

Partitions

This 9 November marked the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, with the eventual collapse of the Iron Curtain – as impermeable as it was formidable – that once cleaved Europe. Indeed, the Cold War ended exactly where it had begun four decades earlier: in Berlin, with the blockade of 1948 aimed at separating the communist Democratic Republic of Germany from its capitalist counterpart in the West.

While the argument for partitions is not new, the terms have changed considerably over time. Before World War I, most partitions were erected for the needs of empire in order to strengthen rule or simplify administration. For example, in the seventh and eighth centuries, a united Islamic empire, the *Umma*, was ruled from Damascus until the new dynastic capital was established in Baghdad, when the *wilayat* or provinces of Islam went their separate ways. Similarly, in the fourth century, Constantine the Great realized that the Roman Empire could not be ruled centrally because of both its extent and the fact that barbarians were besieging it in Western Europe – so he divided it into two halves, one in the west, with its capital in Rome, and one in the east, ruled from Constantinople.

After World War II, however, as colonial empires were increasingly challenged, partitions became more sordid affairs. They arose not as a means of realizing national self-determination, but rather imposed as a way for outside powers to unburden themselves of colonies or divide up spheres of influence – a strategy that historians have since dubbed “divide and quit”.

In the twentieth century alone, many such – practically prototypical – examples of forced fragmentations exist, including Palestine, Ireland, Cyprus and India.

The partition of British India was carried out in 1947 by the viceroyalty in India, which was then headed by Lord Mountbatten, with maps in a closed room. The stated cause for the partition of India was that Muslims wanted a country that was separate from the mostly Hindu rest of India. The application of partition resulted in mass migrations from India to Pakistan and vice versa. There were reciprocal massacres, mainly in the province of Punjab, and the eventual death toll reached as high as half a million.

Significantly, the British rejected the partition option in Palestine in the same year that they espoused it in India. The two reasons they gave were unfeasibility and the risk of a military conflict that would require an expanded British presence. But the partition of Palestine went ahead in 1948 under the aegis of the UN Security Council and as a result of Jewish insistence on the creation of the state of Israel. It too was made on a map behind closed doors in an attempt to create separate areas for Jews and Arabs.

The key question, of course, is how successful these partitions have been at reducing conflict and permitting outside powers to end their involvement. In the case of Northern Ireland, the British are still enmeshed in a prolonged stalemate, even if the communal conflict has largely shifted to the political arena. Similarly, while there have been few casualties since the Cypriot conflict of 1974, the division of Cyprus is little more than a never-ending standoff that remains volatile and

continues to require the presence of UN troops. Moreover, the costs of containment include permanent vigilance by NATO as well, which played a key role in averting a war in 1996 between Greece and Turkey – both NATO members – following violent demonstrations by Greek Cypriots.

Even in India, arguably the most successful ethnic partition in recent history if the many victims during the bloody divorce are airbrushed out, the business of partition remains unfinished: many in Pakistan are still resentful of Bangladesh's separation in 1971; and India and Pakistan have been embroiled in a conflict over Kashmir that has twice flared into war since 1947.

Indeed, the root of the problem lies in the ethnic two-nation theory. In other words, there is a fundamental error in the premise that Hindus and Muslims, Catholics and Protestants, Greeks and Turks, or Jews and Arabs are simply too irreconcilable to live together.

This is pure, unadulterated nonsense. For instance, Beirut's Green Line that once buffered the most bitter of political and sectarian rivals has all but vanished; and barely 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, almost nothing remains of the equally intractable divisions between communist and capitalist Germans.

National entities based on political systems, ethnicities or religions are doomed to fail; they can last only so long in the modern, globalized and multiethnic age. Without doubt, future historians will be able to pinpoint the exact moment in our development when common economic space finally eroded all partition lines by making them irrelevant.

Cartography Cut to Fit

No ship in a bottle or vial full of some arcane substance can match the feat of compression or evocative power of a map. Maps are essential to human survival; they reflect the growth of scientific and mathematical thought and our grasp of the world around us. They record the ebb and flow of nations and show the lay of continents and oceans, of deserts and cities.

The geography of the world is precise and cartographers don't lie; they just take a position. Mapmaking has always been a blend of science and art, reflecting as much the aspirations of those who commissioned them as the actual political boundaries. Saddam Hussein, for instance, was fond of a particular globe – tailor-made for him by European cartographers – that had all the Arab countries coloured bright orange and the rest of the world a jaded yellow. In a sense, he was emulating a more ancient former ruler of Baghdad, the eighth-century Caliph al-Ma'amun, who sent emissaries from his court to find the largest map of the known world.

Maps have existed for millennia, ever since humans began to track – on animal skins or carved on clay tablets or wood – where the hunting was good or which pass was safe to cross. Modern cartography has its roots in the early 15th century, when advances made by such prominent Arab geographers as al-Idrisi were transmitted to Europe (inspired by the maps and writings of

Ptolemy and Marinus of Tyre, al-Idrisi was a major authority used by Columbus in determining the circumference of the globe).

Ever since the Middle Ages, when Jerusalem was placed in the middle of a flat Earth, maps have been as arbitrary as they have been in a state of flux. For example, two decades ago, the maps of the world displayed swathes of red to mark out the Soviet Union and its satellite states, a disintegrated Germany and united Yugoslavia. These days, Turkish maps show Cyprus split in two autonomous halves – a division that is expunged from official Greek Cypriot atlases.

But the complex mirroring that maps achieve is nowhere more evident than in the Arab region. On one globe, the gulf between Saudi Arabia and Iran is the Arabian Gulf, while on another globe it's the Persian Gulf. This is because maps are inextricably caught up in conflicts, and the Middle East has had more than its fair share of wars.

Take, for instance, the fact that Israel is still nonexistent in most atlases of the Arab world. More often, foreign atlases that are imported into the region will have the indelible mark of the censor, while local publications plump for the safer strategy of reproducing historic Palestine before the Catastrophe – as the creation of Israel is dubbed among Arabs – from a 1940s original, complete with Arabic names of towns, villages and hamlets that have either morphed into Hebrew counterparts or no longer exist.

Of course, this is partly political expediency. But equally, by choosing not to represent a faithful portrait of reality, these maps are reflecting a deeper grievance: a constant reminder of the land that once was and the loss of a collective inheritance. It is hardly a coincidence that there are as many maps of historic Palestine as there are Palestinian households in the refugee camps across the region.

And in Israel itself, the Green Line has only recently been reinserted into official maps and school textbooks four decades after it was removed from them, following the occupation of the West Bank in the Six-Day War of 1967. Arabs will always be sceptical when it comes to maps, including “road maps” to peace that are instigated by the international community. After all, it was the British who fashioned Iraq out of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul – three vilayets, or provinces of the Ottoman Empire – with cartographers in tow to record the fait accompli. In the same way, the British engineered the creation of Kuwait when a wealth of oil was discovered beneath the sands at the tip of the province of Basra.

And much of the current border disputes between Lebanon and both its neighbours, Syria and Israel, stem from equally zealous French mapmakers.

The computer age may have revolutionized cartography, but none of the subjectivity has gone. If anything, technology has made it possible for everyone to stake their claim to land – albeit virtually – thanks to such programs as Google Earth. The difference between maps and other data-conveying graphics is that maps exist to represent spatial relationships: direction, sequence and distance. And space is hard to describe in words. When we unfold an old map, we can feel that we are digging deep into the intricacies of time and knowledge. And that, ultimately, is why maps leave us awestruck.
