Vanishing lines in the sand –
Why a new map of the Middle East
is necessary
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By the Syrian government's own admission, the forces of Bashar al-Assad cannot defeat the opposition.[1] Barring US-led military intervention, continued foreign support for each of the rivalling factions will not change the equation either.

As the bloody stalemate in Syria continues, territorial divisions in the country are becoming more entrenched. Bashar al-Assad's regime is tightening its grip on the most populous part of the country, from Damascus to Latakia in the west. The rebel forces are consolidating their hold on the Euphrates valley, stretching from Aleppo to Deir-es-Zor. As al-Qaeda-linked groups like the Al-Nusra Front mete out sharia law in their caliphates in the eastern desert areas of Syria, Kurdish groups are creating an autonomous region in the north-east of the country.

As feared, Syria's civil war is spreading to its neighbours. Of these countries, the most vulnerable is Lebanon. In the past century, Lebanon changed from being a largely Christian country (mainly Maronite territory with some Greek Orthodox enclaves) to include areas containing many Muslims (including Druze). The sectarian divisions which triggered the civil war (1975-1990) are now as deep as ever. A weak state of five million people, Lebanon has already taken in more than 700,000 Syrian refugees across its porous borders, most of whom are Sunnis. Deadly attacks across the Sunni-Shia divide are on the increase.

The 605-km border between the eastern deserts of Syria and the western deserts of Iraq is also losing its physical reality. Al-Qaeda and al-Nusra fighters move freely back and forth. The fact is that the Syrian civil war has reignited a sectarian conflict that never really died down since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. To the Sunni minority in Iraq, the revolt of the Sunni majority in Syria feels like the regional balance is swinging in favour of the Sunnis. The Sunni minority in the north began to demonstrate in December, modelling their protests on the Arab Spring, but the demonstrations have turned deadly since. The country risks fragmenting along the lines of the former Ottoman provinces of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul –

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[1] See the first-ever such indication in an exclusive interview by Deputy Prime Minister Qadri Jamil, in *The Guardian* newspaper, 20 September 2013.

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cobbled together in one artificial state in the wake of the First World War. According to the UN, a total of 1,057 Iraqis were killed in July, the highest monthly count since 2008.

In all three states, the power of the central government is waning as ethnic and religious groups retreat to their own well-defended and near autonomous enclaves. The heart of the Middle East now consists of a porous bloc of fragmented countries stretching from the Mediterranean to Iran.

The external borders of this bloc are not inviolable either. Syrian mortars have landed in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. The violence in Syria has frequently spilled over the 822-km border with Turkey, across which insurgent groups advance and retreat at will. Turkey has absorbed 460,000 Syrian refugees since the beginning of the conflict; Jordan more than half a million.

This volatile situation heralds the end of 'Sykes-Picot', the infamous agreement of 1916 in which Britain and France secretly dealt with what came to be called the 'Syria Question' (although in reality it was about dividing the spoils of the entire Arab Middle East). The Sykes-Picot Agreement formed the basis for a later treaty negotiated during and after the 1919 Versailles Peace Conference to carve up the remains of the Ottoman Empire in an old-style imperialist land grab. Britain and France drew lines to divide their zones of influence in Mesopotamia and Palestine, without heeding the ethno-religious and geographical realities on the ground. The borders were contested from the start and tinkered with during and after the Second World War – most spectacularly to create a homeland for the Jews. The borders established by Sykes-Picot are now vanishing, like lines in the sand.

Some are jubilant at the unfolding collapse of the old order in the Middle East, notably the thirty million Kurds who were left without a state of their own after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and are now dispersed across Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria. They feel that their moment has come: Kurdish groups are close to independence in Iraq; they have started peace talks with the Turkish government, and are likely to demand a high degree of autonomy from any post-war Syrian government. Irredentism lurks around the corner. Turkey, however, will try and prevent it from materialising.

Fear of widespread instability in the Middle East is pushing the US, Russia, the EU and its member states to talk of a diplomatic solution to the Syrian conflict. Yet, it is hard to conceive of a hard-and-fast agreement. The Syrian conflict is not simply a popular uprising against a dictatorship, it is also a sectarian battle between several factions of Sunnis and the Alawite sect. It has become a war of proxy between regional powers (Iran and Hezbollah vs. a heterogeneous grouping of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey), backed up by global powers that seem to be descending into a renewed Cold War confrontation (Russia (and China) vs. the US (and its allies)). The war in Syria is marked by surprising and absurd contradictions; the efforts to deal with it full of twists and turns.

A lasting agreement cannot be reached in the Middle East if world powers stick to Sykes-Picot and ignore the wider conflicts playing out in Syria: a regional struggle between Shia and Sunni that is also a longstanding conflict between Iran and its traditional enemies, notably Saudi Arabia; territorial disputes between Israel and its Arab neighbours; and the independence drives of the Palestinians and the Kurds. These conflicts should not be dealt with in splendid isolation. Sykes-Picot is dead and should be buried. Any way out of the quagmire will require a grand bargain – one that establishes a new order in the whole region and draws borders accordingly.