

CHAPTER

7

REGIONAL ARAB ISSUES



Notwithstanding the tremendous benefits to humanity from Israel's scientific, medical and technological contributions, some argue that Israel shouldn't exist at all, and that if it ceased to exist, all hostility in the region would come to an end. This, in their view, would bring stability to the region, and redound to the world's benefit. But the reality is, even without Israel, an all-Arab Middle East, bordered by Iran, would be a mess.

The mess is not confined to Iraq. It pre-dates the awkward and self-serving way in which the British and French broke up the Ottoman Empire, although the British and French did add a new layer to the region's problems.¹

When the French and British left, the borders they drew remained. Arab regimes that govern these states have been seeking to redraw the map of the region ever since.

Syria has laid claim to Greater Syria, which in its view, includes Israel, Lebanon, Jordan and Hatay, a province

of Turkey. In 1970, Syria was ready to invade Jordan under the pretext of protecting Palestinians who had tried to overthrow Jordan's King. (Ironically, the Israeli army deterred this action.) Syria first entered Lebanon in 1976. It still disputes its border with Turkey, but is too weak at the moment to challenge Turkey.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Gamal Abdul-Nasser, then President of Egypt, became a champion of pan-Arabism and in 1962 interjected Egypt in a civil war in Yemen. Egypt also fought sporadically with Libya throughout the late 1970s.

Iraq, under Saddam Hussein, attacked Iran in 1980, and Kuwait in 1990.

The Jordanian Hashemite Kingdom is a traditional enemy of Saudi Arabia, having been usurped as the guardians of Mecca and Medina.²

There are also deeply held religious rivalries in the Arab and Muslim worlds. Lebanon has seen a long history of civil-sectarian war. It is not a sovereign state in the sense that a Lebanese government has sole military or police control within its borders. With multiple factions, Lebanon is a powder keg left over from the ill-conceived map drawn by the French at the end of World War I. It continues to be propped up by an international desire to keep the status quo roll call of current nation-states.

Within Iraq, Saddam attacked both Iraqi Shiites and Kurds. Within Syria, in 1982, Hafiz al-Assad, the then ruling dictator, and father of the current ruling dictator, massacred 20,000 of his own citizens in the town of Hama. In Egypt, Christians suffered at the hands of Muslims. In Saudi Arabia, the fundamentalist Muwahhidun—what we in the West call Wahhabism—forces its lifestyle on those it considers to be less devout.³ The Sunni Ottomans annexed territory in present-day Iraq from the Safawis in 1534. For nearly 500 years, Shiite Iran—the modern legacy holder of the Safawi