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A Heretic's Musings on Syria, Iran and the Middle East

by Yossef Bodansky

The brewing crisis that might soon engulf the entire Middle East in flames is Syria. Because of the strategic alliance between Syria and Iran and the border with Israel – both countries are directly affected by the upheaval. Hence, left to their own devices, the Syrian “riots” will transform into a regional war involving Israel and Iran.

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On April 30, Turkish intelligence sounded a major alarm about the situation in their southern neighbor. Turkey believes that the collapse of Syria might have reached the point of no return and that the country is on the verge of a fratricidal carnage. Significantly, the Turks have consulted with the Iranians who are intimately involved in the crisis in Syria.

Turkish Intelligence estimates that between six and seven million Syrians (out of 22.5 millions) are armed and actively involved in the revolt. The Syrian government has lost control of about 30 % of the territory – including most of the densely populated urban slums (Israel, Jordan and Saudi Arabia concur with these numbers). Moreover, Islamist riots are spreading from southern Syria into Jordan's radicalized and explosive north – mainly Irbid, Zarqa and Jarash.

To survive, Bashar al-Assad has initially relied on six close confidants, and through them, on the various military forces that are supposed to suppress the revolts:

- **Maher al-Assad**
Bashar's younger brother and the commander of the Presidential Republican Guard and the Army's powerful 4th Division.
- **Assaf Shawkat**
Bashar's brother-in-law (married to sister Bushra) who is the deputy chief-of-staff of the armed forces and former head of military intelligence.
- **Rami Makhlouf**
Bashar's maternal cousin who is Syria's richest man and the guardian of the family's wealth. Rami's younger brother – Hafez Makhlouf – is the head of the Mukhabarat (that is, internal intelligence and security forces).
- **Abdel-Fatah Qudsiyeh**
The head of military intelligence, the former head of the powerful air force intelligence (Syria's main foreign intelligence service) and a veteran of the Presidential Republican Guards.
- **Muhammad Nasif Kheirbek**
The deputy vice-president for security affairs, but primarily a veteran survivor of the Hafez al-Assad era and thus a go-between to the veterans of the old regime.
- **Ali Mamlouk**
Bashar's special adviser on security and a former Mukhabarat chief.

The key influential figures in the second tier include Hafez Makhlouf, vice-president Farouk al-Sharaa, minister of defense and army commander Ali Habib Mahmoud, and the director of the Ba'ath party's National Security Bureau Hisham Ikhtiar.

The two main "implementers" of the violent crackdown on behalf of Maher al-Assad are Atif Najib (Bashar's and Maher's cousin who is the head of the Political Security Directorate for Daraa Province) and General Ali Mamluk.

However, in the aftermath of the revolt (small and since suppressed) in the 5th Division in the Daraa area after 20 April 2011, there are growing trepidations at the top about the reliability of the general army. The cause for fear is the prevalence of Sunni troops, NCOs and junior officers recruited from the now rebellious urban slums and dilapidated rural areas (where agriculture collapsed due to acute water shortages and mismanagement of crops). These fears were reignited on Friday (29 April 2011) when logistical and support personnel of the 7th Division in Katana, west of Damascus, joined the Ikhwan-led riots after the Friday Prayers. Only the loyalty of the 3rd Tank Division of the 1st Corps – which is predominantly Allawite – is assured, and hence the Division was moved from the Israeli border to guard the center of Damascus.

In order to cope with these uncertainties, the loyal elements of the Syrian army were reorganized into three ad-hoc "Corps" based on units considered reliable and loyal, and which are

normally deployed along the Syrian-Israel border.

- **Corps No. 1**
Deploys in the Damascus area and the outlying towns and districts.
- **Corps No. 2**
Deploys in central Syria and particularly the towns of Aleppo, Homs and Hama.
- **Corps No. 3**
Deploys in the south and Jabel Druze, including Daraa.

There are, however, numerous reports about most senior military officers establishing links of communication with the opposition abroad. For example, Abdul Khalim Khaddam, the Sunni former vice-president (1984-2005) who defected, claims to have gained support from minister of defense General Ali Habib Mahmoud and the chief of staff General Dawud Rajha.

However, for Tehran, most worrisome are the emerging cracks among the Bashar inner-circle. Of these, most alarming are the disagreements which involve disputes over the extent of the Iranian and HizbAllah role in the suppression of the revolt.

The first, and to-date most serious, is the shouting dispute between Maher and Sharaa over the extent of reliance on the most violent Iranian and HizbAllah Special Forces to crack down radical Sunni rioters. Exasperated, the notoriously hot-headed Maher drew a gun, and shot and wounded Sharaa. Sharaa is in the main military hospital in Damascus.

Bashar, however, sided with Sharaa's advice and, on Thursday (28 April 2011), refused to permit the landing in Damascus of an Iranian plane (one in an ongoing airlift). This plane was carrying 200 Baseej Special Forces trained in suppression of insurrection in urban centers. Bashar fears a too obvious an Iranian role and an association in the West with the brutal crackdown of Iran's "green revolution". Significantly, Maher had personally requested Tehran to supplant his own forces with these Baseej troops.

Consequently, the IRGC's Intelligence Arm and the al-Quds Forces started preparing for the possibility of a post-Assad Syria. Starting around 26/27 April, Tehran undertook unprecedented steps that also reflect Tehran's dread of the situation in Damascus. Brig. Gen. Qassem Suleimani, presently the IRGC's on-site "desk officer" for Syria and Lebanon, set up two secret operational bases close to the Syrian border just in case the Bashar al-Assad regime collapses and Iran will have to salvage its vital strategic interests. Suleimani's forward bases are in Hussaiba, Iraq, and Anjar, Lebanon. As well, Tehran coerced its HAMAS protégés to sign a hasty unity deal with the Palestinian Authority. Such reconciliation was the precondition set by the Emir of Qatar for permitting the HAMAS leadership to move from Damascus to Doha if the Assad regime collapsed.

Alarmed by these developments, Bashar al-Assad reshuffled his innermost circle on Friday and Saturday (29 and 30 April 2011). He now relies virtually solely on his brother Maher and his cousins Rami and Hafez Makhoul. But there is an inherent division among them. Maher wants to increase the regime's reliance on Iran in order to violently and decisively suppress the revolt, while the Makhoul brothers want to ease the violence in order not to break completely with the West – the source and place of their wealth. Bashar is dithering – announcing new reforms as advocated by Rami Makhoul, but permitting Maher to once again plead with the Iranians for increased support from both the IRGC and the HizbAllah. Toward this end, Maher instructed Atif Najib and Ali Mamluk to markedly intensify the cooperation with the Iranian security and intelligence services. The extent of these contacts and cooperation has already led to rumors of a pro-Iranian coup-in-the-making to be led by Maher and the sidelined Assaf Shawkat and be directed against the influence of the Makhoul brothers.

Meanwhile, larger and better armed (including with anti-tank weapons and long-range sniper rifles) Ikhwan forces are now escalating their clashes with the increasingly insecure Syrian army. Half the crucial 4th Division is already deployed in the most explosive areas – poised to deal with an inevitable escalation. The Division's 132nd Brigade is deployed in Daraa, and the 47th Brigade is deployed near Hama (the site of the 1982 Islamist revolt).

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Throughout, Tehran has long been convinced that any radicalization and undermining of the predominantly-Sunni Arab nationalism is in its favor. Toward this end, Tehran has been going over governments' heads and reaching out directly to the grassroots. Tehran's primary instrument has been emphasizing the Palestinian issue, urging Jihadist action while blaming the Arab governments of betraying the sacred cause. This campaign has intensified markedly since the beginning of 2011 with Iran sponsoring the escalation of Gaza-based terrorism and rocketing as a reminder of the enduring relevance and explosiveness of the Arab-Israeli war (which was all but ignored as indigenous local issues burst to the surface throughout the various Intifada's).

At the core is Tehran's determination to quickly and decisively win the struggle with the Saudi-led conservative Sunni Islam. Riyadh's resolve to confront with force the Iran-sponsored Shiite insurrection in Bahrain convinced Tehran it must defeat the Saudi Arabian drive before the rest of the predominantly Sunni Arab World rally behind Saudi Arabia. Tehran is afraid that for as long as US forces remain in Iraq – it would be difficult to use raw violence in order to reverse the Saudi-financed strengthening of conservative Sunni entities in both Syria and Iraq. However, this reversal is Tehran's primary immediate-term strategic objective because, together, these communities can create a Sunni wedge between Shiite-Iraq and the HizbAllah bastion on the shores of the Mediterranean. If consolidated, this wedge will reverse the greatest achievement of Iran in the last decade – the consolidation of a Shiite-dominated bloc comprised of Shiite Iraq, Allawite Syria and HizbAllah-dominated Lebanon.

Tehran is undertaking several steps to preventively undermine this emerging Arab Sunni bloc even before it is consolidated.

In Iraq, Moqrada al-Sadr is leading numerous Shiite leaders in denouncing the presence of US forces beyond the expiration of the current agreement in late 2011. They threaten the reigniting of the armed resistance should US forces remain. Moreover, the Shiite security forces intensify the crackdown of the “New al-Qaeda”. In early April, most of the al-Qaeda-affiliated Jihadist networks were in the process of leaving Iraq for Libya (on land, traveling through Saudi Arabia and Egypt). Their place is being taken by a new “al-Qaeda in Iraq” that is Saudi-sponsored and -financed, and comprised of former Iraqi Baathist soldiers recruited in Jordan and Syria. The operational leadership of the group is comprised of Iraqi former generals in Jordan. Baghdad considers this new Sunni entity the greatest security threat even though the “New al-Qaeda” is yet to conduct a single major operation.

In Egypt, Iran is rapidly improving relations with the new military government in order to diminish Western influence and build strategic pressure on Saudi Arabia’s western side. This comes atop Iran’s close relations with, and strategic presence in, Bashir’s Sudan. Iran already influences Sudan’s intelligence services to contain the flow of Egyptian Islamists-Jihadists to radicalize and destabilize Egypt’s tenuous situation. In early April, Egypt’s new foreign minister, Nabil Elaraby, said that Egypt no longer considered Tehran an enemy and would now open “a new page with all countries, including Iran.” The growing Iranian influence is already apparent from the Egyptian permission to the two Iranian Navy vessels to use the Suez Canal for their strategically significant visit to Latakia, Syria in February, Egypt’s de-facto stopping of natural gas export to Israel, and the Egyptian revival of close cooperation with the HAMAS, including the opening of the border with the Gaza Strip.

On April 20, Tehran leaked that Iran had already appointed an Ambassador to Cairo. He is Ali Akbar Sibuyeh, a senior diplomat and the son of a prominent cleric. A few days later, Iran and Egypt signed the first official agreements between the two countries since the break of relations in 1979. On April 23, Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi declared that the Islamic Republic was “ready to raise the level of our relations with Egypt and we hope that the Egyptian officials, taking into account our oral and written exchanges, will take this courageous step”. Nabil Elaraby responded that Cairo was also ready to “turn over a new leaf” in its relations with Tehran, “provided that [these relations] are based on mutual respect, state sovereignty and noninterference in internal affairs in any manner whatsoever.”

In Syria, Tehran is dreading far more than the wide cracks of the Assad regime after decades of very expensive Iranian support, bolstering and consolidation. The void created by the decline of the Assad regime is rapidly filled by the ascent of the Ikhwan-affiliated Sunni Islamist-Jihadist groups. These groups have Saudi-trained spiritual guides, torrents of cash from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, and political dialog with the US in Cairo. Hence, it is clear to Tehran that if the Assad regime collapses – Damascus will be taken over by an Ikhwan-affiliated Sunni Islamist regime. Using their contacts in the Jihadist and al-Qaeda

forces in Syria-Lebanon and Iraq, as well as the Tehran-sponsored Damascus-based leadership of the HAMAS that, in turn, is an integral part of the International Muslim Brothers, IRGC Intelligence and the al-Quds Forces established communications and initial cooperation with the Jihadist forces affiliated with both al-Qaeda the Syrian Muslim Brothers. The Iranians assist the Syrian Jihadists with the smuggling of large quantities of weapons and hundreds of expert terrorists from Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan, as well as with lavish funds and secure communications (mainly satellite phones).

The escalation of the shelling of Israeli civilian targets from Gaza was Tehran's gambit. Iran – via the HAMAS and the HizbAllah - is adamant on escalating the confrontation with Israel to a near-war situation. The grassroots mosque-based support for the "Palestinian cause" is the primary instrument by which Tehran has been going over the Sunni Arab governments to become involved with the populist movements now running the Intifada's throughout the entire Arab World. While Iranian expertise in clandestine, counter-intelligence and organizational skills, as well as funds, are crucial for the Ikhwani leaders behind the Intifada's – Tehran is also most interested in direct interaction with the Arab masses. Since the populist Intifada's do not care about the plight of the Palestinians – Iran is losing its main venue of interaction and influence. The return of the Palestinian issue to public awareness on the coattails of "Israeli atrocities" (albeit provoked by HAMAS-launched rockets) thus serves a vital interest of Iran throughout the entire Arab World. So the HAMAS will keep escalating its rocket barrages – thus provoking Israel to escalate the retaliation. HAMAS and Iran hope for major civilian casualties that will make al-Jazeera's headlines.

Around mid-April, the HizbAllah Special Operations Command – effectively a branch of Iran's Al-Quds Forces – entered the final phase of preparations for the launch of a few spectacular strikes against Israeli and Jewish targets. The strategic-political objective of this initiative goes way beyond the declared intent to avenge the 2008 assassination of Imad Mughniyah by Israeli intelligence. The HizbAllah and its patrons intend to inflict numerous casualties that will compel Israel to retaliate. While the HizbAllah preparations were known for quite some time – a most recent intercept by Israeli intelligence that "the wedding has begun" indicates that the plan is entering the implementation phase.

Ultimately, any one of these provocation might lead to the eruption – by design or accident – of a major war with Israel. For example, a major terrorist strike inflicting a large number of civilian casualties will compel Israel to retaliate against the terrorist leaders. And any major confrontation in Gaza, not to speak of strikes against terrorist safe-havens in Lebanon and Syria, will be immediately enjoined by the HizbAllah - thus also bringing Syria and Iran into the war.

The specter of a major war will galvanize the Arab World at the grassroots, and unify ranks of the vehemently anti-Israel Sunni Islamists-Jihadists behind the Iran-sponsored forces irrespective of the position of their governments. Most notably, any Islamist populist upsurge will force the new military regime in Egypt to, at the very least, cancel peace treaty and permit

Jihadist “volunteers” to join the war. There will be grassroots demands for Iranian strategic missile strikes, military supplies and “volunteers”. Iraq will permit Iran to transit through its territory – thus making mockery of the US presence. This regional posture will put Saudi Arabia and the GCC on the defensive and bring down their anti-Iran grand strategy.

Any Arab-Israeli conflict will ultimately accelerate the ascent and consolidation of power by the Islamist-Jihadist forces on the waves of populist Jihad against Israel – the lowest common denominator in the Arab World. Thus, by the time the smoke thins and the dust settles on yet another Arab defeat – the Intifada’s will have given way to the consolidation of Islamist regimes legitimized by their contribution to the anti-Israeli Jihad. The Arab World will be unified anew against Israel – thus willing to accept Iranian strategic umbrella and regional preeminence. The main victim will be the Sunni-dominated pro-Western coalition against Shiite Iran that Saudi Arabia is presently striving to consolidate.

Presently, faced with the specter of losing its most crucial grand-strategic hold over the shores of the Mediterranean – the strategic alliance with Assad’s Syria – Iran might be tempted into drastic and radical undertakings – namely, the instigation of a regional war against Israel. Technically, this is a very simple thing to accomplish for the HizbAllah is in position to launch spectacular terrorism and long-range rockets at a moment notice. The inevitable retaliation by Israel will set the region aflame. Not only will the Arab masses of the entire Middle East rally behind the Iran-sponsored radicals, but, most importantly, the Syrian Sunnis will rally behind the regime in Damascus for as long as they champion the anti-Israeli war. Given the intensity of emotions among the grassroots and the inherent weakness of all Arab governments – a small spark will suffice to set the region aflame. This is Tehran’s wish – and it might get it.

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On the surface, the easiest knee-jerk solution is getting rid of the Assad regime in the name of bringing democracy – that is, rule by Syria’s overwhelming Sunni majority even if they are Ikhwan-affiliated (which is also the case in Egypt and is deemed acceptable to the West). Alas, there is no legitimate or viable Sunni leadership that can assume power in Damascus even if the Assad regime were to collapse. The Syrian Sunni opposition is a tenuous coalition between exiled veterans of the Hafiz al-Assad regime, veterans of the Syrian Muslim Brothers who escaped into exile during the 1980's, and a younger generation of Islamists-Jihadists that rose into prominence in the last decade.

The leader of the establishment veterans is Abdul Khalim Khaddam – one of the few Sunni Muslims at the Ba’ath leadership and who was Vice President of Syria from 1984 to 2005. Khaddam broke with Bashar over the political-economic reforms that harmed the Sunni urban elite. After his 2005 defection, he was embraced by Mubarak’s Egypt, Saudi Arabia and France as the potential purveyor of a Sunni-dominated Syria. However, with virtually no grassroots following in Syria – Khaddam failed to deliver. Yet, he remains very popular with

Western governments.

The leader of the Syrian Muslim Brothers is Ali Sadreddine Bayanouni who has been living as a political refugee in Europe (presently London) since the mid-1980s. In recent years, Bayanouni established himself as a “moderate Islamist” and allied with numerous exiled Arab Islamist leaders. Throughout, Bayanouni maintained contacts with, and following among, Sunni communities in Syria. The growing Islamicization of the Syrian Sunnis as a backlash to the Iran-sponsored Shiitization increased the grassroots popularity and following of the Muslim Brothers and Bayanouni as the undisputed leader. After the outbreak of the Syrian Intifada, Bayanouni established a liaison office in Al-Azhar, Cairo, through which he contacts several Western Governments, mainly the US, and the Muslim Brothers in Syria.

Meanwhile, in the last years of the previous decade, Khaddam and Bayanouni sought to consolidate a political alliance that would combine Bayanouni’s grassroots presence with Khaddam’s acceptability in the West. Both were worried about the ascent of a younger generation of militant Islamist-Jihadists in Syria’s sprawling urban slums that rejects all veteran Sunni leaders. These Jihadists were first recruited and trained by Syrian military intelligence as part of the effort to bolster the anti-US Jihadist-dominated insurgency in Iraq. By the time these youth returned from Iraq, and some also from Pakistan-Afghanistan, they were devout followers of the al-Qaeda global Jihad doctrine. They established clandestine cells under the banner of al-Qaeda of Bilad al-Sham (historic Greater Syria) and waited for opportune time to revolt. Since Syrian intelligence still needed Jihadists for operations in Iraq and increasingly also northern Lebanon – they limited crackdown only to those caught actively conspiring against the Bashar al-Assad regime. These Jihadist youth are now the backbone of the Syrian Intifada. One of their key organizers and commanders is Feda Tarif al-Sayed who is the son of Tarif al-Sayed – one of the senior Jihadist leaders of the Hama revolt in 1982.

Thus, any attempt to hand over power to the “Sunni majority” will only result in a protracted struggle for power between the al-Qaeda-affiliated younger Jihadists that are popular at the grassroots and the veteran Sunni leaders – led by Khaddam and Bayanouni – that could claim experience and some Western support. The outcome of this power struggle – whether by a fratricidal war or a negotiated tenuous compromise – will be an Ikhwan-affiliated Islamist-Jihadist regime in Damascus.

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Ultimately, however, the real situation in Syria is far more complicated – particularly if the grand strategic and vital interests of the West in the eastern Arabian World – the Mashriq – are to be taken into consideration.

Historically, the Mashriq was dominated by the socio-political dynamics in the Arab heartland – roughly from the shores of the Arabian Sea to northern Iraq, and from eastern Iraq

to the Gaza Strip. This Arab cauldron – predominantly Sunni but including Shiite Arabs as well – has a tendency to spread roughly from south to north through the instrument of radicalization and jihadization to the detriment of Arab nationalism. This ascent is not only contained, but at times also reversed, by three external powers that seek to advance and expand into, as well as extend their influence and hegemony onto, these Arab lands. These are Mahdivist Iran, neo-Ottomanist Turkey, and the European West (with the EU now on off-shore Cyprus). Throughout history and in earlier reincarnations, these three powers have had hegemonic aspirations – through various means ranging from cultural-economic influence to outright military occupation – over the Mashriq.

The fault lines between the Arab cauldron and the surrounding great powers are comprised of a thin line of minorities that, together, constitute the core of the Fertile Crescent. These minorities are, from east to west, the Ahwazi Arabs of southwestern Iran, the Kurds, the Alavis/Allawites, the Druze, the Maronites and the Jews, as well as smaller minorities such as the Armenians and Cherkess/Circassians. This Fertile Crescent of minorities has historically provided the stabilizing buffer regulating the spread of influence of Iran, Turkey and Europe. Initially, these minorities were discriminated against and oppressed by the various Arab rulers of the Mashriq. Between 1517 and 1917, the minorities along the Levant shores of the Mediterranean were relied upon by the Ottoman Sultans as the primary instrument facilitating their rule over the entire Mashriq. After 1917, all Western powers have considered and used the Levant minorities as the purveyors of pro-Western strategic posture, modernity and Westernization to the Middle East. Presently, Iran is attempting to consolidate its westward ascent and surge by coopting some of the minorities of the Levant that had been weakened by recent wars and civil strife. As a rule, whenever the Fertile Crescent of minorities, and especially their Levant section, was strong and viable – it constituted the key to regional stability and purveyor of modernity and growth.

Thus, the crux of the brewing crisis in and around Syria is the fate of the minorities' rule in Damascus and the potentially horrendous ramifications of its demise. The Bashar al-Assad regime is based on the dominant preeminence of the Allawites and the Druze who control the security apparatus, and the support of the urban economic elites comprised of westernized Sunnis and the Armenians. Moreover, the situation in Syria cannot be separated from the situation in Lebanon where the local minorities – the Maronites, Druze, Allawites and Armenians – are threatened by the ascent of the Iran-sponsored Shiite HizbAllah in the south and center, and al-Qaeda affiliated Jihadists in the north and Palestinian camps in the south. Hence, with perfect grand-strategic logic, Tehran is capitalizing on the plight of the Assad regime in order to coopt Syria's minorities and further consolidate Iran's strategic-hegemonic presence along the eastern shores of the Mediterranean (which is supplemented by Iran's presence in the Gaza Strip and growing influence in post-Mubarak Egypt). Iran-sponsored war with Israel will therefore take on the last entrenched and adamantly anti-Iran minorities – the Jews, as well as the Druze and the Cherkess/Circassians of Israel.

However, as history demonstrates, ALL the minorities of the Levant are inherently pro-Western and nationalist. For more than half-a-millennium, these minorities have thrived in the role of purveyors of both regional stability and socio-economic modernity and growth. The current Mahdivist Iranian interlude is thus a historic aberration made possible by economic collapse, wars and civil strife. The minorities of the Levant issue must dominate the quest for resolving the Syria crisis. Hence, there is an urgent imperative to not only bring the escalating and spreading fratricidal violence to a speedy end before a regional eruption ensue – but, to so while empowering the pro-Western and positive minorities’ elements – particularly the Allawites and the Druze, as well as the westernized Sunnis and the Armenians – among both the Damascus elite and the expatriate opposition. In practical terms, this means ushering in profound reforms in order to rebuild a democratically-inclined Syria in which the unique power of the minorities of the Levant is preserved. Such a pro-Western Syria, and by default also Lebanon, will become a bastion against Iranian influence. Needless to say that in pursuit of the traditional self-interests of the minorities of the Levant, such pro-Western Syria and Lebanon will have intrinsic interest to closely cooperate with Israel in pursuit of their common vital interests.

Hence, in rushing to defuse the Syrian crisis before the dreaded regional eruption occurs - attention must be paid, and major effort must be made, to reach out and win over the conducive elements among the Allawites and Druze elites in Damascus – potentially, including Bashar al-Assad himself. The minorities’ expatriate opposition that is led by Dr. Rifaat al-Assad and is presently exiled in Europe can, and should, become instrumental in bridging the differences between the West and Damascus. Only the consolidation of a strong minorities-dominated pro-Western government in Damascus can defuse the Syrian crisis and stall, perhaps even stop, the slide to a cataclysmic regional war.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.



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