



A Heretic's Musings on the Triumph of Heritage

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Abstract

The profound crisis engulfing the greater Middle East is reaching a plateau. This could have been the start of the calming down of the fratricidal violence as well for the populace is content with the trend and exhausted of the enduring upheaval. Instead, absent legitimization and acceptance of the new regional realities by the "international community" and its self-anointed leaders – the fratricidal carnage will continue and escalate. The mere specter of US-led Western intervention is the primary reason for the escalation of the fratricidal carnage throughout the greater Middle East.

The plateau being reached is emerging and consolidating "new order" in the Mashriq. This "new order" is essentially the widespread rejection of the modern state system. Instead, there begun the consolidation of the return to the regional traditional balancing based on interaction between the Fertile Crescent of the Minorities (from east to west the Ahwazi Arabs of southwestern Iran, the Kurds, the Alavis/Alawites, the Druze, the Maronites and the Jews, as well as smaller minorities such as the Armenians and Cherkess/Circassians) and the Arab Heartland (al-Jazira).

The unfolding crisis in Egypt can be best understood in the context of Egypt returning to its roots. Out of power, the Ikhwan are returning to their traditional state of welcomed victimhood and martyrdom caused by Army-run conspiracy and crackdown. The still escalating destabilization of Egypt might deteriorate into a civil war that will, in turn, undermine Egypt's important regional role for a long time to come.

The dramatic awakening of the minorities changes profoundly the role and acceptance of Israel. Israel is perceived as the military bulwark of the Fertile Crescent of the Minorities and as the primary force standing up to Iran and the Shiite ascent that are the primary threat to ALL the Arabs of al-Jazira. The importance of Israel to the shielding of al-Jazira is growing daily as the Arab World is not only disappointed by the US policies – but is giving up on the US ability and willingness to defend and secure the Arab World against the ascent of both neo-Ottoman Turkey and Mahdivist Iran.

Instead of listening to the regional leaders – both Arab and Israeli – the US-led West continues to insist and focus on Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and empowering Islamist-based "democratic" regimes throughout the Arab World – from Syria to Egypt. US and Western insistence on these priorities in the context of the regional return to heritage-based socio-political frameworks will only set the greater Middle East aflame – ushering in the apocalyptic eruption that both Mahdivist Iran and the Jihadist Trend have always dreamed about but could not attain on their own.



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About the Author of this Issue

Yossef Bodansky has been the Director of Research at the International Strategic Studies Association [ISSA], as well as a Senior Editor for the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications, since 1983. He was the Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare at the U.S. House of Representatives between 1988 and 2004, and stayed on as a special adviser to Congress till January 2009. In the mid-1980s, he acted as a senior consultant for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of State. He is the author of eleven books – including *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* (*New York Times* No. 1 Bestseller & *Washington Post* No. 1 Bestseller), *The Secret History of the Iraq War* (*New York Times* Bestseller & *Foreign Affairs Magazine* Bestseller), and *Chechen Jihad: Al Qaeda's Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror* – and hundreds of articles, book chapters and Congressional reports. Mr Bodansky is a Director at the Prague Society for International Cooperation, and serves on the Board of the Global Panel Foundation and several other institutions worldwide.



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ANALYSIS

The profound crisis engulfing the greater Middle East is reaching a plateau. This could have been the start of the calming down of the fratricidal violence as well for the populace is content with the trend and exhausted of the enduring upheaval. Alas, this is not to be. Absent legitimization and acceptance of the new regional realities by the "international community" and its self-anointed leaders – the fratricidal carnage will continue and escalate. Emboldened by the US-led West's refusal to face reality, the forces of the "old order" will continue their historically doomed war of attrition against the indigenous forces and grassroots trends in the vain hope of seducing and ensnaring the gullible US-led West into a humanitarian military intervention that will defeat the "new order" and empower anew the leaders of the "old order". The mere specter of US-led Western intervention is the primary reason for the escalation – rather than exhaustion and self-restraining – of the fratricidal carnage throughout the greater Middle East.

The plateau being reached is emerging and consolidating "new order" in the Mashriq. This "new order" is essentially the widespread rejection of the modern state system invented and imposed by the West in the aftermath of the First World War and the destruction of the Ottoman Caliphate. Instead, there begun the consolidation of the return to the regional traditional balancing based on interaction between the Fertile Crescent of the Minorities (from east to west the Ahwazi Arabs of southwestern Iran, the Kurds, the Alavis/Alawites, the Druze, the Maronites and the Jews, as well as smaller minorities such as the Armenians and Cherkess/Circassians) and the Arab Heartland (al-Jazira). The emergence and revival of the interrelationship between the Fertile Crescent of the Minorities and al-Jazira has been evident on the ground from the very beginning of the Arab Intifada's – but was either missed or ignored by most Arab leaders.¹ Thus, the current turning point is happening because the Sunni Arab prominent leaders of al-Jazira have finally begun to comprehend and internalize the quintessence of the unfolding Intifada's and especially the interaction between the Islamist forces and the US-led West in the Maghreb (including Egypt).

The key lesson learned by these Arab leaders is that although the Islamist-Jihadist forces committed to the destruction of the hated Arab modern state – their adherence to a theology from an earlier millennium means that all the Islamists-Jihadists can do is destroy the existing order. Thus, the Islamist-Jihadist forces cannot and will not build a viable alternative to that they have destroyed – particularly an alternative capable of addressing the challenges of the modern world. The empowerment by the West of the Ikhwan (Muslim Brothers) and/or Ikhwan-affiliated forces in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt only wrought calamity and chaos. Not one of these countries established a viable government, consolidated a functioning system of governance, and embarked on a viable path to rehabilitate and rebuild the country, the society and the economy. On the contrary, neither Tunisia nor Libya exist as viable states for regional, ethnical and tribal forces blatantly ignore the so-called central government and pursue their own localized power struggles and self-interests. The modern states that existed under the autocrats Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Muammar Qadhafi are no more and are unlikely to be resurrected in the foreseeable future. And the malaise is spreading into Algeria and the entire Sahel. Moreover, the Ikhwan's Egypt was well on its way to implosion and collapse had the military, led by General Abdel Fattah Sissi, not launched the military coup on 3 July 2013 – thus saving Egypt's existence as a viable state while reviving Nasserite Arab Nationalism.

¹ Yossef Bodansky, A Heretic's Musings on Syria, Iran and the Middle East, ISPSW, May 2011



Hence, leaders in the far more sophisticated and heritage-conscious Mashriq have comprehended that it is imperative to return to the traditional stable correlation of forces based on sub-state entities – both Arab and minorities. With the Arab modern states that have never been truly legitimized effectively gone, and with the Islamist-Jihadist forces, as well as their sponsoring states and US-led patrons, advocating explosive and unsustainable regional order based on an Islamist supra-state – the only viable option remaining is the return to the old order based on both Arab and minorities sub-state entities. And this is exactly what is happening despite, and in defiance of, Western interventionism. The Arab leaders of al-Jazira – both Sunni and Shiite – comprehend that the lingering historic conflicts between the Arab heartlands and the various minorities are of minute relevance when compared to the long-term devastation wrought by the Islamist-Jihadist up-surge. These Arab leaders increasingly endorse the point long made by key minority leaders – namely, that Arab-minorities disputes can be ameliorated in the context of jointly resisting and withstanding the Islamist-Jihadist upheaval and jointly protecting the emerging post-state Mashriq.

The consolidation of a de-facto independent Kurdistan encompassing Iraqi-Kurdistan and Syrian-Kurdistan is the first awakening of the minorities. Significantly, the joint Kurdistan is controlling the oil reserves of both northern Iraq and eastern Syria. With such economic power, the consolidation of a unified Kurdistan is a major step forward in the assertion of all minority rights and increased powers in the new Middle East. Even Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Ankara, with its phobias of anything Kurdish, expressed desire to make deals in order to secure oil supplies as well as "understanding" that a Turkish recognition of the new Kurdistan will be reciprocated by Kurdish non-support for Turkey's own repressive and suppressed Kurdish minority. Meanwhile, to increase pressure on the Kurds, Turkish Military Intelligence unleashed ostensibly Syrian Jihadist forces – mainly the Jabhat al-Nusra and Turkey's own Towhid Brigade – to fight the Syrian-Kurdish forces of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) as well as assassinate Syrian-Kurdish leaders the Turks mistrust for their doubts of the above "deal". The Turks also use their artillery anytime fighting gets too close to the Turkish-Syrian border. By early August, the Kurdish forces are winning against the Jihadists.

Concurrently, Irbil started threatening oil supplies to Turkey in retaliation for "the slaughtering of Syrian Kurds" – thus forcing Ankara to sue for a deal by inviting senior PYD leaders to Ankara for discussions on co-existence. Kurdish leaders from both Syria and Iraq found Ankara disingenuous particularly regarding the stopping of Turkish-controlled Syrian Jihadist forces. In early August, senior PYD leaders said that the PYD "expected Turkey to intervene and keep the Jihadists in check as clashes escalate between the Syrian Kurds and Jihadists." The leaders noted that the first item on their agenda while in Ankara was to issue a "stern demand" from "the Turkish government to clamp down on the flow of Jabhat al-Nusra operatives and their arms across the Turkish border into Syria." Meanwhile, Massoud Barazani, the President of Iraqi Kurdistan, vowed to use Iraqi-Kurdish forces to defend the Kurds in "Western Kurdistan" – that is, in Syria. "Iraq's Kurdistan region will make use of all of its [military] capabilities to defend" their brethren "in western Kurdistan", Barazani decreed.

The success of the Kurds emboldens Syria's other major minority communities – the Alawites, the Druze and the Christians. There is a marked expansion of locally-raised ethno-centric militias that join the war in their own areas against Sunni-Jihadist forces. This trend expedites significantly the Assad administration's consolidation of power in the minorities' belt and the adjacent urban-economic belts – the viable parts of the Syrian state. In early August, Turkey-based joint Jihadist and Free Syria Army (FSA) forces launched a desperate attempt to reverse the trend by raiding Alawite villages in the northern Latakia province including Qardaha – the Assads' hometown – and intentionally committing atrocities against their civilian population. The objective was to bring



the war home to Assad's stalwarts by unleashing waves of refugees and horror stories. On August 11, FSA chief General Selim Idriss crossed briefly into Syria in order to inspect the front in the coastal region of Latakia. Idriss said he visited a couple of destroyed Alawite villages in the Latakia area in order to "look into the reality of the important successes and victories that our revolutionary brothers have achieved on the coastal front." Thus, Idriss himself acknowledged the partnership between the FSA and the Jihadist forces, as well as owned the atrocities they had just committed. "We will continue to work intensively on the coastal front," Idriss stated. Meanwhile, the opposition's cynical effort backfired badly as the entire Alawite population rose up against the carnage and expanded the Alawite control over numerous Sunni villages and townships in the adjacent Idlib province.

Concurrently, the Alawite and Druze awakening are spreading into the Hatay Province (seized from Syria in the late-1930s with French connivance in order to reduce the Alawites' demographic-political power in French-mandate Syria) and the entire Turkish eastern Mediterranean coast. The socio-political focus of Turkey's own Alawites-Alavis is evolving from opposition to Turkey's active support for the Syrian Jihadists that is taking place in and from Hatay Province to focusing on the overall oppression of the Alawite-Alavi minorities in Turkey and the suppression of their culture, heritage, and self-identity. In the south and west of Syria, the Druze self-awakening is spreading into northern Jordan where local Druze communities are habitually discriminated against by the region's increasingly Islamist Jordanian-Palestinian population. There is a concurrent Druze awakening in central Lebanon where, despite Walid Jumblatt's caution and reticence, the nationalist awakening in the Shouf Mountains is clearly manifested in the louder voices calling on the Lebanese Druze to help their Druze brethren in Syria against both Sunni Arabs and HizbAllah Shiites. Throughout the entire greater Middle East the minorities' Genie is out of the Lantern.

The dramatic awakening of the minorities changes profoundly the role and acceptance of Israel – the state and home of the Jews who constitute a historic key part of the Fertile Crescent of the Minorities. Arab populist rhetoric notwithstanding, Israel is perceived as the military bulwark of the Fertile Crescent of the Minorities and as the primary force standing up to Iran and the Shiite ascent that are the primary threat to ALL the Arabs of al-Jazira. The importance of Israel to the shielding of al-Jazira is growing daily as the Arab World is not only disappointed by the US policies – mainly support for Iran, Turkey and the ascent of the Muslim Brothers – but is giving up on the US ability and willingness to defend and secure the Arab World against the ascent of both neo-Ottoman Turkey and Mahdivist Iran.

The northern parts of Arab al-Jazira are not immune to the reawakening of traditional identities. On the Shiite side, two of the Shiite Arab leaders with distinct roots in Mesopotamia (the central and southern parts of modern Iraq), the stalwart Iraqi patriot Moqtada al-Sadr and increasingly the opportunist Ammar al-Hakim (the leader of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq), joined hands in late July in pressuring Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to disengage from the Iranian embrace and emphasize Mesopotamia's unique Shiite-Arab character. Sadr and al-Hakim blamed Maliki for the passive reaction of Iraq's security forces to the current wave of lethal bombings. They argued further that the Maliki-led traditional Shiite establishment is intentionally ensnaring Iraq's Shiites in the Sunni-vs-Shiite Islam war in both Syria and Iraq. For example, the Liwa Imam Husayn (a predominantly Iraqi Shiite militia with Sadrist roots that is fighting in Syria) held Iftar Dinner for the Shiites living near the Sayyida Zaynab shrine in Damascus in a building owned by Ayatollah Sistani (the formal leader of Iraq's Shiites).



The position of the Shiite-Iraqi leaders, and particularly the Sadrists, reflects the quandary of the Shiite Arab camp. While the Sadrists have been sworn enemies of the Sunni Jihadist forces operating in both Iraq and Syria since the fall 2004 massacre of Shiites in Falujah, Sadr is most apprehensive that Shiite Arab Mesopotamia is not ready to confront and address the Sunni Jihadist upsurge emanating from the escalating Jihad in al-Jazira. The pressure exerted by Iran and the HizbAllah throughout Bilad al-Sham has provoked a fierce reaction throughout the entire Sunni world – a Jihadist upsurge that is now threatening the Shiite Arab world. The series of bombings during Eid al-Fitr in which 74 Shiites were killed and more than 320 were wounded was a turning point not so much by the extent of casualties and carnage as by the audacity of the claim of responsibility by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (that fights both in Syria and Iraq). “The Islamic State mobilized ... in Baghdad and the southern states and others to convey a quick message of deterrence on the third day of Eid al-Fitr,” the communique read. “They [the Shiites] will not dream of security during night or day, during Eid or other [days].”

Thus, Sadr recently warned close confidants, the looming threat to the Shiite heartland of Iraq is the outcome of the turmoil created by the ascent of both Iran and Sunni Jihadism that are trying to fill the vacuum created by the collapse of the power structure in al-Jazira. Consequently, Sadr warned, the Sunni Jihadist sectarian threat is fast approaching a level of calamity and intensity not seen in the region since 1806 – when “Saudi and Wahhabi gangs” sacked both Najaf and Karbala in a series of extremely lethal raids from what is currently northern Saudi Arabia and central Syria.

The Sunni Arab region is indeed firmly in Islamist-Jihadist hands. The self-identity in terms of al-Jazira keeps growing as manifested in the unity of the al-Qaeda-affiliated forces in Bilad al-Sham (which covers the Euphrates Valley in Syria) and the Islamic Republic of Iraq (which covers the Sunni-populated western parts of Iraq). The unity held despite initial criticism by Ayman al-Zawahiri. Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi, the veteran commander of the Jihad against the US, is the Emir of the rapidly expanding “Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham” al-Qaeda affiliate. The organization is conducting myriad of raids and terrorist operations – mainly blowing up car-bombs in densely populated areas – from the suburbs of Damascus to the heart of Baghdad. As strongly suggested by the intensifying grassroots resistance to the Jihadist rule over the key cities of Ar-Raqqah and Deir-Az-Zawr – given the opportunity, the local Sunni Arab population would revert to tribal- and blood-based system of loyalties and self-identity. Similarly, the ascent of the Shamari nation in regional politics and security on both sides of the nominal Iraqi-Syrian border (if it ever existed in reality) enables the anti-Islamist framework to also assert itself over the northern parts of Sunni Arab al-Jazira in heritage self-determination terms.

The ascent of the Jihadists throughout al-Jazira has already resulted in a profound grassroots backlash. The bulk of the Arab populace is irrevocably committed to basing society’s survival and endurance on localized sub-national frameworks of self-identity. While the modern Arab State has never been fully legitimized – it nevertheless exists in the form of the beleaguered modern Syria and modern Iraq. Consequently, the Sunni Arab population of Syria, and increasingly also of central and western Iraq, comprehend that only the Assad administration can provide them the support, supplies and protective umbrella against the ascent of the Jihadists and their drive to impose their oppressive Islamic governance upon the tribally-based rural and urban populace. This grassroots realization has already won the war for Assad’s Damascus at the strategic level.²

² Yossef Bodansky, A Heretic's Musings on Victory in Syria, ISPSW, May 2013



Moreover, the Sunni Arab tribal population of Iraq is gravitating to seeking shelter under the regional umbrella increasingly provided by Assad's Damascus – thus reviving the geo-strategic role and gravitas of Bilad al-Sham. Meanwhile, the Shiite Arabs of Iraq are pressuring Maliki's Baghdad into reviving the geo-strategic role of traditional Mesopotamia. The reawakening of these heritage frameworks of self-identity is already irreversible no matter how strong and centralized the governments in either Damascus or Baghdad pretend to be.

Most significant are the ensuing changes in the southern part of al-Jazira. The elites of the Arabian Peninsula, and particularly official Riyadh, are rethinking their staunch support for the Islamist-Jihadist trend and even home-grown neo-Salafite Takfiri elements. Riyadh realizes that the Takfiris are virulently and violently anti-tribal self-identities and anti-Shiite. The Takfiris are thus destroying and undermining the socio-political grass-roots trends considered most vital to the enduring hold onto power by the House of al-Saud and other royal families in the Gulf States. Meanwhile, the radicalization and anti-tradition sentiments espoused by the Islamist-Jihadist trend, coupled with the lure of the Arab Intifada's, have already created an explosive mix that is spreading into and poisoning Saudi Arabia's sprawling Sunni urban slums.

Hence, there is an urgent imperative for Riyadh to expedite the containment of the Jihadist ascent as well as the ascent and aspirations of both neo-Ottoman Turkey and Mahdivist Iran. Under the current geo-strategic trends, this can only be attained through the restoration of the Fertile Crescent of the Minorities and its protection of, and buffering for, the Shamari and other tribes-nations loyal to, and supportive of, the Najdi tribes from whom the House of al-Saud hales. The clearest manifestation of the profound policy change in Riyadh is the recent visit to the Kremlin by Saudi Intelligence Chief Bandar bin Sultan. Until recently, Riyadh shied away from contacts with Moscow, expecting the Kremlin to initiate the reversal of tension created with Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal. However, Riyadh can wait no longer. Hence, Riyadh reached out to the Kremlin, long the patron of the region's Minorities, in order to agree on a common policy toward both the Mashriq – where Assad's triumph and the ensuing ascent of the Fertile Crescent of the Minorities are now accepted by Riyadh – and support for General Abdel Fattah al-Sissi and his consolidation of a post-Morsi Egypt.

The unfolding crisis in Egypt can be best understood in the context of Egypt – historic Misr – returning to its roots. Under the leadership of General Sissi, the Army is forcing Cairo – the traditional Umm al-Dunya, that is, "The Mother of the World" – to abandon the Islamist dreams and aspirations of restoring Bilad al-Kanana and regional hegemony in favor of salvaging and consolidating the heritage of Misr first. Out of power, the Ikhwan are returning to their traditional state of welcomed victimhood and martyrdom caused by Army-run conspiracy and crackdown – thus provoking the military into the still unfolding extremely violent crackdown of the Ikhwan and other Islamists in Egypt's urban centers. The still escalating destabilization of Egypt might deteriorate into a civil war that will, in turn, undermine Egypt's important regional role for a long time to come.

The wild card that is most likely to further exacerbate an already explosive situation is the US-led West. Washington has lost any touch with reality. The US-led West ignores the historic upheavals, the collapse of the modern Arab state – the building blocks of contemporary international relations – and the reversal of the fortune of the Ikhwan and other Islamist forces the US-led West has endorsed and sought to empower as the crux of the "Arab Spring". Instead, the uppermost leaders in the US-led West – US President Barak Obama, US Secretary of State John Kerry, and the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Baroness Catherine Ashton – are personally focusing anew on finding a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.



Besides being unsolvable in Western political terms, NOBODY in the Arab World wants to even touch the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Because of the predominant trepidation of Iranian strategic ascent and the empowerment of Jihadism throughout the Arab World – pro-Western Arab leaders dread most the weakening of Israel – the military bulwark of the Fertile Crescent of the Minorities and the primary military force standing up to Iran and the Shiite ascent. Shiite Mahdivist Iran, and not the alleged plight of the Palestinians, is the primary existential threat to ALL the Arabs of al-Jazira. Any Israeli-Palestinian agreement as envisaged by the US-led West will empower Palestinian radicals, undermine the Hashemite Kingdom – the buffer between the Syria-based Jihadists and Saudi Arabia – and, most important, weaken Israel.

Hence, there emerge anti-US sentiment and active policy among all Arab leaders who until most recently were the staunchest pro-Western allies. In this spirit, General Sissi refused on 14 August to accept a call from Obama. As made clear in the preparatory call from the NSC, Obama would have demanded that Sissi resign and stop the violent crackdown of the Ikhwan and other Islamist forces. Instead of listening to the regional leaders – both Arab and Israeli – the US-led West continues to insist and focus on Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and empowering Islamist-based “democratic” regimes throughout the Arab World – from Syria to Egypt. US and Western insistence on these priorities in the context of the regional return to heritage-based socio-political frameworks will only set the greater Middle East aflame – ushering in the apocalyptic eruption that both Mahdivist Iran and the Jihadist Trend have always dreamed about but could not attain on their own.

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