

Foreign Policy Association of Harrisburg
P.O. Box 60665
Harrisburg, PA 17106

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The Syrian Civil War is widening because it has become an avenue for a bigger proxy war, especially between Sunni and Shia. This war has been building for decades, although its roots go back to the early days of Islam and sectarian conflict has flared up many times in the subsequent centuries. In this particular iteration, the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 empowered Shia Islamists in that country, and one thread of their philosophy was to export the revolution abroad into other Shia areas. This activity, which led to the establishment of Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, collided with the rise of Sunni Islamism earlier in the 20th century, especially the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928 and the Jamaat Islami in British India in 1941. The Afghan War of the 1980s provided a training ground and battlefield for Sunni Islamists of that era to wage a great jihad against the atheist Soviet Union. Al-Qaeda was born in the waning days of that war and began to espouse an increasingly militant ideology against the Sunni rulers of most Arab countries (the Near Enemy) who were aligned with Western countries like the United States (the Far Enemy). Sunni extremists also saw Shia as apostates, which, in the stricter interpretations of Islamic law, justified their execution.

The 2012 outbreak of Arab Spring violence in Syria quickly spiraled upward into a civil war that brought all of the regional rivalries into play. Iran supports the Alawite-dominated government in Damascus, meaning two Shia governments support each other. The Gulf Arab countries (particularly Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar) all support various groups of the Sunni dominated opposition in the Syrian Civil War, including some of the most extreme groups, like ISIS. The Kurds also have organized groups in the opposition, which make the Turks extremely nervous, even though it is through Turkey that most of the supply lines to the Sunni-dominated Syrian opposition run. Russia and China also support the Syrian regime for somewhat different reasons, while the United States and most European governments favor the more moderate elements of the opposition.

As noted above, there are internal dynamics driving the violence now ongoing in Iraq in addition to the broader regional trends already described. Iraq, like Syria and Lebanon, is an artificially created state, all of which were created by way of a secret British-French negotiation during World War I on how those two countries would carve up the Levantine holdings of the Ottoman Empire at war's end. All of the countries created as a byproduct of the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 were flawed from the beginning. Under the imperial system of governance prior to the end of World War II, different ethnic and sectarian groups did not have to set aside their identities to become part of a nation. Creation of Syria and Iraq meant combining sectarian and ethnic groups within artificial borders under outside rulers and authoritarian systems of government.

Eventually, both countries came to be ruled by revolutionary governments controlled by a minority sectarian group that became increasingly heavy-handed toward the majority sectarian group. Operation IRAQI FREEDOM toppled the Sunni minority government in Iraq, while the Arab Spring saw the challenge to Syria's minority government. Both of these countries are fragile, with no real national identity binding the people together.

<http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/index.cfm/articles/Syria-and-the-Great-Middle-Eastern-War/2014/07/8>

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