conservative regimes that observe the norms of 17th century Islam with democratic governance by the younger generation. They have released a genie that they themselves cannot control. And Arabs will not be the only losers; their American allies will lose as well. The winners will be Iran and the Shiite communities in the Arab countries, whose unification will give them control of the world’s chief sources of oil. The Wahhabi rulers will have to return to the Bedouin way of life, because without oil revenues they will not be worth a dime. Israel will also be a winner because the Arabs will cease being a real enemy for a long time, if not forever. And the region will have borders that reflect the balance of ethno-religious forces realistically and fairly, not artificial lines that Paris and London drew 100 years ago at the end of World War I.

Alexander Orlov is a political analyst and an expert Orientalist. This article was written expressly for New Eastern Outlook.