



TOWARD A NEW VISION FOR THE MIDDLE EAST

BY ROBERT NICHOLSON

The Middle East lies in the throes of a full-scale civilizational crisis. Scores of Sunnis and Shiites have declared war on the West in the name of Islam; in the meantime, they are slaughtering each other without shame. The simultaneous draw-down of U.S. troops, the rise of ISIS, the dismantling of the Syrian and Iraqi governments, the self-emancipation of the Kurds, and the imperial expansion of Iran have created new facts on the ground that dramatically complicate the next decade. Millions of people have been displaced, hundreds of thousands have been killed, and millions more have been physically and psychologically traumatized. The national borders created in the aftermath of World War I hover on the brink of collapse, and at this point there is a real question whether the region will ever go back to the way it was. If not, the next and most terrifying question is what new order will arise to take its place.

By exploring the regional importance of organic communities – ethnic and religious blocs that have historically thought and acted as one – this essay aims to provide a conceptual first step toward that new order should the old paradigm finally break. It is these communities, I argue, that will form the basis for the new Middle East. By protecting them and empowering them for self-determination where circumstances

allow, the West can not only increase stability and freedom around the region but can also create new allies against the forces of tyranny.

My goal is not to offer a comprehensive political strategy or to advocate for replacing the old map of the Middle East with a new one. Prudence is the watchword in all things. However, I do hope to interrogate old thinking and advance an innovative





conversation about U.S. strategy in the region in the months and years ahead – including within the pages of this new journal. The conversation will be necessarily exploratory, even tentative. But sometimes the best way to play is with strategic modest and the patient advance of runners in deliberate, methodical ways.

There are only two things that are certain at this point: First, ignoring the Middle East is not an option. Let's not even speak about terrorism. Right now the refugee crisis sweeping across Europe demonstrates that the problems of the Middle East don't stay there, and that the West must deal proactively with the region or find existential threats in its own backyard. And we cannot address the symptoms of the problem without seeking to eradicate the underlying disease. Forcing the West to swallow huge numbers of refugees will only result in a more monolithic and radicalized Middle East, a more fractured and frustrated West, and an ever-expanding gulf between the two. The solution to the refugee crisis, like so many other crises, is to address the problem at its root.

Second, our current model doesn't seem to be working. For over a decade we have worked hard to bring peace and democracy to Iraq. Today the country is riven by inter-ethnic and interreligious conflict. Baghdad remains powerless in the face of territorial incursions by Iran, the Islamic State, and the Kurdish Regional Government. Why hasn't America been able to succeed here? Why, despite all the blood and treasure, has Iraq remained so dysfunctional? It is clear that we don't know the answer. And that, in and of itself, begs for a new approach.

Next year marks the centennial of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, a secret pact struck between Britain, France, and Russia during World War I to apportion the shattered pieces of the Ottoman Empire among themselves after the conflict ended. This infamous agreement, implemented through a series of international treaties among Western states, constructed the map of the Middle East as we know it today.

Prior to World War I the Middle East had always been a cosmopolitan mix of ethnic and religious communities that more or less looked out for themselves. Even during the episodic cycles of empires and caliphates, the bulk of everyday life took place in local units under the rule of local authorities. Group affiliation, whether religious, ethnic, or tribal, was the ultimate benchmark of identity.

In the wake of Sykes-Picot, the peoples of the Middle East, Arabs and non-Arabs alike, were shocked by the new geographic and political upheaval. The newly-drawn countries, untethered from any underlying demographic reality, were viewed by the indigenous peoples as arbitrary innovations of Western powers wrought for their own benefit at the expense of the local inhabitants. The new political regime was, for them, simply the continuation of Western meddling and betrayal which had begun when the British and French governments reneged on their wartime promise that Arabs would receive some degree of political independence for their military partnership against the Ottoman Empire. Arab resentment against the Western powers would endure over the subsequent years only to crescendo when the French forcibly deposed Faisal bin Hussein, the would-be king of the "Arab Kingdom of Syria," from his throne in Damascus in 1920.

While calm eventually returned and the new states started to take on a life of their own, local inhabitants never forgot that these so-called nations were to a significant extent purely imaginary. They never could proclaim supreme loyalty to the governments that ruled them. And they could never elevate their new political identity over the interests of their native community. Nevertheless, United States foreign policy (like the foreign policy of every other Western government) continues to take these artificial states as given and seeks to make them stable democracies governed by principles of civil rights, freedom of speech, and free market economics. Every citizen gets one vote and the opportunity to participate in the political process. All men



are given equal standing to pursue life and liberty under the beneficent gaze of blind justice.

Yet this approach makes major assumptions about Middle Eastern society that don't always hold. It assumes that Middle Eastern borders are meaningful to those who live within them. It assumes that the fundamental unit of Middle Eastern society is the individual, and not the ethnic or religious community into which those individuals are born. It assumes that religion can be kept in the tent, and that metaphysical concerns will always be trumped by economic self-interest. It assumes that historically-isolated communities of different faiths and tribes will pledge allegiance and sacrifice their sons for a state run by members of rival communities located hundreds of miles away.

As the anniversary of Sykes-Picot approaches, it is clear that the system it gave birth to stands in jeopardy. Many Middle Easterners are returning to Islam as the source of cultural and political authenticity, casting off their arbitrary state identities and seeking to reestablish the caliphate that was dismantled by the Great Powers. Religious radicalization is increasing as Muslim communities argue over the true essence of Islam and compete to demonstrate their bona fides as messengers of Muhammad's vision. Lay Muslims are caught in the middle of this firefight. Non-Muslim communities, heavily outnumbered, face nothing less than an existential threat.

I don't have the answers that have eluded America and her allies in their struggle to bring stability to the region and set it on a course toward prosperity. But I do believe there is at least one basic principle that can help us understand the region as the region wants to be understood: the principle of organic community.

The strategic questions are endless: Should Baghdad control Kurdistan? Will Damascus regain control of Raqqa? Will Tehran maintain its influence over the politics of Beirut? Government databases

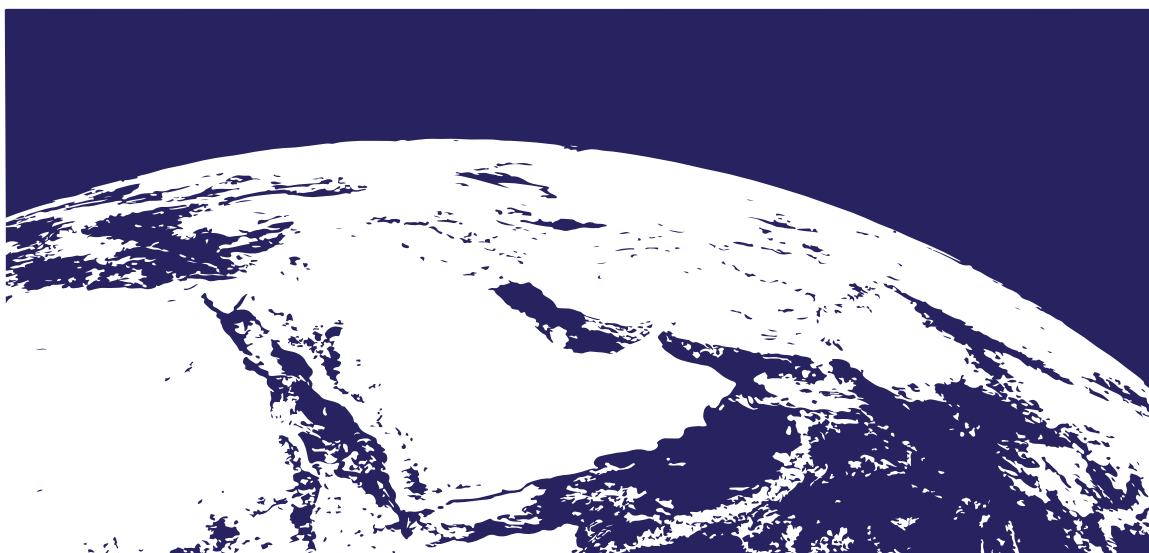
overflow with memos and policy papers addressing such questions, and yet we are no closer to regional peace than we were ten years ago.

One possible explanation is that our policymakers are asking the wrong questions. If so, it wouldn't be the first time. In his memoir *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, T.E. Lawrence observed a unique difference between the views of Arabs and Britons during World War I concerning the preferred post-war order:

The problem of the foreign theorists—"Is Damascus to rule the Hejaz, or can Hejaz rule Damascus?" did not trouble [the Arabs] at all, for they would not have it set. The Semites' idea of nationality was the independence of clans and villages, and their ideal of national union was episodic combined resistance to an intruder. Constructive policies, an organized state, an extended empire, were not so much beyond their sight as hateful in it. They were fighting to get rid of Empire, not to win it.

Lawrence had his finger on something important here. Westerners who work on Middle Eastern policy often look to create or reinforce multinational political entities with an underlying structure of rational authority. Middle Easterners, on the other hand, find legitimacy in their own local communities: Kurds with Kurds, Shiites with Shiites, Assyrians with Assyrians. Faith in the *common weal* is almost nonexistent. Fear of the other is ever present.

Middle Easterners crave safety and independence for their group even at the expense of the state's well-being. Westerners pursue the opposite approach. The complications that result should not be surprising. Taking Lawrence's observation to heart, US policymakers must recognize the abiding importance of group identities and the abiding mistrust that these groups feel toward each other. Regardless of the final strategic priorities, factoring these principles into U.S. policy will inevitably lead to more constructive ends.



The fundamental disease of the Middle East is a crisis of identity coupled with bitterness toward the West and a paralyzing fear of rival communities. Contrary to popular conceptions, the Middle East is not a monolithic sea of Islam or a swarming hive of hostile Arabs. It is a mosaic of religions and denominations, languages and ethnicities, cultures and subcultures that have intermingled but remained disparate for thousands of years.

America should seek to play upon this reality, not struggle against it. The problem with U.S. foreign policy is that it tries to make the region look like America: a multinational melting pot that transcends group identities for the sake of a greater good. A better policy would be to nudge the region toward the European model: a consortium of particularistic and self-interested nation-states that maintain their own ethnic and religious identities, perhaps under the banner of a larger transnational union.

The American strategic vision, whatever its final form is, should work toward fostering a Middle East comprised of self-determining nation-states living in light of their heritage under the principles of freedom, coexistence, and rule of law. The peaceful character of these states will derive not from autocracy and fear, but from the populations' shared sense of history and common vision for the future – in other words, from their desire to act out their collective will as a people.

Talking in general terms about affirming and supporting organic communities in security and self-determination is easy. Drawing direct application to real-life circumstances is much harder. *How* could this new strategic vision be implemented without making the situation even worse and *where* should implementation start?

First, with respect to *how*, implementation of this model should be done only where practicable. A mad dash to balkanize the Middle East and carve new states out of whole cloth will result in the same issues caused by Sykes-Picot. Second, implementation should be phased to coincide with current realities. Proclaiming independence for Druze in Syria may not be the most useful first step toward securing that community's future. Nativity takes time: A smaller, more interim arrangement may make more sense for the time being – a province or safe haven, for example, may have to be sufficient for now. Third, implementation should only happen where the would-be nation is committed to freedom and rule of law and is prepared to take on the responsibilities of self-government. Building a state without proper leadership will condemn these new polities to failure. Fourth, implementation should begin with those communities that first of all meet the above criteria and that are most urgently in need of outside assistance.

Second, *where* to begin? Many people talk about securing independence for the



Kurds as a natural first step in bringing stability to the region, and it's a good idea overall. But there is another community facing an existential crisis whose plight should be especially meaningful to American Christians and anyone else who cares about protecting minorities in the face of religious persecution: that is, the Christian community scattered across northern Iraq and northeastern Syria. These Christians are facing nothing short of a genocide at the hands of the Islamic State and, to some extent, their Kurdish neighbors. In Iraq alone their numbers have diminished from 1.6 million in 2003 to just over 200,000 today.

Lots of Americans are talking and writing about helping these Christians, but few have gotten past the most myopic of solutions. Humanitarian aid is of course critical, but aid money only goes so far. Schemes to evacuate Christians and resettle them in the West have attracted many supporters in recent months, but this strategy ultimately does more harm than good. Not only does it concede victory to the Islamic State and eradicate the witness of Christianity in the region, it hurls impoverished and traumatized Christians into foreign lands with few resources or support.

The best way to help persecuted Christians is to find a way to ensure their ongoing survival inside their historic homeland. And the best way to do that is to recognize not just their religious identity but their ethnic identity as well. These are not just Christians, they are *Assyrian* Christians descended from a pre-Islamic, Aramaic-speaking nation that has resided in Mesopotamia since well before the time of Christ. Also known as Syriacs and Chaldeans, the Assyrians see themselves as a distinct people. They have their own literature, art, and music. They have traditional dances and clothing. They have national heroes.

This community stretches in a series of pockets – an “Aramaic archipelago” of sorts – from the hills of northern Israel all the way to the mountains of western Iran. Its nucleus, however, lies in the historic

Assyrian heartland around ancient Nineveh (modern Mosul) and the plains that run along the upper Tigris and Euphrates rivers. It was here that God sent Jonah, where Isaiah prophesied a restored Assyrian nation alongside Israel and Egypt at the end of days, and where early apostles preached the gospel. Today the Assyrians have been chased out of Nineveh and scattered across the world, but they long for the day when they will be free from the rule of Kurds and Arabs and can return to reestablish their ancient polity on their native soil.

Whether an autonomous province inside Iraq, a homogenous Assyrian state erected on the Nineveh Plains post-Iraq, or a mixed “State of Mesopotamia” comprised of Assyrians and other friendly minorities, the idea of new political entity in northern Iraq has garnered more and more attention as of late. Working to help the Assyrians recover even a fragment of their ancient homeland would undoubtedly help secure their future in a collapsing Middle East. It would help preserve Christianity in its ancient homeland. It would undermine the Islamic State. It would help create a buffer between feuding Kurds and Arabs. It would create a safe zone for minority communities around the region to find refuge from persecution. And it would provide a new and likeminded ally for the U.S. and its regional partners in the struggle against totalitarian ideology.

There are, of course, numerous complications.

First and foremost are the external challenges: not least among them creating conditions on the ground that will allow an Assyrian polity to take root. This means destroying the Islamic State and crafting a multinational security structure that carries moral and spiritual credibility, a real sense of resolve, and a tremendous amount of resources from the international community.

There are also internal challenges as Assyrians seek to move beyond a millennia of powerlessness and ready themselves



for self-governance. They need rigorous training and assistance in areas of self-defense, political leadership, community- and state-building, education, and cultural and linguistic preservation. They need a vanguard of forward-thinking young leaders who are devoted enough and skilled enough to lead their community into the future. Such leadership is rare, but the Western community of nations could be very helpful in helping source it.

Many skeptics will doubt the ability of Assyrians or any other Middle Eastern community to determine its own future in such a hostile and complex environment. But skeptics also doubted the prospect of Jewish political revival only a hundred years ago. Who could not help but laugh at young Jewish farmers and intellectuals working against all odds to push the concept of an independent Jewish polity located inside the Ottoman Empire and centered on the ancient city of Jerusalem? Today the Jews are living on their ancient homeland, speaking their ancient language, and surviving – even flourishing – among hostile neighbors committed to their destruction.

The Assyrians are actually in a far better position today than the Jews were then, and there is no reason to doubt that the same process that resulted in a Jewish state could not likewise result in an Assyrian one. Indeed, there are numerous parallels between the two causes and lessons to be learned – a subject I hope to write about elsewhere.

Israel herself may in fact be a good model for what the new Middle East could look like: a series of small, mostly homogenous nation-states with strong Western alliances and innovative economies based on the twin pillars of freedom and law. As the “start-up nation” *par excellence*, Israel has acquired much hard-won experience about building and maintaining a progressive yet traditional society in a region where fear and violence remain the rule of the day.

As I said at the outset, this essay is not a comprehensive strategy for U.S. foreign policy. It proposes only a more intentional move toward a mosaic-like Middle East comprised of self-governing and mutually interdependent nation-states built to coincide with the organic boundaries of ancient communities. The ideal may be difficult to achieve, at least for the time being. More realistic is the establishment of one or two such entities in the chaotic swirl of a collapsing Iraq and Syria. The ideal will always be qualified by reality and measured against the best interests of the United States. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try to achieve what is most possible and closest to the ideal. Timing is key. Leadership is dispositive. But prudence must govern all.

Questions abound. How can the U.S. pursue this strategy in the face of ill-disposed regimes like Iran and Turkey? Which communities should achieve independence and which should not? What are the determining factors? Who decides? What kind of regional security arrangement can be put in place to ensure interim safety for these fledgling polities as they make their way to a sufficient level of independence? How can we work with regional partners to ensure that our actions don't appear as yet another attempt to impose Western ways?

The point of this essay is not to answer these questions, but merely to raise them. Yet if asking the wrong questions has up to now contributed to the present quagmire, then asking *better* questions is no idle endeavor. Small ball can win the day. ■

Robert Nicholson is the executive director of *The Philos Project*, a nonprofit organization that seeks to promote positive Christian engagement in the Middle East. He holds a BA in Hebrew Studies from Binghamton University, and a JD and MA (Middle Eastern History) from Syracuse University. A formerly enlisted Marine and a 2012-2013 Tikvah Fellow, Robert lives in New York City with his wife and two children.