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The Middle East's Thirty Years' War?

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> The Middle East seems to be on the verge of a 'New Thirty Years' War' that is characterized by a disintegrating regional order, a contest between secular and religious concepts of domestic and regional politics, and the potential for new and unlikely alliances. What is at stake in 2015 and beyond, in short, is not only the future of the states in the region, but the concept of statehood in the Arab world per se.

Displaced people from the minority Yazidi sect, fleeing violence from the 'Islamic State' in Sinjar town, walk towards the Syrian border near the Syrian border town of Elierbeh, 10 August 2014.

A most modern form of war

Few reports on the states between Egypt in the West and Iran in the East written during the past decades would have spoken of systemic stability and benevolent conditions for the region. Nevertheless, 2014 was an especially difficult year, having seen the biggest challenge to the regional order since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. At the center stands the Syrian carnage; a revolt-turned-civil-war-turned-proxy war in a country that for decades was party to many conflicts, yet whose internal stability was mostly taken for granted. After more than three years, immeasurable suffering, and over 200,000 deaths, the conflict has now openly spilled over the border into Iraq (again).

With the advent of the so-called 'Islamic State' (IS), for the first time in decades, a single party combines the necessary ideological zeal, determination, and military skill to implement a revisionist agenda and redraw regional borders – or, more precisely, to erase them altogether in an effort to shake off the very concept of the state as an unwanted colonial heritage. The future of the IS appears in no way clear; in fact, at the time of writing, a sudden collapse in large parts of the territory where it is openly operating seems to be a real possibility. However, its mere presence and success is no coincidence, but just the most prominent sign of currents challenging the region's order.

As numerous observers have noted, the Middle East seems to be on the verge of a conflict that can, with good reasons, be described as a 'New Thirty Years' War'. This is also the core of this chapter's key argument: The region is threatening to slide into a conflict that is characterized by a disintegrating regional order, a contest between secular and religious concepts of domestic and regional politics, the potential for new and unlikely alliances, and all that within a disintegrating center. What is at stake in 2015 and beyond, in short, is not only the future of the states in the region, but the concept of statehood in the Arab world per se.

To bring forward this argument, and to highlight possible implications, the chapter proceeds in two steps: First, it uses three central characteristics of the Thirty Years' War as a prism to describe and analyze current developments in the region. Second, it points to selected possible implications of such a development. In conclusion, it asks what these thoughts may mean for the prospects of a regional peace. By following these steps, the analysis looks beyond the IS and its immediate threat at the systemic shift that could be implied in its rise, a shift

that may best be described evoking the Thirty Years' War.

Omens of a New Thirty Years' War

The Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) was, in the words of Peter H. Wilson in his seminal work 'Europe's Tragedy', a 'struggle over the political and religious order of Central Europe'. This definition captures its importance for this analysis: The war was a protracted struggle, not a short, 'clean' war. It was a contest over the very concept of 'order', not just power within an order; it incorporated political as well as religious dynamics; and, finally, it engulfed the whole center of a continent, not just a distinct number of belligerent parties, let alone 'states'.

The war has shaped Europe's historical memory not only because of its length and immense cost, but because it was perceived even by contemporaries to have become a veritable self-feeding, self-preserving actor of its own, creating its own logic and evading Carl von Clausewitz' later (and, as is often forgotten, essentially normative) dictum that war had to be the extension of politics by other means; the Thirty Years' War ostensibly turned this logic upside down. Thus, it has developed into an *archetypal conflict* that stands in direct, and logical, contrast to the 'post-Westphalian' state-on-state wars that began to dominate in Europe

after the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 – and that still guide Western thinking on international politics.

In the following part, three elements of the 'Thirty Years' War' paradigm will be referenced to analyze current developments in the Middle East: The disintegration of order, the interaction of sectarian zeal and secular power struggles, and the emergence of a self-sustaining war economy.

From Sykes-Picot to 'Syraq'

The Thirty Years' War saw a disintegration of Europe's geographic and political center. The Holy Roman Empire, always an entity only imperfectly described by today's political vocabulary, practically plunged into a civil war that saw an extensive redrawing of borders and open conquest for the sake of titles, rights, and territory. The war involved all of Europe, yet it was fought mostly – and most viciously – on the 'German' territory of the empire. This collapse of central power created a vacuum that was filled, at least partially, by stable, unitary, and determined outside powers, foremost among them France, Spain, and Sweden that protected their interests by sending their own armies or financing and supporting allied sovereigns and forces. A similar constellation – a disintegrating center that simultaneously constitutes the
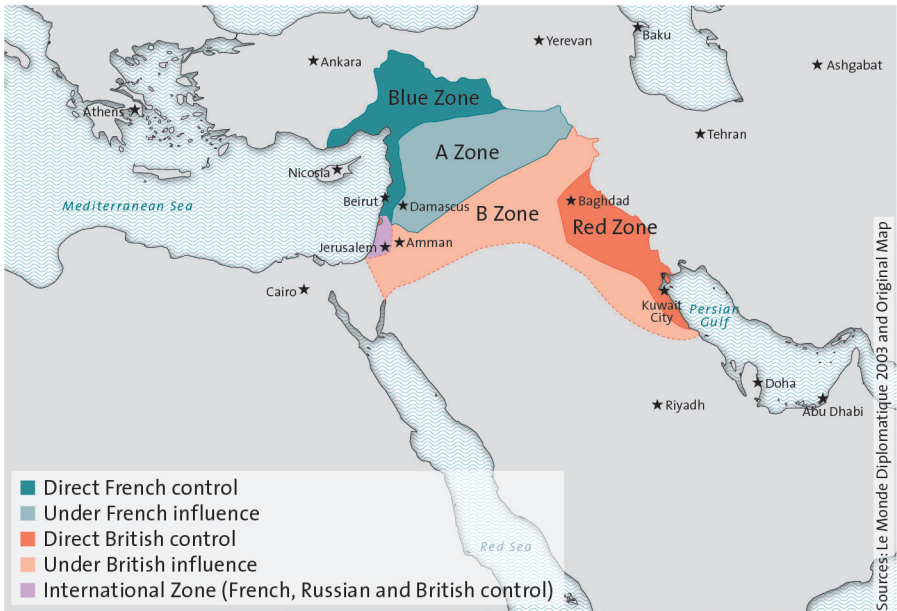
Evolution of borders in the Middle East

The Ottoman Empire at its peak

Source: 1997, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.

Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916

Sources: Le Monde Diplomatique 2003 and Original Map

■ Direct French control
■ Under French influence
■ Direct British control
■ Under British influence
■ International Zone (French, Russian and British control)

Map as of 1948: Territorial status quo ante

'Syraq': Disintegration of state borders

IS Control Zones
IS Attack Zones
IS Support Zones
Iraqi Kurdistan
Borders under pressure
Quasi-inexistent border

Source: Institute for the Study of War, as of 15 January 2015

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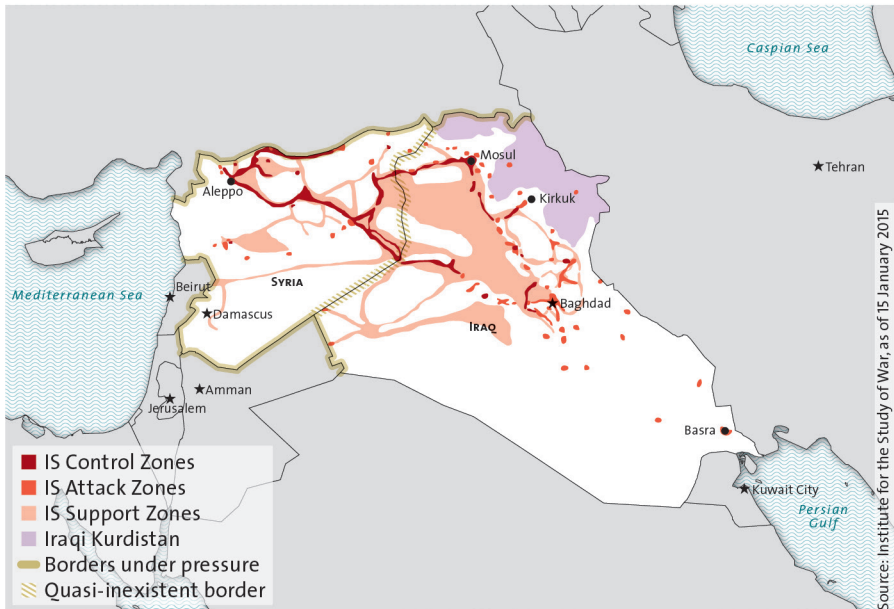
main area of operations and the prize of the war, influenced significantly by outside powers with distinct political and sectarian agendas – may be looming in today's Middle East.

The modern Middle East – understood here as the region between Egypt in the west, Iran in the east and Turkey in the north – is still largely the result of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire following World War I and the resulting order predefined by the Sykes-Picot accord of 1916. In it, the colonial powers France and the UK reneged on earlier promises and decided to separate the region into spheres of influence. As a result, more often than not, they set borders and boundaries arbitrarily. Indeed, the very concept of Arab states in a modern sense developed in large part only after 1916 and against a colonial background. The geographical center of the Middle East – encompassing the Levant, Jordan, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia – consists of states whose very existence, let alone the demarcation of their boundaries, is thus a relatively young phenomenon. To subsequent generations of Middle Eastern leaders the colonial and often artificial nature of these borders was obvious, and efforts to render these borders obsolete are as old as these states themselves.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Pan-Arabism was a powerful force, propa-

gating the unity of the Arab people while incorporating nominally socialist elements of ideology. However, Arab unity never passed the test of reality. Hence, as young as they are, the borders between the Arab states have been the cornerstone of the regional order for nearly a century. While they have certainly not prevented conflicts and wars, they nevertheless contained them and mostly channeled them into state-controlled limitations. Fixed and recognized borders are a necessary condition for existing peace agreements in the region, and will have to serve as the foundations for those treaties for which there is yet some hope. Challenging current borders in the geographical center of the Middle East therefore means challenging an order that has proven to be no principal impediment to peace and a suitable basis for regional stability.

'Syraq'
When, in June 2014, fighters of the IS commandeered a civilian Caterpillar bulldozer and cut a breach into the earth berm that marked the Syrian-Iraqi border, they symbolically challenged not only the current line separating both countries, but the whole concept of regional order. The IS thus most prominently embodies one of the characteristics most often described by evoking the Thirty Years' War – that of a disintegrating center

being contested and dominated by outside powers.

While many observers were surprised when IS forces occupied the Iraqi city of Mosul by *coup de main* in mid-2014, Syria and Iraq have long been de-facto parts of closely linked conflicts – so close that it does make sense, from an analytical and policymaking point of view, to consider Iraq and Syria as theaters of the same war, albeit with considerable differences when it comes to possible policy solutions. For all practical purposes, at the time of writing, a considerable part of the border between Iraq and Syria has ceased to exist and others like the Lebanese borders may follow. An increasing flow of money, weapons, fighters, and refugees threatens to render the pillars of Sykes-Picot obsolete.

At some point during the Afghanistan war, it became policy for US officials in the administration of President Barack Obama to call the area of operations 'AfPak', thereby making clear that the conflict dynamics of Afghanistan and Pakistan are inextricably linked. At the risk of oversimplifying, for the analyst of both conflicts, it clearly makes sense to speak of the war in 'Syraq' to understand the interdependent genesis of the current situation while avoiding the pitfalls of meshing policy options for both countries.

Open borders: fighters and refugees
Even beyond 'Syraq', borders are set to lose their containing and structuring effect while states are in danger of losing every semblance of a 'monopoly of power'. The result is a massive two-way flow of fighters and refugees.

The war in 'Syraq' is fought primarily by non-state actors of varying character. As described above, the privatization of violence during the Thirty Years' War, partly in the form of mercenaries, was a major factor for both the duration as well as the fateful cyclical dynamic of violence that marked the war. It was far easier to raise armies than to disband them. First, disbanding mercenary groups necessitated funds that were often not available, which made it easier to keep those armies and satisfy them through resources generated by continued fighting. Second, years of continuous service produced a large number of men that never learned anything else but the craft of war, making a 're-integration' into society difficult at best. Third, the possibility of actively influencing the war solely by transferring money to professional mercenary leaders lowered the threshold of intervention and multiplied the number of parties and interests involved in the conflict. Similar dynamics can be seen in the current war. In fact, the majority of the heterogeneous Syrian

Flow of fighters and refugees from/into selected countries

Source: UNHCR
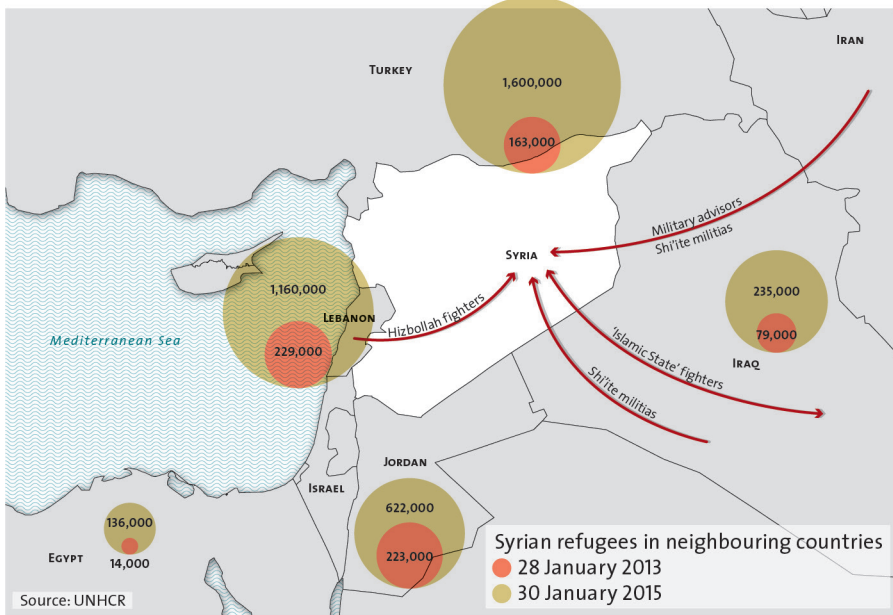
war factions – the US had counted up to 1500 rebel groups by February 2014 – are dependent on international support in terms of money, personnel, and materiel. The conflict is thus by principle internationalized.

Furthermore, neither in Iraq nor in Syria does an undisputedly 'national' army exist. In Syria, the national army is widely perceived as an instrument of the Assad regime. The regime, for its part, depends heavily on aid from Russia and direct military support by Lebanese Hizbollah fighters, Iranian military advisors, and further Shi'ite militias composed, in part, of foreign

fighters predominantly hailing from Iraq, but also, allegedly, countries like Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Yemen. Various sources put the number of Hizbollah fighters at between 3000 and 5000, plus up to 5000 non-Syrian Shi'ite fighters. In addition, between several hundred and a few thousand Iranian military advisors are reported to be present on the ground.

The Syrian opposition, meanwhile, lacks an effective command and control structure. Thus, even the largest rebel 'groups', according to the International Crisis Group, resemble ad-hoc alliances of autonomous

groups more than effective military commands; they are more concerned about coordination, the de-conflicting of operations, and a relatively coherent external representation than they are about creating unity of effort, let alone unity of command. The primary rebel groups are the Free Syrian Army (FSA), originally made up of defectors from Assad's army, which incorporates secular or moderate Islamist groups and whose name suggests an organizational structure that does not exist in reality; more radical Islamist groups such as 'Islamic Front' and the Jaish al-Mujahideen; and, finally, openly jihadist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the IS.

The dependence on external support is similar in Iraq. The Iraqi Army (IA) is heavily dependent on foreign assistance, especially from the US, which is supporting the build-up of new Iraqi divisions in 2015 to regain territory currently held by the IS. The integrative potential of the IA, meanwhile, is one of the main reasons for hope on the Iraqi side, where many Iraqis seem to prefer the army to sectarian militias, be they Sunni or Shi'ite. However, to have any chance on the battlefield, the IA still relies on support from these Shi'ite militias, many of which are allegedly supported by Iran or have strong ties to several figures within the cabinet of Iraqi Prime Minister Haider

al-Abadi. The Kurdish Peshmerga of northern Iraq, for their part, only lived up to their military reputation after receiving heavy support from US aircraft and are recipients of training and materiel provided by an international 'coalition of the willing', including Dutch, German, and British soldiers. Finally, the presence of Iranian military advisors on the ground on unspecified duties, and the ground attacks flown by Iranian aircraft, make clear that Tehran sees vital interests at stake and will have a role in any outcome of the fighting.

As of the beginning of 2015, the trend for external actors involved in financing non-state actors to protect their own interests continues. The US, after having delivered humanitarian assistance, training, and 'non-lethal' aid to some Syrian groups since at least 2013, is planning to equip and train up to 5000 'moderate' Syrian fighters to oppose the IS (and, possibly, the Syrian regime). In January 2015, reports suggested that Jordan, even before the killing of its pilot who had been captured by the IS, would start to finance militias in both Syria and Iraq to keep the IS from its borders and create a de-facto buffer zone.

Even more impressive than the numbers of fighters involved are the actual strategic and operational troop

movements throughout what is effectively a unified theater of operations. Reports describe movements of entire Shi'ite militia units from Iraq, where they became 'unemployed' after the US withdrawal in 2011, to Syria, lured by the promise of a solid salary, among other incentives. As those militias move from Iraq to Syria, Hizbollah units have been doing likewise since 2013, crossing regularly from Lebanon to Syria. The IS, for its part, moved units from Iraq into Syria after 2011 to gain combat experience and back again in force in 2014 for its summer offensive.

Finally, some reports indicate that in 2014, the IS ordered all members of its Libyan units to return to their home country to assist in the seizure of the port city of Derna in November of that year – in what would be a strategic movement of troops over hundreds of kilometers and through countries officially untouched by the war.

The flow of fighters through the region, a veritable back-and-forth of state and non-state forces, however, is eclipsed by the flow of refugees displaced by the war. Every neighbor of Syria is heavily affected by the war, if only through the arrival of Syrians fleeing the conflict. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), by January

2015, 3,73 million Syrians had fled their country – out of a pre-war population of 22 million. Most refugees flee to Turkey (ca. 1,6 million), Lebanon (1,16 million), Jordan (622,000), Iraq (235,000), and Egypt (136,000). These numbers do not include those that travel further to European destinations, and they are expected to increase by another million to a total of nearly 4,3 million refugees in the course of 2015. In Iraq, the UNHCR in January 2015 estimated that 1,5 million residents were Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) after more than twelve years of more or less continuous conflict.

The refugees are pushing a number of host countries to the breaking point, especially those that have always suffered from ethnical or religious tensions: Lebanon, a country that is continuously on the precipice of civil war and where the number of Syrian refugees has now reached the equivalent of a quarter of the country's pre-war population, felt compelled to introduce visa requirements for further refugees since January 2015, for the first time in decades, in a desperate move to re-establish the containing effect of its borders with Syria. Jordan, which borders both Syria and Iraq and furthermore is one of the pillars of the current order, notes with concern that the refugees now make up a full tenth

of its pre-war population. The Hashemite kingdom has a vivid memory of internal unrest in 1970 and is aware of the precariousness of a monarchy resting on the shoulders of what is effectively a national minority. Judging by the fate of the hundreds of thousands of descendants of the Palestinian refugees from the 1948 and 1967 wars, who have mostly never been able to establish themselves as full citizens in their host countries, the Syrian refugees might be a destabilizing factor for the regional order for decades to come.

Taken together, refugees and foreign fighters are part of the same phenomenon, namely the import and export of the conflict in 'Syraq' into the neighboring countries and its spillover beyond the original battleground. As states try to influence the war's outcome by supporting factions and militias, and at the same time struggle to maintain their physical separation from the conflict by strengthening their borders despite the inflow of refugees, these dynamics seem increasingly unsustainable.

Sectarian zeal and *raison d'état*

The Thirty Years' War was a religious war – or rather, it cannot be understood without taking into account the impact of religious reformation, in itself an immensely political process.

Major powers involved in the war, like Catholic France or Protestant Sweden, saw themselves more often than not as driven by religious imperatives, or even as vanguards in divine plans. Even where religious motives were not decisive, they were always at play. At the same time, however, the war saw one of the earliest and clearest manifestation of decidedly non-religious policies oriented towards a *raison d'état*: Most prominently, Catholic France under Cardinal de Richelieu, or Protestant sovereigns opting for alliances with the self-proclaimed vanguard of counter-reformation in Vienna. The war could not have started without religious fault lines, and it could not have lasted as long as it did without manifestly conflicting interests of states and sovereigns in a volatile environment, leading to alliances that were thought unlikely under pre-war constellations. It was this dualism of religious fervor and coolly calculating 'state' policies that contributed to the carnage of the war.

The same struggle between sectarian zeal and calculated state interest is obvious with regard to the countries that are at the same time most openly sectarian and most intimately involved in the war of 'Syraq'. Iran and Saudi Arabia have been the main regional contenders for hegemony in the Middle East for decades. While

The evolution of the 'Islamic State'

2003 — Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's jihadists join Iraqi insurgency
2004 — Formation of Al-Qaida in Iraq
2005 — AQI conducts sectarian killings of Shias
2006 — AQI renamed as 'Islamic State of Iraq'
2007 — ISI targeted by US troop surge and Sunni tribesmen
2008 — ISI forced onto defensive
2009 — Iraqi government policies escalate sectarian tensions
2010 — Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi appointed ISI chief
2011 — Beginning of uprisings in Syria
2012 — ISI launches jailbreak offensive to increase numbers
2013 — ISI claims Jabhat al-Nusra as Syrian offshoot, changes name to 'Islamic State in Iraq and Levant',
2014 — takes Raqqa
JAN — ISIL expands into Fallujah, takes parts of Ramadi
FEB — ISIL breaks with Al-Qaida
MAR
APR
MAY — Takes Mosul; takes Tikrit; takes Tal Afar; takes Al Qaim, Rawa, Ana and Husaybah
JUN — Declares formation of a new Caliphate and changes
JUL — name to 'Islamic State'
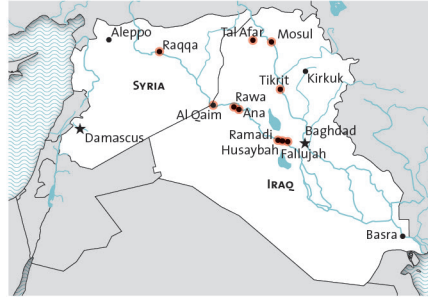
Sources: Stratfor 2014, Prem Mahadevan: 'The Neo-Caliphate of the Islamic State', CSS 2014

Tehran has, since 1979, often been an active exporter of Shi'ite revolution and activism, the currents underlying its involvement in the region reach much deeper to traditional dreams of Persian hegemony in its strategic neighborhood. This has both negative and positive implications: negative, in that the combination of geopolitical aspirations and religious zeal focusing on Shi'ite populations outside Iran is destabilizing and fuels the conflicts in the region; and positive, in that Iran is thus far acting within the framework of the current order, resisting changes to borders and focusing instead of influencing or dominating politics within those borders. It is here that a convergence of interests with other powers may be possible, as will be explained below.

Saudi Arabia, for its part, has continued its tradition of directing radical Islamist energies towards the outside lest it be endangered from within. It is determined to block Iranian moves towards hegemony and to prop up Sunni regimes and groups throughout the region. At the same time, Riyadh finds itself in the precarious situation of being in the midst of an immensely delicate succession after the death of King Abdullah in January 2015, coupled with an increasing threat of IS forces operating at its borders.

Even though Riyadh seems to be on the strategic defensive following Iran's push throughout the region, it might at some point decide that its interests are best served with a settlement on the basis of the territorial status quo – at least in the short term.

Two other neighbors of 'Syraq' will play a minor, yet still important role in any future development of the crisis. Neither is free from sectarian agendas, yet state interests appear to prevail, as of now. Turkey, under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, is heavily involved in the conflict both through the Syrian refugees it shelters and through the country's intense and deeply ambivalent relations with numerous opposition groups, the IS and the Kurds, in both Iraq and Syria. Ankara's call for a comprehensive approach to fighting the IS and its desire to stabilize Syria without Assad are born out of empathy with the largely Sunni resistance in Syria as well as the wish to see the refugees return – and therefore entirely pragmatic, a fact often overlooked by Western critics of Erdoğan.

Egypt, on the other hand, plagued by internal strife since the ouster of Hosni Mubarak and facing its own increasingly violent insurgency on the Sinai peninsula, has been the only major Arab power content with remaining largely aloof from the Syrian conflict.

This might even enable it to act as a mediator in any settlement – provided that groups and states allied with the Muslim Brotherhood do not profit. Taken together, both Turkey and Egypt would, in all probability, be prepared to sponsor a settlement based on a balancing of regional interests.

Looking beyond these four central states, both Jordan and Lebanon suffer from similar problems, though with varying intensity. Both are heavily affected by the war; yet, as minor powers, they are in no position to influence the war decisively, focusing instead on containing the possibly disastrous effects of an open spillover to their territory. Lebanon is on the verge of a renewed civil war, with Hizbollah and Sunni factions that are fighting each other in Syria barely keeping a fragile calm within Lebanon's borders based on the tacit agreement of all major Lebanese parties that a further spillover has to be avoided at all costs, making the state in the Levant a tense backwater of the war where fighters from both sides rest to recuperate. Jordan, meanwhile, is focused on securing its long border with 'Syraq', wary of its own population: though it may not be susceptible to the lures of the IS, its determination to fight for the monarchy against both internal and external enemies is far from clear. Considering

the reported support for armed tribes in 'Syraq' close to its borders and the cruel execution of the captured Jordanian pilot by the IS in February 2015, it seems doubtful, however, whether Amman can resist being drawn deeper into the conflict.

Taken together, all neighbors of 'Syraq' see vital interests affected, and all would have to bear the fallout of a disintegration of the current order. They are competitors, and may even be enemies, within the framework of the current order, yet they share the same interest of preserving this order and preventing the conflict that looms after a breakdown of the current balance. The question of whether secular, coldly calculated *raison d'état* can prevail over sectarian loyalties in those states will determine whether a comprehensive settlement on the basis of the status quo ante is possible at all.

Boom of a 'terror economy'
The years between 1618 and 1648 did not see continuous conflict, but rather a series of wars and campaigns. However, the war was perceived, already by contemporaries, as a period of continuous and existential instability. In the pre-state age of the mercenary, the war saw an extensive privatization of violence, with what could today be called non-state actors doing much of the fighting. Entrepreneurs of war, in-

cluding prominent commanders like Albrecht von Wallenstein, raised and led armies while making a huge profit from it. As a consequence, peace became less desirable for an increasingly powerful group of actors, while many 'ordinary people' lived their entire lives within a war economy that made service in some armed group the only realistic option for earning a decent wage – or at least to offer hope for spoils of war.

Today's Middle East sees the establishment of a veritable and hugely profitable war economy in 'Syraq'. Prem Mahadevan, in his chapter of this volume, details extensively the nexus between crime, terrorism, and non-state groups fighting in the region. Therefore, the following thoughts will be limited to a short assessment. With the advent of the IS exerting at least some part of control over large swathes of the region, this crime-terror nexus has been raised to a new level. What constituted smuggling, under the current order, may well qualify as trade in the years ahead. While the IS might be transitory, the economic quantum step it represents in terms of generating constant income under the conditions of, and through, structural instability, are likely to linger on after its demise. Moreover, the war economy transcends the war parties; as discussed, both individuals and whole militia units from both

sects are lured with respectable sums to 'enlist' in one group or continue their service in other parts of 'Syraq's' battle-field and beyond.

In addition, the presence of millions of refugees in the region is a fertile ground for an informal economy, as refugees are forced to work illegally if they can find employment at all. This will, in turn, further undermine the capacity of the states to generate income to support those very refugees. Once a full-blown trans-national war economy is in place, it will be immensely more difficult to revert to normalcy, as similar 'war societies' in Africa demonstrate convincingly.

Implications for 2015 and beyond

Status-quo vs. revisionist powers

The advent of the IS changes the potential dynamics of the conflict. The very concept of the 'Caliphate' announced by the IS in June 2014 poses a double challenge for the region today: First, it encompasses far more than Syria, in fact, it theoretically lays claim to the entire countries at one point in history ruled by Muslims. Second, the concept of the Caliphate, in its professed nature as a Muslim empire under God, stands in contrast to the philosophical concept of the Western state, at least within today's Middle East. The IS, through its (still distant, fragile, and barely functional)

Caliphate, is today's revisionist power par excellence.

For the regional powers, the advent of the IS and the threat of disintegration is existential: The wars of the last decade were waged over the control of states and regional hegemony, but within the paradigm of the current state-based Middle East. By establishing itself as a player in the conflict, the IS draws new lines between itself and the status-quo powers – including practically every state and regime in the region and beyond. Among those powers are, notably, even non-state actors like Hizbollah, quite remarkably for the resistance movement it claims to be.

It is no coincidence that this emerging constellation is in the interest of the Syrian regime. The mid-term goal of the Assad regime seems clear: To consolidate the area under its control at the cost of the mainstream opposition, after which it would be militarily strengthened and could present itself as the only realistic alternative to a jihadist opposition and thereby as a potential partner for the West and regional powers. Assad's regime is thus positioning itself as the one force that could defend the status quo (ante), the current regional order and its borders, against the revisionist force of the IS. In doing so, it is

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banking on the common interest of all current powers – and Assad may well have calculated correctly. In short, the advent of the IS has not brought peace any nearer, but it may have raised the likelihood that an eventual peace will be based on the smallest common denominator of most parties – the reestablishment of the state-based order.

Fragile Iranian hegemony

Iran has, so far, been the great winner in the turmoil that has beset the region since 2003, as the last years have seen the advance of Iranian proxies throughout the Middle East. In Lebanon, no political issue can be decided against objections of Hizbollah; in Iraq, Tehran has secured a government dominated by Shi'ites, and it has the last word on most matters of importance; and in Yemen, Shi'ite rebels allegedly supported by Tehran appear to have the upper hand in a violent struggle for power in Sana'a. However, as impressive as Iran's influence in the region is at the beginning in 2015, it stands on shaky ground, and it is not at all clear that this influence can be transformed into the regional hegemony that Tehran aspires to. Two factors are reason enough for skepticism.

First, in economic terms, Iran is relatively weak, suffering from years of increasingly effective international sanctions and, lately, the punishing effects of the drop in world oil prices. Iran is estimated by the IMF to need an oil price of USD 131 to finance a balanced budget; at the time of writing, the price hovered around USD 50. As Anthony Cordesman has noted pointedly in a study for the Geneva Center for Security Policy (GCSP), Iran's economic performance is already dwarfed just by the combined GCC states – not taking into account the other Sunni Arab states not at all friendly with Iran.

Second, and more important, in a region made up of overwhelmingly Sunni Arab states and people, Shi'ite Iran is an outlier. It cannot hope to dominate the region against a united front of Arab states; therefore, its only hope lies in dominating the states individually through Shi'ite proxies, either in the form of regimes or through de-facto independent forces like Hizbollah. This proxy-based hegemony is inherently unstable, fuels a violent sectarianism, and would in no way resemble the long-term structural hegemony that many observers fear. It is here that the IS constitutes a paradoxical threat to Iran: The instability caused by the war benefits Iranian involvement through proxies; however, a collapse of the state-based order would be detrimental to Iranian interests, as it needs those states to dominate the system.

Against this background, as Iran is engaged in nuclear negotiations with the international community, it is once again clear why a negotiated nuclear threshold status would be immensely beneficial for Iran. It would ease the economic burden while likely preventing the regional nuclear arms race Tehran fears. While it wishes to continue its delicate course of fueling instability within states without challenging the existence of those states, Iran has a vital interest in its own domestic economic stability. A New Thirty Years' War, therefore, would have very ambivalent implications for Iran, offering historic opportunities while simultaneously threatening the very basis of its rise.

Prospect of new alliances
The disintegration of traditional order and the fragmentation of the political and social landscape may, over time, lead to a shift in alliances that would seem paradoxical as of today.

One factor is the above described dynamic of pitting status-quo powers against revisionist movements. That will concern state as well as non-state actors. While Israel has been a rather passive observer of the war, so far, and is therefore not dealt with extensively here, it seems possible that Tel Aviv may one day see strong incentives to support Hizbollah – the quasi-state devil it knows – against jihadist groups

at its borders. The events of January 2015, with Israel reportedly supporting Jabhat al-Nusra on the Golan Heights, only confirms the basic dynamic: That of a state practicing 'realpolitik' and leaving all options on the table. In the event of a viable nuclear accord between the P5+1 and Iran, a strategic rapprochement between Tel Aviv and Tehran may well be a viable, if most likely informal policy option for both states.

A further element is the ambiguous status of outside powers. In the face of strategic uncertainty over the future involvement of the US and continuous speculation over an increasing role of China in the region, it would be naive to assume that current parameters of intra-regional relations will stay consistent over the next years and decades. Cracks between Israel and the US might not be as transitory as is often asserted if the structural rightwing majority in Israel solidifies further; Turkey has proven to be an either unreliable or volatile partner for nearly every state; and Saudi Arabia may increasingly make its strategic calculations without the US alliance as a *conditio sine qua non*. The center of the Middle East is disintegrating, peripheral powers are oscillating, and external powers are facing fundamental strategic decisions – new alliances therefore seem more than likely.

Conclusion: A Westphalian Peace?

After 30 years of bloodshed and immense destruction, the Peace of Westphalia ended the war in 1648 in what could be termed a 'great compromise'. The peace was at its core a positive affirmation of the old order. It cemented shifts in power, but no revolutionary outcomes. Plus, in a striking acknowledgement of its international dimension, both France and Sweden were formal parties to the new constitution, and thereby de-facto guarantors of it. Finally, the peace settled the religious feud on the basis of a simple insight that lay at the basis of every compromise since the Peace of Augsburg in 1555: That, at least for the time being, no sect could possibly prevail.

That is telling for today's Middle East. First, no peace in Syria is possible without the consent of its neighbors. A final settlement may reflect realities on the ground and gradual changes in the relative power of the region's states; however, it will not be possible against the persistent objection of any one power, first and foremost Iran. This conclusion, which may seem sobering at first, points to possible pathways out of the conflict, provided that all parties get a seat at the table and all interests are perceived as inherently legitimate. The main UN-sponsored peace process of Geneva and Montreux that failed in January 2014 did not fulfill these criteria. Second, the basis of such an understanding could be an informal understanding of the 'status-quo powers' – in essence, all involved states plus Hizbollah – that any prolongation of the conflict could simultaneously destabilize themselves and strengthen revisionist powers such as the IS. Thus, a common interest of the region's powers could be the preservation of the state-based order. That, of course, necessitates that all powers come to this very basic insight; and that, at least for the time being, state reasoning should trump sectarian agendas, if only for pragmatic reasons.

These conclusions might seem theoretical in nature, and unhelpful in practice. That may be true; but as long as those minimal requirements are not met, it appears that the violence in 'Syraq' will continue; that the parties to the conflict (minus the IS) will fight to position themselves for negotiations to come; and that temporary and partial cease-fires are liable only to strengthen the party with strategic or operational superiority if the other side cannot replenish itself. Until a comprehensive settlement is reached, localized initiatives seem destined to fail – as they did between 1618 and 1648.