

Contact editor at: editor@theArabweekly.com

The greatest curse of the Middle East region

Sami Moubayed

is a Syrian historian and author of "Under the Black Flag" (IB Tauris, 2015).



“Looking at the bright side of it -- Germany reunited. So did Yemen.

On September 28, Arab nationalists throughout the Middle East will mark the 56th anniversary of a military coup that shattered the Syrian-Egyptian Union of 1958-61. Gamal Abdul Nasser promised that his union regime would last 100 years but it came crashing down just three years later, due to political repression and chaotic socialist policies that led to the confiscation of land and private enterprise and ultimately to the destruction of the Syrian upper class.

When the Ba'athists took power in 1963, via a military coup, they promised to restore the Syrian-Egyptian Union and, on paper and in theory, they are still determined to do that.

This ultimately is the greatest curse of the Middle East. Nobody was satisfied with the borders they ended up with at the end of the first world war. The Turks cried foul play, claiming that the former Ottoman Empire had been sliced into pieces and the people of Syria complained that they were left with only a fraction of what Bilad al-Sham had once been.

At the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, the Zionists aggressively lobbied for their share of the cake – a Jewish state in Palestine – and so did other minorities, notably the Kurds, whose representative, Serif Pasha, pointed to the Fourteen Points of US President Woodrow Wilson, which, among other things, promised “self-determination” for “non-Turkish races” of the Middle East.

When the final borders were drawn and accepted internationally, neither the Arabs nor the

Kurds got their independent state. The Kurds were divided among Syria, Iraq, Iran and Turkey while the Arabs were scattered throughout the kingdom of the Hejaz, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Palestine and throughout North Africa. The Jews had to wait until 1948 to get their country while the Kurds carved one out of Iraq in 1991.

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Obviously, nobody was satisfied with these settlements, wanting to believe that they were temporary. Some within the Alawite community petitioned the French in 1936, demanding that they get to keep an independent mini-state in the Syrian coast instead of being reunited with Mother Syria. Abdullah I of Jordan dreamt of a throne in Damascus and constantly positioned himself as a king-in-waiting, pleading with the British to install him whenever a vacancy emerged in Syria. In the 1940s, he tried to talk Syria's Druze into seceding and merging with his kingdom.

His brother Faisal, who was briefly king of Syria before becoming sovereign of Iraq, often suggested a Syrian-Iraqi Union under his crown, with a rotating

summer/winter capital between Baghdad and Damascus.

When parliament tabled a bill demanding the restoration of Baalbek, Rashaya, Hasbaya and the Bekaa Valley to Syria, arguing that they had been forcefully annexed to Lebanon, Syrian President Shukri al-Quwatli, an Arab nationalist, turned it down saying: “What difference does it make if they are in Syria or Lebanon? These borders are temporary and we will one day erase them to create an Arab Nation.”

More recently when President Hafez Assad – Bashar's father – mentioned Palestine in private talks with Arab nationalists, he referred to it as “southern Syria.”

Some residents of the Middle East wanted to expand their borders to include larger more ambitious Arab projects; others worked for mini-states based on ethnicity or religion. More than ever, this is materialising in Syria and Iraq today.

Before its ambitious “caliphate” began to crumble, the Islamic State (ISIS) carved out what effectively became “Sunni-Stan” in major cities such as Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor and Mosul. The Kurds did the same in north-eastern Syria, creating militias to fight just about anybody who hovered close – be it the Free Syrian Army, ISIS, al-Nusra or government troops.

Two referendums that will bring them closer than ever towards statehood were set.

The first was September 22 in Syria, with the selection of leaders for approximately 3,700 communities with the intention of creating a Kurdish-backed federal government in the north within the framework of the present borders.

Areas voting were al-Hasakah, including the strategic city of Qamishli; Tal Abyad and Kobane, near the Turkish border; and Afrin, west of the Euphrates. In all three the vote went smoothly, with no interference from the central government in Damascus. Syrian Kurds are to have municipality elections in November and parliamentary ones in January.

The second one – far more controversial – was set for September 25 in Iraqi Kurdistan, eyeing full independence.

Arab nationalists are furious, claiming this further breaks down the dwarfed and artificial states that were created by the British and the French in 1916. Kurdish independence might inspire more fragmentation as other minorities make claims to statehood. Turkish and Persian nationalists are unhappy with the Iraqi referendum because it would trigger similar ambitions among the Kurdish minorities in their countries, which have been persecuted for more than a century.

Dividing countries in conflict or those emerging from war is not new and not without benefits so long as it is done with vision and relative consensus. It happened to India in 1947, which gave birth to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. A civil war in 1971 resulted in the secession of East Pakistan as the new country of Bangladesh. It happened to Korea in 1948. It happened to Germany in 1949. It happened to Egypt, when Sudan was carved out as an independent state in 1956. It happened to Yemen in 1969. More recently, it happened to Sudan in 2011. The list can go on. Looking at the bright side of it – Germany reunited. So did Yemen.

Nation as a fortress: We will all be North Korea by another name

Rashmee Roshan Lall

is a columnist for The Arab Weekly. Her blog can be found at www.rashmee.com and she is on Twitter: @rashmeerl.



“In a world of fortress nations, with severely circumscribed interests and mindsets, collective defence is a paradox and selflessness a sin.

In 1945, when the Soviets installed Kim Il-sung as putative head of the new country called North Korea, the former guerrilla presented himself to his people as a leader who would build up the nation as a fortress. North Korea would be racially pure and therefore superior to the mixed-race Muggles in South Korea and everywhere else. It would be impenetrable to imperialists, mostly because foreign entry would be restricted.

Now, 72 years later, and the idea of fortress nations seems to have become alarmingly popular in unexpected parts of the world. Consider the following:

US President Donald Trump's senior aides want an annual cap on refugee entry of 15,000, which is approximately half the world's daily number of new refugees. Trump has until October 1 to decide on the issue.

Leaked reports suggest the White House is being selective in its information-gathering process. It is said to have rejected an official study that said refugees earned the government billions more in revenues over

the past decade than they cost. It is obvious that refugees have been added to an anti-immigrant agenda that is meant to secure the fortress nation.

Anti-immigrant parties are gaining support in Germany, which voted September 24; in Austria, which votes in October; and in Italy, which votes early next year. Only in Austria is there a real chance that rising hostility to foreigners, especially those from the Arab world, will propel the anti-immigrant party into government. The conservative Austrian People's Party, which shifted closer to the far-right Freedom Party's positions on immigration and Islam, has maintained a poll lead in the four months since the election was called.

Finally, countries are defending their walled fortresses by any means possible. Extraordinary new deals are being done. Italy may be paying Libyan warlords to prevent migrants from setting sail in the central Mediterranean, the busiest route into Europe. The European Union is paying people traffickers in Niger to start other

businesses, which don't involve the dispatch of human beings.

The Italians deny a monetary arrangement with the warlords but it's hard to understand why else the number of migrant arrivals from Libya would fall sharply the past two months. In July, arrivals in Italy were down 50%; in August, 85%.

If money is changing hands, it shouldn't really be particularly shocking. Eighteen months ago, the European Union as a whole brokered a money-for-migrants deal with Turkey. Ankara was promised more than \$7 billion to help pay for the upkeep of migrants intercepted on the Aegean Sea route to Europe.

That arrangement seems to have worked even though Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is routinely caustic about it. He complained to the UN General Assembly that Europe was stumping up less than it should.

In a way, Erdogan's constant grousing pairs well with Trump's eternal griping. Both seem to believe that a sharp-eyed, elbows-out and hostile world is taking advantage of

their countries. However, their narrow self-focus merely illustrates the philosophy Trump has proposed as the guiding principle of global affairs.

He told the General Assembly that sovereignty should reign supreme rather than submission to global collectivism. Refugees, by extension, were cast in terms of a hopefully short-term affliction that is best quarantined in or near the refugees' home countries.

“Are we still patriots?” the US president asked world leaders at the most multilateral institution on Earth. “Do we love our nations enough to protect their sovereignty and to take ownership of their futures?”

In real terms, that was a call to base nationalism, a nod to me-first transactional relationships rather than inspirational or aspirational shared values.

In a world of fortress nations, with severely circumscribed interests and mindsets, collective defence is a paradox and selflessness a sin.

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Subscription & Advertising:
Ads@alarab.co.uk
Tel 020 3667 7249

Mohamed Al Mufti
Marketing & Advertising
Manager

Tel (Main) +44 20 7602 3999
Direct: +44 20 8742 9262
www.alarab.co.uk

US Publisher:
Ibrahim Zobeidi
(248) 803 1946

Al Arab Publishing House
Quadrant Building
177-179 Hammersmith Road
London W6 8BS

Tel: (+44) 20 7602 3999
Fax: (+44) 20 7602 8778