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INTRODUCTION

Political Turmoil and Social Transformation in the Levant

Martin Beck, Dietrich Jung, and Peter Seeberg

In the year 2014, the ongoing Syrian civil war, the advancement of the Islamic State (IS) in both Syria and Iraq, another round of failed bilateral negotiations in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the military escalation in Gaza raised the question as to whether the developments in the Levant might lead not only to processes of regime change, but possibly also to an even more fundamental alteration of the Levant’s entire state system. In the period after the Arab Uprisings of 2010–11, any hopes for a democratic, social, and political change in the Middle East have increasingly been disappointed. This applies in particular to the subregion of the Levant, where warfare has characterized the situation in Syria, Iraq, and the Gaza Strip. Hopes for a democratic rule in Syria and Iraq, as well as for the establishment of a Palestinian state in coexistence with Israel, have been essentially frustrated. Confronted with the enormous human suffering in Syria, the international community has shown an appalling inability to act in an efficient way. The Syrian population has become the pawn of a complex setting of brutal regime repression, militia warfare, organized crime, and the diverging interests of regional states and international great powers.

At the end of World War I, the international great powers together with their respective regional clients established a new political order in the Levant on the remnants of the territories of the demised Ottoman Empire. Although heavily disputed and challenged by various actors, in the end, this new political landscape of modern national states has largely remained unchanged until today. However, the
continuing dismantlement of the Syrian state and the territorial assertions of the IS are knitted into regional conflicts such as the Kurdish issue, the sectarian struggle in Iraq, the future of the Lebanese state, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Taking into account this complex setting of conflicts, the political violence that has unfolded since the “Arab Spring” might put at stake the political borders of the post–World War I order.

Taking this turmoil in the Levant as its central point of reference, this book brings together a multidisciplinary group of scholars. The following chapters are written by international experts in the fields of Middle East area studies, history, International Relations, political science, and sociology. They provide fresh descriptions and analyses of the political predicament in the Levant that arose in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. This is done with the aim of presenting studies on the turmoil in the Levant from different disciplinary angles. We do not attempt to offer a theoretical frame through which all authors are expected to process their empirical data. Instead, we want to present a multiplicity of perspectives on current developments in the region. We asked the contributors to address the political turmoil in the Levant from their disciplinary angles, based on their own scholarly experiences. The volume is therefore deliberately characterized by a diversity of approaches and styles that give credit to the productive plurality of scholarly traditions as well as to each single author’s theoretical and methodological preferences. In this endeavor the authors present their specific answers to the overarching question of the ways in which we might discern indicators for a political transformation of the state system in the Levant including its social, economic, and ethnic foundations. With the nine chapters of this book, the editors intend to provide the reader with diverse answers to this general question. As the turmoil in the Levant is ongoing, it goes without saying that these answers are preliminary. They are meant to fuel the debate on the transformation of Middle East politics rather than to offer premature conclusions.

In chapter 1, Fred Lawson opens our discussion with an analysis based on a chronology of events of the Syrian civil war. Lawson’s chapter is first of all a primer for the reader, giving a detailed overview of the developments on the ground. Lawson gives a precise account of the enormously fragmented political landscape of this war as it developed throughout 2014. In so doing, he discerns four key features that characterized the Syrian war in its fourth year. First, he observes, similar to Peter Sluglett in chapter 2, a clear shift toward a fully sectarianized conflict. Second, he points to a remarkable increase in infighting
among those militias that initially had the mutually shared goal of combating the regime in Damascus. Third, Lawson observes the loss of control over large parts of Syrian territory by Damascus. Fourth, the regime nevertheless was able to maintain state control over some key districts with the help of loyal militias.

The second aim of the chapter is to analyze the reconfiguration of interstate relations in the Middle East, based on the previously mentioned key features of the war. In assessing the impact of the Syrian war on the relationship among regional states, Lawson puts the focus on Turkey’s regional realignments and the reconfiguration of the relationship between Iraq and Iran. In addition, he emphasizes the ascendance of a much more powerful role in regional politics of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq and of local Kurdish organizations in general. The chapter concludes with a description of the shift in the pattern of regional alignments as, according to Lawson, took place during the winter of 2013–14 and which are closely related to the “pronounced turn” of the Syrian war toward ethno-sectarian violence. Lawson’s analysis clearly shows the transformative power of the events in Syria on a regional level; however, it also indicates the rather ambiguous nature of these transformations, making predictions with respect to their outcomes a mere speculative endeavor.

The turn to ethno-sectarian violence described by Lawson, often accompanied by Sunni Jihadism, to a certain extent mirrors the violent expressions of sectarianism that more generally have become a frequent occurrence in the multi-sectarian parts of the Arab world. The background for this relatively new phenomenon is described and analyzed in chapter 2 by Peter Sluglett, with a particular focus on Syria. The idea of his contribution is to explain how uncoordinated protests and demonstrations developed into an armed conflict between the regime and the opposition and later became transformed into a sectarian civil war. The chapter takes a historical starting point, looking at the modern history of Syria, the creation of the army, and its history related to several military coups. Furthermore Sluglett analyses the development of the Baath party and the social and economic conditions under Hafiz al-Assad, who based his power on the Alawi sect in Syria.

Sluglett describes how in 1982 the regime crushed the militant uprising in Hama with extreme brutality, thereby contributing to laying the foundation for a “modern form of Salafism.” This Salafism, building on both Sunni extremism and anti-Shiism, gained impetus as a result of regional protests against the US-led invasion in Iraq in
2003. The leader of al-Qaida in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, and others attempted to trigger a civil war between Sunnis and Shiites, an ambition that was continued by followers in Iraq and Syria. The chapter emphasizes that the conflict in Syria is not simply a result of Sunni-Shia contradictions. When the protests began in early 2011, power was monopolized by a heterodox minority, and the extremely repressive response to the demonstrations by the regime went out of control. In this development the religious dimension gradually began to play an increasing role, not least because of anticipations of revenge after a possible end of the fighting. It is one of Sluglett’s interesting points to underline that the internal struggle in Syria is to some degree a result of contradictions beyond Syria’s borders. The chapter concludes with the idea that even though the complex regional development, including the rise of the IS, might not lead to a transformation of the state system in the Levant, the turmoil in the region will continue into the foreseeable future.

Basing his analysis on the complexities of the Syrian war economy with its multiplicity of competing actors, Samer Abboud comes to a similar conclusion in chapter 3. In applying the lenses of political economy, Abboud is predominantly interested in the very fluid emergence of new political authorities in the course of the war in Syria. For the year 2014, he observed the evolution of four distinct areas that represented centers of military and administrative power. First, there are those territories that have remained under control of the Assad regime. Then, there is the squat of land under the control of the IS, which combines territories within both the Syrian and the Iraqi states. The third area is the Kurdish enclaves in the northern parts of Syria, close to the borders to Turkey and Iraq. Finally, there are various smaller pieces of territory in the south and northwest of Syria that are under control of different rebel factions.

Abboud describes and analyzes the emergence of forms of micro-governance and decentralized authority in these four areas. He argues that, together with different economic interests, this fragmentation of political authority—so far—has prevented the establishment of more stable, alternative forms of state institutions that could replace the institutions of the Syrian Baath regime. In economic terms, it is in particular the often predatory nature of the economics of these new forms of political authority that rules out their coalescence into more lasting state institutions. Instead of benefiting from effective forms of governance, some of these predatory networks have a major interest in the continuation of conflict and war. They are the principle benefactors of the political and economic fragmentation of Syria. According
to Abboud’s analysis, therefore, the future role of these predatory actors, the question of their inclusion in or exclusion from attempts to settle the conflict over Syria and to reconstruct more lasting forms of authority, will be decisive in conditioning the future political transformations of the region.

In chapter 4, Simone Hüser deals with one of the most important repercussions of the turmoil in Syria: the massive refugee crisis it has created in several countries of the region. Hüser picks Jordan as a case study of high relevance: 600,000 of the nearly four million Syrian refugees ended up in Jordan, which makes the Hashemite Kingdom, after Lebanon, the second biggest recipient of Syrian refugees in relation to the indigenous population. Thus, as a result of the influx of Syrian refugees, the Jordanian population has grown nearly 10 percent. Hüser describes in her painstaking empirical study the effects that the influx of refugees had on the socioeconomic system of Jordan. At the same time, she emphasizes that it would be misleading to perceive the refugee influx to Jordan wholesale as a burden that has caused a socioeconomic crisis. As Hüser points out, most of the crisis symptoms are the result of the homemade structural deficits of policies pursued in the period prior to the refugee influx. Moreover, the regime has also managed to exploit the “refugee crisis” to gain legitimacy, both in terms of material resources (in the form of acquiring political rents) and “soft” strategies (for instance in the form of scapegoating policies).

Hüser comes to the conclusion that the “refugee crisis” in Jordan for the time being has not contributed to a potential transformation of the state system in the Levant. Rather, the Hashemite regime has managed to use the influx of refugees to stabilize its rule. Demonstrations related to the Arab Uprisings have indeed significantly decreased with the influx of Syrian refugees. There are potential destabilizing factors, for instance Syrian refugees could serve as a pool for Jihadist groups. Yet, these destabilizing factors have not materialized as such and at the end of the year 2014 there were no strong indicators that they would do so in the foreseeable future.

In chapter 5, taking its point of departure in international and regional sanctions imposed against Syria, Peter Seeberg discusses to what degree and in which ways the sanctions have impacted on the development in Syria and on the regional power balance. Furthermore, the chapter views the sanctions as part of changes in the political order in the Levant that seem to imply a gradual transformation of the state system in the region. Following a presentation of theoretical aspects related to the use of sanctions in international politics, the
chapter describes and analyzes the main foreign policy interests of the international and regional actors that have imposed sanctions on Syria.

The American sanctions have a relatively long history and, based on claims by the United States that Syria supports terror groups, go back to the late 1970s. In contrast to the US sanctions, the European Union (EU) sanctions are a result of a change in the European approach to Syria, which followed the Syrian clampdown on the protesters and demonstrators in the early spring of 2011. The international sanctions consisted of restrictive measures against individuals from or close to the regime, but also on broad economic sanctions and an oil embargo. This was also the case with the Arab League sanctions, which additionally involved an expulsion of Syria from the organization, while the Turkish sanctions contributed to the regional isolation of Syria. Peter Seeberg claims in his chapter that these sanctions as such did not reach their goal, because the sanctioning actors did not constitute a strong and coherent coalition, and they did not coordinate their actions. They were not able to obtain support from a unanimous UN Security Council, due—first of all—to Russian and Chinese opposition. Thus, important conditions that might have made the sanctions work were not present in the given political context. However, the sanctions implied a restructuring of power relations in the Arab Middle East and became a part of a changing political reality in the region, where the traditional significant political centers Bagdad, Cairo, and Damascus have lost power in comparison to the Gulf States. In sum, the chapter claims that the sanctions might not have had much direct impact on the Syrian regime, but they contributed to structural changes in the political order in the Levant, implying a potential transformation of the state system in the region.

Political transformations often find their written expression in constitutional texts. In chapter 6, Mervat F. Hatem therefore looks at the traces that the “dignity revolutions” of the Arab Spring have left in the new constitutions of Syria, Egypt, and Tunisia. Hatem begins with a brief assessment of the regional political economy behind the recent Arab Uprisings that started in December 2010 in Tunisia. In her assessment, she puts her focus on youth and its exclusion from employment and the concomitant delay in the age of marriage. Hatem argues that the political economy of the Arab Spring was characterized by the blindness of regional states to the challenges that their youthful populations have posed. The call for dignity, according to Hatem, was a call to correct economic exclusion, gender-based discrimination,
social inequalities, and the experience of bodily harm, humiliation, and torture by the authoritarian regimes. Applying a comparative approach, Hatem analyzes the ways in which these demands for dignity have been addressed by the newly drafted constitutions.

In the three constitutions, Hatem discerns both continuities and change. Change in the 2012 constitution in Syria, for instance, is visible in the removal of the article that guaranteed the Baath party a monopoly of political power in the previous constitution. However, this did not really challenge the power of the regime that essentially converges in the presidency. Moreover, the preamble of the constitution still maintains the dated language of the classical Arab nationalism of the 1950s and 1960s. In a similar way, both new Egyptian constitutions from 2012 and 2014 were drafted with strong references to the 1972 constitution, eventually allowing the military to reclaim its predominance in a newly built authoritarian state. The preambles of both the 2012 constitution drafted under Muslim Brotherhood rule and the 2014 constitution under the newly established military regime refer to concepts of the “dignity revolution” such as liberty, public sovereignty, democratic governance, equality, and the rule of law. Yet, as in the Syrian constitution, the Egyptian constitutions undermined these bills of rights in simultaneously stipulating the higher interest of the community and the state vis-à-vis individuals. In contradistinction to Syria and Egypt, Tunisia saw a different process of the drafting of its new constitution. Here the document reflects the societal consensus that was behind the new drafting of the constitution with its minimum level of political consent and compromise. This difference is particularly emphasized by the stipulation that the family is the basic social institution without making any reference to religion. In sharp contrast to this, the Syrian and Egyptian constitutions stipulate religion to be a constitutive element for defining the family as a constitutional social institution.

In chapter 7, Lorenzo Kamel presents a historical analysis of the conflict over Palestine in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He links the examination of top-down processes with often neglected bottom-up processes, thereby emphasizing the role of “Biblical Orientalism.” According to Kamel, Biblical Orientalism shaped both processes and sidelined the role of the majority of men and women who lived in the area constructed as “Holy Land.” For a long time Palestinians contributed to Biblical Orientalism insofar as they made no major effort to bring the history of Palestinians back in. Only in the past decade, as a response to a perception of threat to their identity, have Palestinians discovered archives as a tool to embrace their
own history. Kamel then shows how the politicization of the various archival (and pseudo-archival) initiatives connects to what he critically labels the “empty” debate on the one- or two-state solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In terms of the overarching question of the present volume, Lorenzo Kamel comes up with two enriching theses. First, we are possibly witnessing a “groundbreaking moment,” comparable to the one when, in the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, “European modernity” caused basic changes in the regional system. This time, however, change could not only mean a reconfiguration of the Levantine state system, but also possibly lead to a “partial deconstruction” of nationalism in the region. This said, Kamel suggests in his second thesis that the impact of the alleged structural change in the Levant on Palestine will only be limited due to the special characteristics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There are actually particularities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that set apart Israel and the territories occupied by Israel from other areas of the Levant. However, specific events after World War II established linkages between the areas: wars. The first Arab-Israeli war of 1948–49 created significant Palestinian refugee communities in the Levant, particularly in Lebanon and Jordan. Although the Palestinian issue currently does not play a major role in the regional debate on the Levant in turmoil, it is hard to imagine that the region could undergo deep structural change without sooner or later raising the issue. Moreover, it is remarkable—and supports Kamel’s thesis—that apart from some skirmishes with Syria, Israel refrained from getting militarily involved in the regional crisis. There are no strong indicators that a policy change is ahead, particularly since Israel avoided any attempts to regionalize the Gaza War in 2014. However, if Israel still became engaged in a regional war, a linkage between the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the alleged transition of the state system in the Levant could occur: If in such a hypothetical war, as happened in previous wars, Palestinians were expelled from areas claimed by Israel as strategic, their political leadership could use the momentum to annex further parts of Palestine.

Based on an analytical framework that models the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a three-level game, Martin Beck discusses in chapter 8 three cases of Western responses to Palestinian ambitions of acquiring Palestinian statehood, thereby focusing on the United States and the “big three” actors of the EU: France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. His first case covers the period around 1980, when the Europeans attempted to return to the Middle East with a
new declaratory policy that, when compared to the US approach of these days, attributed a more significant role to the Palestinians. Beck then critically discusses the contemporary cases of Western responses to the “Palestine 194” initiative and the round of bilateral negotiations, the so-called Kerry initiative. His analysis confirms the high relevance of the international image as a third level beyond the intergovernmental and the societal dimension of the conflict. In particular, Beck shows that both concepts of Rationalist consequentialism and Social Constructivist appropriateness contribute to a better comprehension of Western policies toward Palestine.

Martin Beck argues that the conflict over Palestine has the potential to contribute to a fundamental transformation of the state system in the Levant. Yet, the trends in Palestinian politics and reactions to them in the West do not point in this direction. The initiative “Palestine 194” has been a failure in terms of full recognition of Palestine as a member state of the United Nations. Although the Palestinian Authority managed to become upgraded in the United Nations (the so-called Vatican status), got full membership in both the UNESCO and the International Criminal Court, and was fully recognized as a state by EU member Sweden, the impact in terms of an actual—rather than virtual or symbolic—alteration of the state system in the Levant is rather limited. The Kerry initiative to hold another round of bilateral negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians appeared from the very beginning not much more than an attempt to pretend negotiated peace rather than a process with the potential to establish a “real” Palestinian state, which indeed would contribute to a more substantial transformation of the Levantine state system. Moreover, none of the relevant actors—Israel, the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, and Hamas in the Gaza Strip—have made attempts to get involved in the regional turmoil taking place on the territories of Syria and Iraq. Thus, the findings of Beck confirm Kamel’s diagnosis that the Israeli-Palestinian complex follows its own logic and is only partly connected to other political arenas of the Levant.

The volume ends with the concluding chapter 9 by Dietrich Jung. Taking his point of departure in the discussion about the nature of the IS, Jung puts the focus on three interrelated issues: the political economy of the Syrian war, the increasing sectarianization of the conflict, and the embeddedness of the current situation in regional and international politics. In the first section of the chapter, Jung elaborates an analytical framework that is based on some elements of the school of historical sociology. This theoretical section makes
particular references to the work of Charles Tilly, Max Weber, and Sinisa Malesevic. Based on this analytical frame of reference, the chapter continues with a discussion of the previously mentioned three issues. In this discussion, Jung engages in a conversation with the other contributors to this book. He presents his own argumentation in close relationship with the assumptions, arguments, and findings of the previous chapters.

In applying Charles Tilly’s analogy of war making and state making as organized crime, Jung analyzes the war in Syria from the vantage point of a number of nascent state-building processes. In these processes, the sectarianization of the conflict serves the aim of emerging proto-states in two ways. On the one hand, it is an attempt to enhance the legitimacy of these new emerging political authorities with regard to the population under their rule. On the other hand, it is an ideological means to get support from regional states that utilize sectarian ideologies in their striving for political hegemony in the Levant. Putting the Syrian war and the fragmented forms of political authority this war has generated into the context of regional and international interstate relations, the chapter argues that we most probably will not see the emergence of new states. Political change might occur instead in the way in which existing states deal with the ongoing social and geopolitical transformation of the region. With regard to Syria, we eventually might expect institutional changes in a postwar order toward more decentralized forms of rule comprising elements of federalism and autonomy schemes.

**Note**

1. The contributions to this volume contain names, locations, and technical terms that have their linguistic origin in Arabic, Kurdish, Persian, and Turkish languages. Various forms of transliteration have been applied to them. For the editors it was not always possible to retrieve the original terms and therefore enormously difficult and time-consuming to standardize the transliterations. Consequently, we approached this problem in a pragmatic way. In terms of names and locations, we use the most common spellings in English, do not write them in italics, and avoid the transliteration of the Arabic letters ُ (hamza) and ً (ain). Technical terms are set in italics and follow the IJMES word list, however, again avoiding the transliteration of the Arabic letters ُ (hamza) and ً (ain). These rules apply to the main text of all chapters. Only the transliterations and names in brackets that were given by the authors of the respective chapters have been left as they were. Finally, the authors use different abbreviations and names for the
“Islamic State” (IS, ISIS, ISIL) given the fact that this group has changed its name several times. We decided not to standardize these abbreviations and have left them as the authors used them. Any further errors and mistakes are the fault of the editors.
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