



## **A Heretic's Musings on Syria in Lieu of Libya**

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### **Abstract**

The deterioration of the situation in Egypt since the overthrow of Mubarak reverberates throughout the Arab Middle East - causing people to either rethink the advisability of changing the status quo, or to commit to the establishment of Islamic States because, as demonstrated in Egypt, the "new" state has already failed miserably. A vast majority of the grassroots commit to the "Islam is the Solution" utopia as the sole viable outcome of their Intifada's.

The upheaval in Syria is of grand strategic importance for the West because it pits the resurgent Sunni Arab Islamism against the region's aspirant non-Arab Islamist powers Iran and Turkey. Standing between them as a buffer and preventing a cataclysmic eruption are the key element of the Fertile Crescent of minorities and especially their Levant section outside Israel - the Allawites, Druze and Maronites. Therefore, all regional powers are sponsoring their respective Jihadist proxies in Syria in order to change the overall strategic posture by undermining the Allawites and Druze power base in Damascus. The wavering of Shiite Iran about how to implement its own grand strategic objectives further exacerbates an already explosive situation. The outcome of the struggle for Syria will determine Europe's access to the energy reserves and markets of the greater Middle East and even Central Asia.

The aggregate impact of the failures of the Intifada's, particularly in Egypt, and of NATO's military intervention in Libya is already a profound anti-Western blowback that will long dominate the Arab Muslim Middle East's attitude toward, and cooperation with, the West, and especially Europe. The Intifada's have already irreversibly destroyed the modern Arab state, as three competing Islamist trends - Arab neo-Salafism, Turkish neo-Ottomanism and Iranian Mahdivism - vie to fill the vacuum at a great risk of cataclysmic clash and to the detriment of the interests of the West. Hence, the empowerment and strengthening in Syria and Lebanon of the Fertile Crescent of minorities and especially their Levant section outside Israel - the Allawites, Druze and Maronites - is a precondition to the reestablishing of conducive relations and cooperation between Europe and the Arab Middle East.

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## ANALYSIS

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Even at the height of the Middle East's stifling heat - the "Arab Spring" has already turned into a dark cold Arab winter dominated by nascent and rejuvenated Islamist-Jihadist movements as well as evolving dictatorial regimes. Most distinct to-date has been the marginalization and collapse of the West-inclined elites - political, economic and military - throughout the Arab World. These elites are being besieged and replaced by a myriad of anti-West Islamist-populist elements.

This irreversible unraveling of the inherently vulnerable West-inclined elements in the Middle East is the direct outcome of NATO's disastrous intervention in Libya. For the US and Western Europe, the intervention in Libya has been a manifestation of a new international multilateral world order. This new posture is articulated by the principle of R2P - "responsibility to protect". George Soros defines the "Responsibility to Protect" doctrine in stark terms his acolytes in the Obama White House dare not use: "If governments abuse the authority entrusted to them and citizens have no opportunity to correct such abuses, outside interference is justified. By specifying that sovereignty is based on the people, the international community can penetrate nation-states' borders to protect the rights of citizens."

Alas, the Arab World and the rest of the developing world see the NATO intervention in Libya, especially in the aftermath of the demands that Muammar Qadhafi exits power, irrespective of the formal title and excuse, the latest round in Western efforts to suppress the ascent of populist leaders and forces in Arab World. The fact that the NATO intervention is focused on Muammar Qadhafi - who, in the last decade, has gone out of his way to placate the West by renouncing terrorism, unilateral disarmament, as well as commercial and energy favoritism - has only aggravated the shock of Arab leaders who are still trying to absorb Washington's betrayal of its stalwart ally Hosni Mubarak. In early June 2011, former Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (during the Reagan Administration) Francis "Bing" West summed up the most important grand-strategic legacy of the NATO intervention in Libya in these terms: "That was insane. The lesson of Libya is, Get a nuclear weapon and tell everyone to go fuck themselves. Qadhafi got rid of his nukes and we said, 'OK, you're out of there'."

The emergence of France and the United Kingdom as the driving forces behind the Libya intervention resulted in the inevitable comparison with their failed intervention in Egypt in autumn 1956. The Arab elites are still convinced that although the formal excuse for the 1956 intervention was to reverse the nationalization of the Suez Canal - the real objective was to reverse the ascent of the anti-Western Arab Nationalism led by Gamal Abdul-Nassir. Similarly, in 2011, the British-French-NATO formal excuses are to prevent the harming of civilians in Benghazi and demonstrate the West's commitment to saving civilians under threat. However, NATO's real objective is to reverse the ascent of Sheikh Yussuf al-Qaradawi's populist Islamism - the real driving force behind the "Arab Spring" - and its prime beneficiary - the rejuvenated Arab dignity, defiance, honor and steadfastness spearheaded by the irreverent Muammar Qadhafi.



And just as the 1956 intervention resulted in the surge of Nassir's version of pan-Arabism - so has the Libyan intervention empowered Qaradawi's Islamism and Qadhafi's defiant populism. The specifics and inaccuracies of this "comparison" are irrelevant. For the incited and exacerbated Arab street - all that matter is the simplistic presence of France and the United Kingdom in leading roles of a military intervention that in 1956 failed to topple the implacably anti-Western Nassir, and, in 2011, has also failed to bring down the equally anti-Western Qadhafi. (Even if Qadhafi exits power as part of a negotiated deal, which is most likely at the time of writing, in the Arab psyche the damage is done.)

Meanwhile, the historic transformation of Egypt in an Islamist framework continues. After decades of ambivalence, the new government in Cairo is taking Egypt clearly into the Bilad al-Kanana (Greater Egypt) identity where the Nile Valley signifies the western-most boundary of the Arabian World of the Mashriq - and identity that is favored by the Islamists and, institutionally, advocated by the Muslim Brothers. This development comes at the expense of the traditional concept of Misr where the Nile Valley is a distinct socio-political entity connected to the West (Europe) through a legacy of state-institutions and cosmopolitan metropoleis. This profound change is manifested in Cairo's sudden announcement of the building of the 32-km bridge across the Strait of Tiran - from Ras Nasrani near Sharm el-Sheikh in south Sinai to Ras Hamid on the Saudi Arabian coast of the Red Sea. In mid-July, Egyptian Prime Minister Essam Sharaf nominated General Abdul Aziz, the chairman of the Arab Road Association, to head the project. If completed, the bridge will connect Egypt with the Arabian Peninsula and the rest of the Mashriq. Hence, the engineering details and project viability are irrelevant here. What matters is that post-Mubarak Egypt has declared its eastward - that is Mashriq - orientation at the expense of the traditional national institutions and self-identity of Misr.

Six months after the crowds first burst into Tahrir Square on January 25, 2011, the overall situation in Egypt is deteriorating rapidly. The plight of the average Egyptian has worsened significantly as a result of the "revolution" and the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak. In December 2010, unemployment in Egypt stood at 25 %. In June 2011 - unemployment surpassed 50 % and the vast majority of the new unemployed are young people. More than 90 % of the current university students (excluding military and police colleges) will not find employment. During 2011, the number of dwellers of Egypt's horrific slums where there are no running water, sewage, electricity, communications, education and health services has increased from around 40 million people to slightly under 50 million (because of the eviction of unemployed and their families, as well as the collapse of small villages due to neglect and drought) - out of a total population of 84.5 million. The Muslim Brothers are the sole source of social, medical and food services, as well as spiritual solace, for these downtrodden.

Hence, the Egyptian masses consider the continued postponement of the elections an effort by the ruling the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces to prevent the Muslim Brothers from coming to power and then saving them - the downtrodden. On July 12, General Mohsen Fangary (who was most popular with the Tahrir Square crowd) sternly warned on State TV that "the Council will not relinquish its role during this critical period in Egypt's history. ... The Army will not allow violent protests or the obstruction of economic activity; it will not permit the spreading of rumors and misinformation which could lead to disunity, disobedience and the dismantling of the homeland; it will give precedence to the interests of the public over those of individuals. The Council will not allow anyone to seize power and will take the necessary measures against threats to the homeland." The under-the-surface turmoil in Egypt is far worse than in early 2011. This time, the masses will not



vent their rage and frustration by demonstrating in Tahrir Square.

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The long-term ramifications of the unfolding events in the other key front of the "Arab Spring" - Syria, or more accurately Bilad al-Sham (Greater Syria) - should be examined in the overall context of the Arab reaction to the Libya intervention. The image of grassroots civil-rights activists driven by electronic social-media prevalent in Western media is incorrect and intentionally misleading. Both liberal and Islamist circles in the West are spreading their message in the hope of instigating a Libya-style Western intervention.

In reality, the Assad regime is facing a well-organized and well-funded Sunni Islamist-Jihadist uprising that aims to destroy the fabric of the country rather than merely change the regime. This is clear from the analysis of the key centers of the revolt and the shifting centers of violence from one city to another while no nation-wide leadership or coordination emerges. Furthermore, virtually all the violent protests and clashes occurred in towns at the edges of Syria - in Dera'a on the Jordanian border, in Tel Khalaf and Zabadani on the Lebanese border, in Deir az-Zawr and Abu-Kamal on the Iraqi border, and in Baniyas, Latakia and Jisr Shugour near the Turkish border. The most violent cities and Jihadist bastions - Homs and Hama - are not far from the Lebanese border and there is easy access to them via a gap in the ante-Lebanon Mountains. Despite proximity to the Turkish and Iraqi borders, the predominantly Kurdish Qamishli has remained largely calm. As well, the two key cities at the Syrian interior - the capital Damascus (except for the increasingly restive suburb of Harasta) and Aleppo/Haleb, the second largest city and the country's economic capital - have also remained relatively calm.

It is not by accident that the emerging patterns and locations of the Syrian revolt correspond to the known presence of operational centers of various intelligence services interested in influencing the situation inside Syria - the Jihadist Leadership runs operations from the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp north of Tripoli, Lebanon, Jordanian and Saudi intelligence have centers in Ramtha, Jordan, Saudi intelligence also operates in al-Qaim, Iraq, and the Jihadist-sponsoring arm of Iran's Jeish al-Quds has forward bases in Hussaiba and al-Qaim, Iraq, and Anjar, Lebanon. Turkey's mighty military intelligence and special forces are deployed along the entire border with Syria. All of these centers channel funds, weapons, intelligence operatives and Jihadist mujahedin across the border and into the nearby predominantly Sunni cities. Starting mid-July, Saudi intelligence provided the Islamists with thousands of pre-paid satellite phones - all components of a US-built network in order to help them overcome communication jamming. It is not without reason that all of these intelligence services exacerbate and capitalize on the Sunni militancy and inherent hostility to the Allawite- and Druze-dominated Assad regime. Nor is it a mere coincidence that the vast majority of the most violent clashes throughout Syria have taken place on Fridays right after the mid-day prayers and sermons - a clear indication of the dominant influence of Sunni Islamist incitement.

Given the brutality and violence of the crackdown of the localized uprisings by the Syrian security forces and paramilitary groups, one would expect the clashes with the regime to escalate as the Sunni Islamist forces are becoming better organized and better equipped. However, even though many of the troops and junior officers are Sunnis, the mob violence is becoming increasingly sectarian and inwardly focused - that is, fratricidal violence within the cities themselves. The Friday Sermons now beseech the Believers to take on the "nusariya" - a



derogatory term for religious minorities - and rid Bilad al-Sham of their presence. Special attention is paid to pitting the Sunni Arabs against Syria's other ethno-national minorities that are loathed by the Sunni Islamists and considered "kaffirs" whose ancestors had rejected and left Islam centuries ago, and their current descendant are punishable by death.

In particular, the Sunni Islamists are targeting Assad's Allawite and the Druze minorities. In the Islamist bastions of Homs and Hama, sectarian clashes have overtaken the anti-regime protests. Dozens of Allawite civilians were kidnaped, killed brutally, and their bodies were mutilated. In Latakia, Sunni mob attacked the Allawite neighborhoods, and in Dera'a the Sunni mob attacked the Druze neighborhoods. In mid-July, a senior Syrian official acknowledged that Syria "is on the edge of civil war." A prominent businessman warned that all over Syria "people are afraid of genocide and we pray the night passes without us being killed." By July 20, some 1,600 civilians and some 1,200 members of the security services and the armed forces were killed, and well over 10,000 civilians were detained.

Starting the third week of July, the situation in Syria took a major turn for the worse. The Assad regime concluded that the shifting insurrection cannot be permitted to continue spreading and moving around the country. Hence, virtually the entire front-line military forces of Syria were deployed all over the country to lay siege to the most explosive cities - starting with the Islamist bastions of Homs and Hama, but also secondary cities such as Deir az-Zawr and Abu-Kamal where large reinforcements from Iraq are arriving to bolster the local Jihadist forces, and Harasta for fear the insurrection will spread to Damascus proper. The mere patterns of the deployment suggest that the regime has effectively lost control of the cities' centers where the local Jihadist militias are constructing barriers and rapidly training and equipping their own forces. Hence, the Syrian army can enter these cities only by massive military offensives.

In Homs, to avenge the killing of Allawites, tanks and armored personnel carriers closed in on several neighborhoods. Under heavy machine gunfire, security forces swept in, raided homes and arrested several people. Other neighborhoods were sealed off as Sunni fighters built barricades to block raids by the security forces. Phone lines and Internet connections were cut all over the region. Despite the crackdown, the sectarian violence against Allawites intensifies in the Homs area. Starting July 23, there was a marked increase in terrorism in the Homs area. First, two powerful explosions rocked the Military Academy in the al-Waer district of Homs city, followed by heavy gunfire as Syrian troops were seen leaving the building. Several troops injured in the attack were taken to the local military hospital. As well, a passenger train traveling from Aleppo to Damascus was derailed and caught fire at al-Souda about three miles from Homs. Saboteurs tore out a large section of the tracks. The driver was killed instantly and 14 passengers were injured. Ultimately, Damascus knows that time is running out fast because the transformation of the insurrection into a sectarian war increases the risk of massive defection of, and widespread refusal to fire on brethren by, Sunni troops.

In principle, the Assad regime is still reluctant to commit carnage and is interested in defusing the crisis. Hence, Assad decided to make Hama - a major city of great practical and symbolic significance - a test case for a novel approach to defusing the crisis. Back on July 18, Assad nominated a new governor - Ahmed Khaled Abdul-Aziz who is Sunni and a popular physician. Abdul-Aziz negotiated a cease-fire and standstill agreement with the Islamist Imam of the city's Grand Mosque. Assad approved the agreement on July 20. According to the agree-



ment, the Syrian military will not storm Hama or attempt to assert control, and the Jihadists will not attack government institutions and property, as well as the city's civilians - that is, Allawites and other minorities. The crucial question of the Jihadists recognition of the legitimacy of the Assad regime was left intentionally vague. This was the first time the Assad regime agreed to the de-facto Islamist-Jihadist control of any part of Syria. Local agreements were also reached between local army units and the Ismaist-Jihadist forces in Deir az-Zawr and Abu-Kamal whereupon the military was permitted to keep and retrieve all heavy weapon systems from the local garrisons in return for guarantees not to storm the cities' centers. On July 24, Assad nominated a new governor for the eastern provinces where the two cities are located - Samir Othman al-Sheikh, an intelligence officer. It is too early to discern whether these agreements are the beginning of the end of the insurrection or of the Assad regime.

Meanwhile, the ascent of the Syrian Sunni Islamists-Jihadists has emboldened their Iraqi counterparts to demand their own share of power. By mid-July, Iraq's Sunni leaders began to threaten secession and the establishment of a Sunni state if their demands were not met. Osama al-Nujaifi, the Sunni Speaker of the Iraqi Parliament, publicly warned that the Sunnis seriously consider breaking away from the Shiite-dominated Iraq. "This [threat of Sunni secession] should be treated wisely and quickly before things develop to where they [the Sunnis] think of a kind of separation to guarantee rights," Osama al-Nujaifi said. He added that the Sunnis "feel like second-class citizens in Iraq." Significantly, the leaders at the forefront of the secessionist movement are from the tribes of western Iraq which, traditionally, are considered the eastern parts of Bilad al-Sham. In Baghdad, Iraqi officials acknowledged that the Maliki government has already lost control over the Sunni community and particularly in the western provinces of Anbar and Ninawa. Iraqi intelligence officials noted that the Sunni tribes are being supported by the intelligence services of Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

As the incitement and exacerbation of Iraq's Sunni community keeps intensifying - Sunni Jihadists escalate anti-Shiite terrorism to demonstrate their resolve and despair. In turn, the rise of Sunni terrorism against Shiite religious shrines and pilgrimage is already sending Maliki into the fold of Tehran. Baghdad is seeking security co-operation and cannot refuse Iranian presence because several Iranian citizens are among the casualties. With Iraq's instability growing, Maliki can also do nothing to restrain Iran and Turkey from escalating their relentless fight against Kurdish separatist rebels. Consequently, the Iranian and Turkish security forces have grown brazen in their deep raids on Iraqi safe-havens of Kurdish rebels and terrorists to the point that both Iran and Turkey now effectively occupy Iraqi territory where Kurdish camps used to be and the main infiltration routes from them into Iran and Turkey respectively.

Meanwhile, although Jordanian intelligence is helping the Islamists in southern Syria - the Jihadist spirit engendered now haunts Amman. Both Jordanian and Saudi intelligence recruited numerous Islamist activists from northern and central Jordan to actually deliver funds, weapons, volunteers and instructions to their Syrian counterparts in Dera'a and beyond. It did not take long for these Jordanians to be inculcated with the spirit of the great Syrian insurrection, and they brought it home - to their communities and mosques. They radicalized the message of the Jordanian Muslim Brothers and brought in local HAMAS cells. Moreover, there are reports the Jordanian Islamists started keeping for themselves some the funds, weapons and explosives they had been given to smuggle into Syria. Starting mid-July, the weekly demonstrations in Amman and other major cities have become more violent and political, with the rioters demanding "democratic reforms" and ending the





“security iron fist”, as well as anti-US and anti-Israel policies. The reforms the rioters are calling for include the dismissal of the prime minister, key cabinet ministers, and the army generals around the King, and thus amount to toppling the tribal power base of the Hashemite Kingdom - even if the rioters still do not dare to call for the overthrow of the monarchy.

On the other side of the divide, Tehran continues to actively support the Assad regime and, in many respects, saves the regime from collapsing. Tehran is petrified that an inevitable and early outcome of the collapse of the Assad regime and its replacement by a Sunni-Jihadist regime will be the undermining of the Iran-dominated “resistance camp” and the breaking down of the unprecedented “Shiite Crescent” that now stretches from Iran to the shores of the Mediterranean via Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Hence, Iran has become directly involved in the security aspects of Syria’s violent repression of the protests. After initially refusing Tehran’s aid, Syrian security forces now rely heavily on advisers and on-site experts from both the Pasdaran and the Law Enforcement Services who train Syrian military units in crowd control and disruption of rioters. Meanwhile, advisers and on-site experts from the Baseeji are responsible for the growing efficiency and ruthlessness of the predominantly Allawite Shabiha militias. Iran also arranged for HizbAllah fighters and security personnel to deploy throughout Syria to bolster faltering security forces units especially where extreme violence is needed.

Iranian intelligence is responsible for the Syrian crackdown of the various internet mobile-phone and other electronic social media networks the anti-regime activists have been using to rally supporters and inform the world of the regime’s violent repression. Iran provided Syria with sophisticated communications intercept and eavesdropping equipment, as well as the expert operators, that enabled Syrian intelligence to identify activists and shut down their phones and Internet. Moreover, Iranian intelligence experts then assisted their Syrian counterparts in infiltrating the opposition’s social networks, the hacking and blocking of Internet sites, the dismantling of cellular phone networks, as well as the dissemination of false and provocative data. Tehran invested heavily in these undertakings. According to a late-June estimate by the Khamenei-affiliated Center for Strategic Research, the cost of the “emergency equipment” Iran transferred to Syria was about \$6 billion. More recently, Iran also reached out to save the Assad regime from economic collapse by offering a \$5.8 billion “loan” - the first \$1.5 billion of it as an immediate grant. Iran is desperate to prevent exhaustion of Syria’s foreign currency reserves which totaled between \$12 and \$14 billion before the outbreak of the revolt and about half of which is already exhausted.

Tehran identifies the eruption in Syria as a unique strategic challenge that is not an integral part of the “Arab Spring”, or, in Tehran’s terms, the “Islamic Awakening” of the Arab Middle East. The Iranian strategic analysis was articulated by Dr. Javad Mansouri in a June 29, 2011, article in the *Tehran Times*. In the late-1980's and early-1990's, Mansouri was Deputy Foreign Minister and a key coordinator of Iran’s support for international terrorism through its diplomatic missions. He subsequently served as Iran’s Ambassador to Pakistan and China. Mansouri argues that the upheaval in Syria is not part of the “recent wave of popular movements in several countries in the Middle East and North Africa” but rather the result of “the interference of foreign elements that are trying to settle their disputes with certain governments of the region. Specifically, this is the case in Syria, where the role of the external stimuli is much greater than the role of the popular protests against the government. In other words, unlike other countries of the region, the popular nature of the uprising in Syria is overshadowed by external players that have been seeking to topple the Syrian government for a long time.”





Mansouri observes that the Assad regime is vulnerable to the popular upheaval because “these external players are taking advantage of one major weakness in the Syrian government. The political structure of Syria and issues such as freedom, legal rights, and the standard of living have been damaged over the past four decades mainly because of the state of emergency and the general security situation in the country.” Despite the complex and dire conditions, Mansouri believes that “there is still an opportunity for the Syrian government to normalize the situation.” Despite all the Iranian support, Tehran still has lingering doubts about the ability of the Assad regime to resolve the crisis. Crackdown by force might be essential - but not enough to stabilize Syria in the long term. “It is not yet clear how the Syrian government will deal with the current situation, but undoubtedly, if the government wants to win the people over and convince them to remain calm, it must accept their legitimate demands and promise them a brighter future,” Mansouri concludes.

And therein lays the Iranian quandary whether to gamble on Assad’s ultimate endurance or prepare for the grim day after Assad’s fall. Tehran is pursuing both options simultaneously. For Tehran, these developments are first and foremost key components of the historic competitive-cooperation between the two non-Arab Islamist regional powers - Turkey and Iran. Both countries recognize the possible toppling of Bashar al-Assad as a historic event whose significance will exceed Syria or Bilad al-Sham. “The departure of Assad, the last of the brave Arab leaders who defy the West, and coming on the heels of Saddam Hussein’s downfall, would likely herald the end of the era of Arab nationalism and facilitate the formation of a new Arab and/or Islamic identity,” explains Lt. Col. (ret.) Michael Segall in a July 20 monograph for the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. “In the shadow of the growing assertiveness of (Shiite) Iran and (Sunni) Turkey, both of which seek a great-power role, the Arab world finds itself divided and lacking any guiding paradigm as the old order falls apart.” This void in the predominantly Sunni Arab World can either be exploited by Saudi Arabia and conservative Gulf States to extend their influence by using the spread of Sunni Islamism, or be capitalized on by Turkey and Iran in order to enforce their revived posture as regional great powers - albeit with Islamist doctrines.

Both powers have different goals but a common end objective - to suppress the possible ascent of traditional Sunni Arabism. Turkey is determined to capitalize on its Sunni Islamist credentials to expand its regional hegemony to the detriment of the traditional power system originating from the Arabian Peninsula. Ankara’s Middle East policy, acknowledged the pro-AKP daily *Yeni Safak*, resembles that of “some sort of post-modern Caliphate” and not of a secular state. Iran is loath to give up on its “Shiite Crescent” grand strategic posture - particularly Lebanon’s HizbAllah and Iraq’s Shiite Government - to the ascent of a Sunni Arab wedge in Bilad al-Sham.

Thus, the common denominator of both powers is to quickly dominate the Sunni heartland of Bilad al-Sham. To do so, Turkey and Iran must first bring down the strongest elements of the Fertile Crescent of minorities, and especially their Levant section outside Israel - the Allawites, Druze and Maronites - that constitutes the historic buffer between the Arab Middle East and the non-Arab powers, as well as facilitates the West’s access to the Middle East. That way, both Turkey and Iran can also turn with impunity on the other major minority group they both seek to destroy - the Kurds. While Turkey, apprehensive of the Saudi influence due to religious-tribal aspects, focuses on dominating the Sunni Arabs - Iran strives to dominate not only the Shiite fringes - Iraq and Lebanon - but possibly Syria’s Allawites (whom Iran considered remotely Shiite because they revere the First



Imam of the Shiites - Ali) if the Assad regime could be salvaged. Moreover, Tehran convinced Ankara not to give up on the Assad regime for the time being.

Alarm bells went up in Tehran in mid-June after Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's AKP won a major victory in the Turkish elections and Erdogan remained in office. Erdogan and his confidants started talking openly about the revival of an "Ottoman Region" dominated by Sunni Turkey. Former US Defense Department expert Harold Rhode explained in a mid-July study for the Hudson Institute in New York that "Erdogan's recent electoral victory speech puts his true intentions regarding Turkey's foreign policy goals in perspective. ... At the very least, this victory speech signals a wish for Ottoman cultural colonialism and imperialism." Dr. Rhode stresses that Erdogan's "real goal [is] the Turkish Sunni domination of the entire Middle East." Tehran could not, and did not, ignore this worrisome development. Given the deep historic enmity between Turkey's Sunnis and Iran's Shiites, Iran is worried that Turkey might reexamine the strategic understandings with Iran, particularly regarding cooperation in Syria and Iraq.

In late June, there began a growing pressure from Tehran on Ankara to act resolutely and "return to the resistance camp" before the new regional order was lost to the foreign hostile forces (the US and Israel) and their local stooges (Saudi Arabia). Tehran considered the outcome of the upheaval in Syria to be the key to the region. Iranian officials warned their Turkish counterparts that should the Assad regime collapse - "various religious and ethnic groups" nobody could then control would rise in the vacuum and threaten the domestic security and stability of Turkey. To avoid such a threat, Turkey should cooperate with Iran against all common regional threats - from the US, NATO and Israel to the conservative Arab Sunni forces led by Saudi Arabia. Lt. Col. Segall pointed out that *Sobhe Sadeh*, the Pasdaran's weekly, warned Ankara to reexamine its perception that Assad's fall would further Turkey's regional interests. Should Turkey continue to cooperate with the US against the Assad regime, *Sobhe Sadeh* warned, Tehran would be compelled to choose between Turkey and Syria and "undoubtedly the strategic interests and ideology of Iran will lead to the choice of Syria."

Tehran was very persuasive for in early July there was a profound change of Turkish policy as Tehran and Ankara resolved to closely coordinate their regional policies in order to dominate post-crisis Damascus and the entire Arab Middle East. In mid-July, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu arrived in Iran to discuss "the wave of unrest shaking Middle East countries" and particularly Syria. He met with President Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad and his Iranian counterpart Ali Akbar Salehi. Davutoglu's visit to Iran was part of a major regional tour that started with Libya and included Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and Syria.

In Tehran, Salehi and Davutoglu held lengthy discussions about the latest developments in the Middle East, and "notably the unrest in Syria." They agreed that Iranian and Turkish officials should hold regular consultations and coordinate common policy regarding "the countries that have been experiencing pro-democracy uprisings" in order to "help defuse the crisis in these countries, help people realize their legitimate demands, and help prevent foreign intervention in the internal affairs of these states." Special attention was paid to the situation in Syria and both agreed that it was imperative for Turkey and Iran to intercede in order to stabilize the situation and prevent Syria's falling into "external hands". Salehi stressed that "Syria, Iran, and Turkey are members of a family, and if any of the members of the family faces a problem, the entire family should make moves to help remove that." In his response, Davutoglu stressed the unique prerogative and responsibility of Turkey and



Iran as the regional powers. "All regional countries should pay attention to public demands and consult with great countries in the region such as Iran." He urged Damascus to follow this advice because "Syria is [Turkey's] valued and good friend and is the brother of Turkey and has close relations with Iran." Davutoglu agreed to the imperative to hold joint policy formulation consultations between Iranian and Turkish officials. Salehi added that Syria should join this forum. "Iran is the friend and brother of Turkey and Syria, and [holding] consultations between members of a family is normal," Salehi stated.

In the meeting between Davutoglu and Ahmadi-Nejad, Tehran warned that the regional countries are becoming increasingly vulnerable to "deceitful schemes hatched by the United States to save the Israeli regime and boost its own economy," and urged the regional countries to resist these "conspiracies by foreign powers to meddle in their domestic affairs." Ahmadi-Nejad stressed that since the aggregate impact of these developments "would harm the entire region," it is both imperative and legitimate for Iran and Turkey to intervene in order to defend their own interests as well as these of Muslim brother states. Iran and Turkey, he emphasized, play a "very sensitive and influential" role in Middle East developments and therefore should jointly "adopt major measures to serve the interests of the two nations and the region's people." Ahmadi-Nejad concluded by reiterating that "close Tehran-Ankara relations and the progress made by regional countries" have already begun to show results and irk their common enemies. In his response, Davutoglu stated that Ankara shares Tehran's regional view and perception of the steps to be undertaken jointly. It is Ankara's policy, Davutoglu stated in conclusion, that "Iran and Turkey shoulder a heavy responsibility to settle crisis in the Muslim world and establish sustainable security."

Despite all the declarations of amity and partnership, Tehran remains ambivalent regarding Ankara's ultimate objectives. Hovering above the common anti-Western view of the Greater Middle East is the undeniable reality that the Sunnis that Turkey represents constitute 85 % of the Believers while the Shiites that Iran represents constitute the remaining 15 %. This reality, notes Zuheir Kseibati in a July 21 article in *al-Hayah*, does not dampen Iran's "aspirations to take over the post-Arab dictatorship era in the hope of planting the seeds of tutelage over the revolution." Yet, deep down, Tehran is apprehensive that "Ankara's interests were to require the establishment of a [Sunni] 'crescent' to deter what remains of the [Shiite] 'crescent' of the Iranian influence in the Middle East, as well as Erdogan's embracing of the 'moderate' Islamic movements in the countries witnessing uprisings, as a prelude for partnerships with these states."

It is therefore imperative for Tehran to prevent the emergence of a distinct "Sunni Crescent" while, at the same time, closely cooperating with Ankara in the consolidation of joint hegemony over the Arab Middle East and the suppression of the Sunni-Arab ascent that might challenge it. Hence, Tehran is carefully using the possible survival of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Damascus as the key to the sustenance of Iran's own "Shiite Crescent" and a Tehran-sponsored "brave Arab leader". Simultaneously, Tehran dreads that the Assad regime, beholden to the Allawite-Druze empowerment, will emerge from the crisis as the last holdout (except for Israel) of the Fertile Crescent of minorities that could still impede the consolidation of the Turkish-Iranian regional hegemony.

On July 25, Tehran reinforced and consolidated the "Shiite Crescent" at the expense of Turkey. Iran, Iraq and Syria signed a \$10-billion agreement to build a pipeline for the transit of Iranian gas from the South Pars gas



field to the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, and from there to Greece and Europe. The Iran-Iraq-Syria-Lebanon part of the pipeline will be completed within three to five years. "The pipeline which will transfer Iran's gas to Iraq and Syria will strengthen trilateral relations in all fields," Iranian caretaker Oil Minister Mohammad Aliabadi declared at the signing ceremony. He further emphasized that "the expansion of economic cooperation between Tehran, Baghdad and Damascus will tighten security in the region as well." (On July 27, Ahmadinejad nominated Pasdaran Commander Rostam Qasemi as the permanent Oil Minister - stressing the security preeminence of Iran's energy policy.)

Back on July 25, Iran's First Vice-President Mohammad Reza Rahimi used the tripartite-agreement signing occasion to reiterate Iran's support for Syria. "Iran and Syria are two inseparable countries and allies, and Iran will stand by its friend and Muslim country, Syria, under all circumstances," he said. Rahimi added that the unrest in Syria is "guided by arrogant powers and the meddling of enemies." The triumvirate of Iran-Iraq-Syria has profound grand-strategic implications for Turkey. The quick completion of this pipeline not only removes the possibility of Iranian and Iraqi gas being shipped via Nabucco, but also opens the possibility of shipping gas from southern Turkmenistan to Europe via Iran instead of Nabucco - thus undermining the most important geo-strategic and geo-economic asset Turkey has vis-a-vis the EU. Still, Tehran would rather have Ankara adjust its policy toward Damascus and renew support for the beleaguered Assad regime.

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The upheaval that is sweeping the Middle East might be at a turning point. "As disillusionment sets in, the Arab Spring could easily turn into an Islamist Winter," warns Prem Shankar Jha, a senior Indian journalist and a former diplomat. The violence and insurrection are far from over, and are likely to escalate and spread before the end of 2011. All Arab governments - old, new and revamped - have been unwilling to, and incapable of, meeting the demands of the grassroots to return to traditionalist social order. Nor have these governments been able to slow down, let alone reverse, the socio-economic deterioration throughout the Arab Middle East - spreading poverty, unemployment, collapse of medical and educational services, and street violence and crime. Half a year into their Intifada's - the Arab masses cling stronger than ever to the utopian "Islam is the Solution" - having been failed by all other alternatives. However, the international community insists on the sustenance of the rejected and delegitimized Arab state-system. Hence, Arab regimes have no reason to face reality and compromise beyond instantaneous fig-leaf and band-aid reforms. That leaves the Islamist-Jihadist insurrection as the only means available to the despaired and desperate downtrodden to address their enduring grievances.

Of course, there exists the grim possibility of the simmering grassroots rage being brought to a major explosion by a cataclysmic eruption. The most likely catalyst is the HizbAllah or the HAMAS, at the behest of a frustrated or panicked Tehran, launching a strike on Israel and thus instigating a regional war. Convinced that it is losing regional preeminence to a Turkish-Sunni ascent, Tehran might commit to an extreme gamble. The hasty transfer of strategic weapons from Syrian arsenals to these of the HizbAllah, including dozens of long-range SCUD-D SSMs and thousands of long-range rockets, increases the likelihood of such an eruption. Similarly, the unprecedented flow of Iran-funded weapons from Benghazi-area arsenals to the Gaza Strip, with the tacit connivance of the Egyptian military authorities, increases the likelihood of a HAMAS provocation. Iran and its protégés do not fear an escalation of such a regional war beyond a confrontation with Israel. After the NATO debacle in



Libya, the specter of Western military intervention on Israel's behalf is neither a viable threat nor a source of possible salvation.

The primary factor that can still affect a regional eruption and/or explosion remains the fate of the Allawites' power and posture in Syria - better say, Bilad al-Sham. The Islamist populist forces that are busy destroying their social order and states, as well as Western influence, have so far failed to replace their gone and tottering regimes. The preeminence of Islamist groups - mainly the Muslim Brothers and their offshoots - among the populist forces makes them receptive to cooperation with, and ultimately becoming subservient to, the Islamist regional forces that Turkey and Iran are. The sustenance of the Fertile Crescent of minorities - of which the Allawites and Druze of Syria are the most beleaguered elements - is a historic fulcrum. Only a viable Fertile Crescent of minorities can provide the crucial buffer that will prevent the grassroots simmering of the Arab Middle East from conjoining with the Islamist ascent of Turkey and Iran - thus creating an explosive critical mass.

Hence, the main quandary is not whether Bashar al-Assad the individual remains in power, nor is it whether "his" regime survives the upheaval. The real challenge is preventing the collapse of an Allawite-Druze dominated regime and its replacement by an Islamist-Jihadist regime. But this will be a mere starting point toward defusing the regional turmoil. Far more important is the crucial imperative to restore and preserve a viable Syrian state via meaningful political reforms, as well as economic recovery and modernization of the entire region. Toward this end, it will be crucial to draw Damascus and Syria away from the Iranian embrace and influence. Ultimately, the restoration of Syria as a key to the Fertile Crescent of minorities, and not placating the Syrian Muslim Brothers and other Islamist-Jihadist forces, is the real vital interest of the West.

Time is short - for the masses that poured to the streets of Syria's towns, excited by populist preachers and promises for instant gratifications, are increasingly cognizant of the deterioration in their standard of living and personal freedoms wrought by the upheaval and the local Islamist ascent. In their Friday Sermons, Islamist Imams keep promising salvation once the "Islam is the Solution" rallying cry is adopted and implemented. Ankara and Tehran also promise that accepting their hegemony will bring forth the implementation of this utopian "Islam is the Solution" posture. The Sunni Syrian masses are despaired and with no patience left - and the exciting month of Ramadan that always sets the Sunnis starkly apart from the Allawites, Druze and Christians starts around August 1, 2011.

Comes Ramadan, the erstwhile weekly protests throughout the Arab Middle East become a daily and rapidly growing occurrence. Since no government in the region can either address the grassroots demands or offer viable path to reform and betterment of life - incited, excited and frustrated mobs are more inclined to revert to terrorism and violence. The Arab World has long given up on the ability of states and leaders to address grassroots grievances, let alone solve them. As the swelling popularity of the Intifada's among both participants and spectators testifies - the commitment to returning to traditional ways of life and social structures is uncontrollable and irreversible. Day after day, the Islamists keep preaching their utopian "Islam is the Solution" credo. The Islamist charities - for so many the sole source of food and solace in festive Ramadan - gain the sympathies and trust of even the most doubtful of the downtrodden.



To survive, leaders, regimes and states have to fight both the groundswell Intifada's and Western interventionism. Security forces are facing the unenviable choice between shooting at protestors now, and having to bring in tanks to subsequently reclaim complete cities. But these measures do not address the root causes of the Intifada's. Therefore, at best, they will only calm down the turmoil and violence for a while.

The challenge is to ease in a gradual yet profound transformation that will reconcile between the endurance of the modern state and region, and the grassroots aspirations and expectations as manifested in the Intifada's. It is imperative that reforms go well beyond political changes for many grievances are essentially social-economic. Ultimately, for any program to be viable it'll have to include comprehensive national modernization and rebuilding initiatives, job creation and discernible improvement of standard of living, and feasible upward mobility prospects based on merits rather than corruption. Resurrection and empowerment of localized and ethno-centric traditions will reduce the influence of the universal Islamism-Jihadism and will help enshrine both stability and modernization.

Hence, in rushing in to help alleviating the grievances of Syria's predominantly Sunni-Islamist Intifada, the West must be extremely careful not to throw out the baby with the bath water. The undermining of the preeminence of the Allawite-Druze in official Damascus in the name of a demography-based democracy, and the ensuing marginalization or even destruction of the Fertile Crescent of minorities will subject the region to a major cataclysmic upheaval. It is not in the interest of the West to have the two non-Arab Islamist regional powers - Turkey and Iran - dominate Europe's access to the Middle East's energy resources and the Suez Canal. Nor is it in the interest of the West to withstand the consequences of a regional war against Israel which will be Iran's instrument - of Mahdivist choice and/or of pragmatic last resort - for attempting to assert supremacy over the Turkey's Sunni-Islamist hegemony. This cataclysmically explosive posture in the Arab Middle East will be the direct unintended consequence of the West-assisted destruction of the Fertile Crescent of minorities, and especially their Levant section outside Israel - the Allawites, Druze and Maronites - in the name of imparting Islamist-democracy in Syria.

Ultimately, no viable reform process can be accomplished in an Arab World under the hegemony of the outside Islamist powers - Iran and Turkey. Nor can the demands and grievances of the populist Intifada's be addressed without first regulating (in socio-political and ethno-religious terms) the interaction with the West given the legacy of the NATO intervention in Libya. The aggregate impact of the failures of the Intifada's, particularly in Egypt, and the NATO military intervention in Libya is already a profound anti-Western blowback that will long dominate the Arab Muslim Middle East's attitude toward, and cooperation with, the West, and especially Europe. Hence, the empowerment and strengthening of the Fertile Crescent of minorities and especially their Levant section outside Israel - the Allawites, Druze and Maronites - is a precondition not only to the success and sustenance of any viable reform process - but to the reestablishing of conducive relations and cooperation between Europe and the Arab Middle East.

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## Recommendations for European Policy Makers

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Don't rush to come up with instant-gratification panacea solutions just because there are ugly images of violence on the satellite TV news. The Arab Middle East is currently going through a peak in a historic convulsion spanning a quarter of a millennium. Ultimately, the Arab Middle East will have to find their own solution for their own problem. Europe might be able to help alleviate the crisis, but Europe might also unintentionally spark a cataclysmic eruption that will set the region aflame. Internalize what Albert Einstein said: "If I had one hour to save the world, I would spend 55 minutes defining the problem and only five minutes finding the solution."

Forget the "Arab Spring" that has never existed and instead focus on the greater Middle East in the terms of the indigenous Intifada's that dominate the regional upheaval and the grassroots' futile quest for the "Islam is the Solution" utopia. The first victim of the Intifada's is already the modern Arab State. Europe must therefore focus on interacting with the indigenous regional socio-political entities and dynamics.

The key to the future of the region is the Fertile Crescent of minorities (from east to west: Ahwazi Arabs, Kurds, Allawites, Druze, Maronites, Jews and Circassians), and especially their Levant section, because they constitute a buffer between the Arab Islamist upsurge and the hegemonic ascent of the two Islamist powers -Turkey and Iran. The Levant section also regulates Europe's access to the energy reserves and markets of the greater Middle East and even Central Asia. Hence, Europe must interact with these minorities directly.

In addressing the turmoil in Syria - Europe must be extremely careful not to throw out the baby (Allawite-Druze preeminence) with the bath water (ending the fratricidal sectarian Intifada). The undermining of the preeminence of the Allawite-Druze in official Damascus in the name of a demography-based democracy, and the ensuing marginalization and destruction of the Fertile Crescent of minorities, will cause cataclysmic upheaval throughout the greater Middle East.

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