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# Why outside 'boots' cannot resolve the rift in Iraq, Syria

The article by Mzee John Nagenda in the *New Vision* of May 23 about the horror of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) had many good points which I agreed with him except one.

This was the view that may be Obama should put American boots on the ground to stop ISIL.

While I totally agree that ISIL and its brutality must be stopped, I feel that foreign forces can never resolve internal problems of an invaded nation. They always alter the balance of power in the victim country, which often leads to years of instability. The 1978/9 Ugandan experiences should bring that point home. American boots cannot resolve the current crisis in Iraq and the whole of Middle East. What we are seeing in Iraq, Syria and Libya is a civil war questioning the Arab state as structured after the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire.

This civil war is exploiting primordial loyalties of religion and tribe to overthrow the structures of the post-Ottoman state in the Middle East, a state that has failed to develop democratic institutions, is dependent on petrol rent and is seen as an agent of foreign interests. While violence can deliver a decisive blow to resistant groups and is, therefore, an arbiter of political conflict, it can never be a successful instrument of political legitimacy and, therefore, control. Resolution of underlying problems in the Arab states is the cure of the volatility of the Middle East. Further, the people of the area might need to fight their civil wars and go through the fire of national regeneration if they are to build viable democratic institutions.

## The crisis of the Arab Middle East state arises out of the following factors:

First, the current Arab Middle East state is a relatively new structure – newer than African states. Created out of the ashes of the Ottoman Empire when the allied powers (mainly France and the UK) defeated the Ottoman Empire in the First World War, the new state was superimposed over simmering old cleavages of Sunni and Shia Islam within Muslim societies, some of which had long established Christian and Jewish minorities.

By bringing American "boots" to Iraq without thorough planning, George W. Bush sowed the seeds of a civil war that is manifested in mainly Sunni ISIL versus the Shia-led administration in Iraq. However, this is not to say that Iraq would have been peaceful if the US invasion had not taken place. The Iraq state is fragile and open violence could have come from elsewhere. But the invasion exacerbated the state's fragility as it changed the balance of power on the religious level amongst Sunni and Shia Muslims, Christian and Jewish minorities and on the political front amongst Arabs, Kurds, Yezids and Iranian minorities in the East of the country. The Shias who benefitted from the invasion have failed to build inclusive political structures, which ISIL is exploiting.

Secondly, the Arabs blame the West for giving away Arab lands in Palestine. Many Arabs view the ruling regimes of these states as supporters of the West, who they accuse of betrayal. The Arabs rose up against the Ottomans thinking that the British would permit them to create a big Arab state – virtually a return to the caliphate state.

The McMahon – Hussein correspondences (July 14, 1915 to January 1916) between Hussayn bin Ali, Sharif of Mecca and Sir Henry McMahon, the British Commissioner in Egypt, envisaged the creation of such a state. The Arabs met their part of the deal and rebelled against the Ottomans and a British agent "Lawrence of Arabia" duly strengthened the rebellion by fully participating in it. However, two major actions on the part of the western allies dampened the hopes of the Arabs. First, the secret Sykes – Picot Agreement



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negotiated by a French diplomat, Francois Georges - Picot and Sir Mark Sykes, also known as the Asia Minor Agreement, between the UK and France, also assented to by Russia in 1916, planned the partition of the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire amongst these European powers. When the Bolsheviks took power in Russia, they published the agreements!

Secondly, a letter from the UK's Foreign Secretary, Arthur J. Balfour, to Water Rothschilds, 2nd Baron Rothschilds, leader of the British Jewish community, for transmission to the Zionist Federation was leaked and published on November 9, 1917 known as the Balfour Declaration, revealed British intentions in the area. His majesty's government promised to support the immigration to Palestine of Jewish peoples and the establishment of a Jewish state, "it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country".

When Palestine was put in the British mandate, Jewish immigration to Palestine accelerated culminating in the establishment of Israel. Israel has a right to exist but Arab peoples wherever they are, feel the West is the cause of the loss of Arab land. The Arab/Israel conflict has now become a major unresolved problem on the Arab mind. Any fighting group in the Middle East puts in on its agenda – much as achieving a solution is increasingly becoming impossible.

The current Arab state, to some extent, is seen by a number of Arabs as being unable to resolve this problem. Radical groups tend to think that the solution is to destroy the current Arab state. Elsewhere, the fall of the Ottoman Empire was followed by partitions and creation of new states.

The partitioning of the "sick man of Europe" or the Ottoman Empire into several states of what are now the Arab states and Turkey, followed the collapse of the Ottoman armies with the occupation of Constantinople by British and French forces in 1918. France took Syria and Lebanon, the UK Palestine and Transjordan (later divided into Jordan and Palestine). The Ottoman territories on the Arabian Peninsula became the Kingdom of Hejaz but were later annexed by the Sultanate of Nejed (now Saudi Arabia) and the Mutawakkilite

Kingdom of Yemen was left semi-autonomous.

Ottoman possession on the western shores of the Persian Gulf became part of Saudi Arabia while others like Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar became British protectorates. The French and British divided Great Syria (current Syria and Iraq) between them with the British taking Iraq. The state of Iraq as we know it today is less than 100 years old.

Thirdly, the current Arab state has failed to resolve the age-old division between Shia and Sunni Muslims. This division dates to the seventh century after the killing of Ali, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad. In Shia-led countries like Iran and now Iraq, Sunnis are not full participants in the state. In Sunni-led countries like Bahrain, the Shia say they are discriminated against. The war in Yemen is led by Shia Houthis who complain that Sunni leaders have sidelined them for a long time.

The Middle East state has survived for so long under autocracy because of the influx of massive amounts of petrol dollars. The money has been used to buy off or suppress opponents. The unequal distribution of resources in these states, which are so entirely dependent on petrol, "rent" dollars as to make those states be defined as petrol states, has fuelled such resentment. This bitterness explains part of the brutality of "terrorists" groups as well the autocracy of the region's governments.

This is a syndrome of the "oil curse". Countries which get massive influx of money without prior establishment of political and social institutions to manage the cash bonanza normally go through the political problems.

Due to its thirst for oil, the West has supported and maintained autocratic regimes in the Middle East for a long time. As long as autocrats kept the pipes open, the West turned a blind eye to their autocracy. Yet the West is afraid of democratising the Arab state because years of autocracy have undermined political development, political education and genuine opposition.

Unfortunately, the only social force that can organise political action or stand up to authority is religion – Islam. Religion is thus politicised. Mainstream Islam is usually part of the establishment and so it is the extreme and fundamental groups that can easily organise to stand up to autocracy. Any voting in any Arab state is likely to deliver an extreme Islamist party.

This happened in Egypt. This eventuality is not usually welcome in the West. Failing to get into power democratically, extremist groups take up arms and are termed, and a number of them become, "terrorists". The West is thus quiet on the undemocratic excesses of Middle Eastern regimes that freely pump oil to the West. In the end, however, democratising the Arab state is the best, if not the only option to reduce the volatility of the Middle East. If democratised, the Arabs will demand moderation and appeals to primordial loyalties will decrease as the middle-class social group grows. This has happened in some states, including Tunisia and Iran. The policy of intervention has failed before and will fail again.

The policy also causes a lot of pain to the invading countries as body bags begin to come back home to the mothers and fathers of invading countries. Few American parents want to bury their children for a cause that has changed with the changing dynamics of global energy supplies and creation. The Iraqis must be enabled to resolve their differences and some of them will pay in blood as the Baganda put it "*Ensi egulwa mirambo*" i.e. countries are secured by body counts. Obama is correct. Iraqis must resolve their problems. Just enable them to do so. The emerging middle class will defeat extremism.

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## YOUR VIEW

*What do you think of these issues in the week?*



### BIOSAFETY BILL DEBATE

**Dennis Katungi, publicist**  
As debate rages on about the proposed Biotechnology Safety Bill, it is important accurate information gets into the public domain. Much of what is circulating is misinformation. People need to know the truth; both positive and negative so that they can objectively make up their minds whether to support or oppose the proposed Bill. This can be done.  
See story on [www.newvision.co.ug](http://www.newvision.co.ug)



### BUDGET AND DEBTS

**Julius Kapwepwe Mishambi, director of programmes at Uganda Debt Network**  
The sh25 trillion Uganda budget for 2015/16 has been considered when globally, the financial crisis remains apparent. So, while there is talk that Uganda's debt sustainability indicators are okay, we ought to recall that the country has grappled with the debt situation since pre-independence from the colonial Britain on October 9, 1962.  
Full story on [www.newvision.co.ug](http://www.newvision.co.ug)



### SEPP BLATTER WINS FIFA

**Simon J. Mone, civil engineer**  
On Friday Sepp Blatter was voted to head Federation of International Football Association (FIFA) for a fifth term. Even at 79, Mr. Blatter looks good. However, his election comes against a backdrop of serious allegations labelled against some FIFA officials. Let the truth unravel. So that the honesty of football's top men is tested to the limit.  
Story on [www.newvision.co.ug](http://www.newvision.co.ug)



### FALL OF RAMADI

**Gwynne Dyer, journalist**  
The fall of Ramadi to Islamic State troops recently was not a big deal. The city was deep inside IS-held territory, IS fighters had controlled 80% of it since March and we already knew that the Iraqi army can't fight. Even so, Islamic State is not going to take much more of Iraq. What it doesn't already hold is either Shia or just not Arab at all (Kurdistan) and that is not fertile ground for Sunni Arab fanatics.  
See story on [www.newvision.co.ug](http://www.newvision.co.ug)