

Opinion

Editorial

Dealing with Arab diaspora communities

The story of migration from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is not new but the push for a diaspora strategy has never been as urgent as it is today.

The World Bank has put out a paper titled “Mobilising the Middle East and North Africa Diaspora for Economic Integration and Entrepreneurship,” which recommends that the region pay more attention to its 20 million or so people who live abroad.

This makes sense. The diaspora from the Middle East and North Africa repatriated no less than \$53 billion in 2014. Nearly 2 million Palestinians abroad provide about 17% of the West Bank and Gaza’s gross domestic product (GDP). For Lebanon and Jordan, overseas remittances accounted for more than 10% of GDP, which exceeds each country’s budget allocation for education, health and defence combined.

The paper points out that the benefits of a diaspora strategy would go beyond remittances. A diaspora can help with knowledge transfer, entrepreneurship, investment and bilateral trade between the country of origin and that in which it resides.

“If only 1% of the MENA diaspora were mobilised, that would mean tapping into the expertise and network of 200,000 professionals, which is significant,” notes the World Bank.

Such professionals can – among other things – contribute to transfer of know-how and encourage tourism and investment in their countries of origin. They can also help in times of crises. The World Bank highlights the case of the Syrian International Business Association, officially launched in February in Germany. It is expected to assist the process of rebuilding the shattered lives of Syrians abroad.

But it is worth noting the caveats that go with creating a successful diaspora strategy. A diaspora needs to be socially, economically and politically integrated in its adopted country, rather than seen as the marginalised outsider, or worse, be perceived as a fifth column.

A diaspora – first-, second-, third-generation and beyond – loses clout in its host country if it is eternally viewed as a minority group of culturally different people. East Asian communities in the West are a good example of an economically integrated diaspora and they have contributed a great deal to the pace of industrialisation and technological progress of their countries of origin.

The case for diaspora engagement, therefore, has to be made in a way that allows people of MENA ancestry to be solidly and proudly part of the world in which they live.

Anything else would encourage marginalisation and all the resulting problems of radicalisation, ghettoisation and youth delinquency.

Cultural or religious differences should not be used by Western politicians or by ideologically driven elements within the diaspora themselves to drive a wedge between their communities and adoptive societies. The status of diasporas should instead be that of full-fledged citizens with full rights and responsibilities towards their adopted countries. They cannot be eternal immigrants.

This is all the more crucial in a time in which terrorist incidents are liable to exploitation by populist demagogues.

Except for those forcibly displaced, diaspora communities need to be allowed to grow as equal members of their new environments.

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Redrawing borders will not solve the region’s problems



Mark Habeeb

The borders of many countries in the Middle East are based on boundaries concocted by colonial powers in the 18th and 19th centuries. Most famous of these are the lines determined by the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, an Anglo-French accord that created modern-day Iraq and Syria – two nations struggling to stay unified in the face of sectarian conflict.

Many African countries have experienced ethnic and sectarian turmoil as the result of colonial craftsmanship. So, one would think that the Western powers have learned their lesson.

Apparently, the temptation to fix other countries’ problems by re-drawing their national borders remains strong. London’s Guardian reported that Sebastian Gorka, a senior White House counterterrorism adviser, proposed partitioning Libya into three parts based on the old Ottoman provinces. Gorka reportedly drew the “new Libya” on a napkin while lunching with an EU official in January.

The Guardian reported that Gorka is seeking to be named the Trump administration’s special envoy to Libya, a position that has been vacant since the president took office in January.

Geoff Porter, president of North Africa Risk Consulting and a long-time observer of the region, wrote in Politico that the answer to Libya’s crisis is not partition but rather the creation of a unified nation in which everyone benefits equally from the country’s resources. “Admittedly,” Porter wrote, “a plan for doing this doesn’t fit on a napkin but neither would any plans for dealing with the mess created by divvying up Libya into borders from a bygone era.”

And then there is Thomas Friedman, the widely respected foreign affairs columnist for the New York Times, who wrote that the “least bad solution” to Syria’s civil war is “a partition of Syria and the creation of a primarily Sunni protected area” that would be defended by international forces, including US troops.

Harvard University’s Stephen Walt said about Friedman’s proposal: “Let’s not mince words. What Friedman is really proposing is a foreign invasion of Syria.”

Significantly, neither Friedman nor Gorka reference the desires of the Syrian or Libyan people. It is as if they were unaware that redrawing lines on a map has real implications for real people on the ground. There is no doubt that ethnic and sectarian conflicts are driving much of the region’s violence and turmoil but after many decades living as unified nations, the people of countries such as Syria and Libya cannot easily be regrouped into new political entities without massive population transfers and fierce struggles over natural resources.

In 2006, in the midst of the Iraqi civil war triggered by the 2003 US invasion, then-US Senator Joe Biden proposed dividing the country into Shia, Sunni and Kurdish enclaves with a greatly weakened central government in Baghdad. In his subsequent eight years as US vice-president, Biden never pushed strongly for partition and backed a unified Iraqi state.

The idea, however, has not gone away: As recently as 2014, Michael O’Hanlon of Washington’s Brookings Institution advocated for a “federal” Iraq with a devolution of power to Sunni, Shia and Kurdish regions.

The yearning for simple solutions is understandable – if we can end the bloodshed by redrawing a few lines on a map, why not do it? However, for complex and multilayered problems, simple solutions simply do not exist. Especially simple solutions imposed by outsiders.

It is widely agreed that foreign powers erred in drawing regional borders in the early 20th century and in violating Iraq’s sovereignty in 2003. What makes anyone believe foreigners have the answers today?

Mark Habeeb is East-West editor of The Arab Weekly and adjunct professor of Global Politics and Security at Georgetown University in Washington.

Sebastian Gorka, a senior White House adviser, reportedly drew a map of the “new Libya” on a napkin, recently.