



## Heretic's Musings on the Third Anniversary

Yossef Bodansky

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### About the Author of this Issue

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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

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Three years ago this week, on 17 December 2010, a 45 year old Tunisian policewoman slapped an agitated vegetable vendor in his early-twenties who was creating a disturbance in a police station after his cart had been confiscated for lack of license. The vendor was a university graduate ensnared in Tunisia's economic catastrophe and thus compelled to seek meager income as an unlicensed street vendor. Humiliated by having a female slap him on the face in public – he set himself aflame.

Three days later, the Islamist leadership in Europe that is mostly comprised of expatriates from the Maghreb capitalized on the self-immolation in order to spark the Islamist-Jihadist Intifada's they had long been preparing for. They issued a slew of Fatwas and communiques urging the frustrated and destitute populace of the greater Middle East to rebel against the existing socio-political order and westernized modernity in quest for utopian Islamist solutions. The urging fell on fertile ground. The great Intifada – labeled "the Arab Spring" by the liberal West – was launched and is still unfolding.

The Islamist leaders capitalized on the grassroots frustration with, and rejection of, the spread of westernization and the ensuing transformation of the modern Arab state. Absent traditional legitimacy, modern Arab states became the instrument of power hungry despots. Statehood bred corruption and destitute where traditional conservative sub-state rulers both cared for and abused their subjects. Relying on the tenets set by Said Qutb circa 1960, the Islamist leaders, and particularly those affiliated with the Muslim Brothers (the Ikhwan), opted to initially transform the existing Arab states into Muslim States, and then proceed into jointly establishing a new regional order based on the tenets of the Caliphate. Subsequently, Islamist governments of regional powers – mainly Egypt, Turkey and Iran – attempted both jointly and separately to capitalize on the chaos and uncertainty in order to consolidate their own posture as regional hegemony. Turkey and Iran still continue to pursue these objectives.

Ignored by all aspirant elites and leaders were the Arab grassroots in whose name, and on whose backs and shoulders, the Intifada's are being waged. Having overcome their endemic fears of state power and oppression, the Arab grassroots boldly crossed the threshold of communal fear and embarked on their still unfulfilled quest for reformulating their socio-political and socio-economic posture to further their own indigenous values and aspirations. Significantly, all Arab grassroots reject the viability of the modern state. In so doing, the grassroots and their indigenous leaders have alienated and pitted against them both the lingering state authorities fighting for dear life and the assertive Islamist-Jihadist forces who are bent on replacing the erstwhile state authorities with Islamist rulers as advocated by Said Qutb. This profound struggle over the viability of the Arab modern state is still escalating and spreading, and is far from resolution.

US-led Western intervention in support for "the Arab Spring" only aggravated the situation.

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In the Maghreb, where it all began, Western intervention was blatant and led only to carnage and misery.

Tunisia has failed to consolidate viable government because the lauded exercises in "democracy" only prevented the Francophone alliance of strong families and economic elites from holding onto and stabilizing the country. Meanwhile, the Western-supported "moderate Islamist" parties that seized power proved incapable of doing anything other than destroying the instruments of the state and governance, as well as attempting to impose Islamist ways on a hostile westernized populace. Presently, Tunisia's borderlands and deep interior are



lost to Jihadist forces who are building their forces there while preparing to storm the main cities in quest for power.

Libya's Jamahiriya used to be a delicate-yet-stable balance between conservative tribes and rising westernized clans. The Jamahiriya was managed fairly efficiently by the Qadhafi coterie. Alas, Libya was destroyed by the US-inspired NATO "humanitarian" intervention that sought to empower the "moderate Islamists" shunned and rejected by virtually the entire population. The Islamists, no longer pretending to be moderate, now control parts of the destroyed Tripoli. The clans carved their own fiefdoms in the coastal cities devastated by NATO bombing. The tribes carved for themselves the rest of this vast country. Along the fault lines between clans and tribes there escalate fratricidal fighting and clashes between the militias of all sides. Absent a charismatic leader who will inspire the grassroots to give a viable Libya a chance – the fracturing of Libya into hostile and violent mini-states will soon become irreversible.

Most dramatic has been the transformation of Egypt. Even before the self-immolation in Tunisia – the people of Egypt were seething with rage against the Hosni Mubarak regime, its corruption and efforts to empower the President's son Jamal. The vast majority of Egyptians looked at the Islamists as the only organized force capable of challenging Mubarak's Cairo. However, Egypt's urban elite did not want to sacrifice its way of life on the altar of the Ikhwan's awakening. Nor were they ready to abandon the role of Egypt as historic Misr for the revival of the Islamist concept of Bilad al-Kanana. When the US threw its power behind the Ikhwan and both their stifling of urban-elite Egypt and their starving-through-mismanagement of rural Egypt – the grassroots appealed to the only institution representing the soul of Misr – the Military - to save them and their Egypt. Alas, by the time the military moved in to save Egypt – the Ikhwan and other Jihadists have already established a wide underground network that is already escalating a clandestine war and terrorism – thus complicating the military's task to save Egypt.

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In the Mashriq, Syria (more accurately – Bilad al-Sham) is the key and microcosms of the Intifada. The original revolt was launched by urban elites against a state order that they insisted was oppressing and disenfranchising. Almost immediately, and with US encouragement, the Islamist-Jihadist leadership started to take over the grassroots revolt by provoking the security forces into indiscriminate violence against the urban slums where the Jihadists had supporters and the grassroots are hostile to the urban elites. However, the insistence of the Islamists-Jihadists on transforming society by coercion and destroying the tribal-clan frameworks resulted in their being rejected by the grassroots despite their suffering from the state's security forces. Consequently, the Jihadists evolved into vanguard forces tailored after Osama bin Laden's "Son of the Land/Earth" program and committed to fighting an all-out Jihad against both the people and the government. Also rejected from the very beginning was the West-sponsored coalition of Islamist-Westernized expatriates striving to replace the existing state authorities with an Islamist state. This schism was inevitable because the grassroots Intifada has rejected the very existence of the modern state.

Initially, the predominantly Sunni Arab grassroots sought to hold their own against both the state power (a coalition of minorities-dominated security forces and Sunni urban economic elites) and the foreign-sponsored Jihadists. But this proved impossible. The grassroots abhorred being used by the Jihadists as human shields and instruments for inducing Libya-style Western intervention in response to humanitarian catastrophes – that is, the needless carnage inflicted by the security forces on urban slums in response to Jihadist provocations and terrorism. Ultimately, the profound grassroots rejection of the Islamists-Jihadists is the result of the debilitating



economic collapse and destitute. The grassroots elected to ally with Bashar al-Assad's Damascus because they are convinced that Damascus will not alter their way of life and is attempting to help them. In contrast, the grassroots are cognizant that the Jihadists are not only determined to profoundly change their lives and impose Islamism – but are cynically exploiting the grassroots' destitute and plight in order to increase pressure on the grassroots to accept Islamism. Even with the majority of Syrians gravitating to Assad's Damascus – Jihadist carnage and terrorism will continue for as long as the Jihadists remain convinced they can continue avenging their rejection.

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From the ashes of the Mashriq and the crumbling of the Arab modern states – there slowly emerge the outlines of the post-Intifada's greater Middle East. Most important are the resurrection of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities and al-Jazira (the Arab interior or the Arab heartlands) as the two pillars of regional stability. Consequently, Israel and Saudi Arabia emerge in parallel key roles as the predominant powers among the Minorities and al-Jazira respectively. This grand strategic posture makes Riyadh and Jerusalem gravitate toward each other both in pursuit of common interests – long-term regional stability – and against common existential threat – the US-empowered ascent of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Although the outburst of the great Intifada three years ago was an inter-Arab affair – the duration, lethality and ultimate outcome of the great Intifada will be determined by the future of Iran. That is, the fate of the greater Middle East now hinges on how Iran envisages itself in historical and regional context, and not on the basis of which weapon systems Iran does or does not possess. That this process has been accelerated and intensified by Obama's desperation for a legacy-defining grand rapprochement with Tehran irrespective of its ramifications does not alter the quintessence of the dynamics and threat for the regional powers.

Historically, Persia, and more so Shiite Persia, was an integral and important component of the tapestry of minorities in the greater Middle East. Persia rose to prominence in alliances with global powers aimed to dominate the Arab Middle East. Most important were the alliances with the Chinese-Mongol Empires in which Persia played the role of the western pillar of the Silk Road. Toward this end, Persia acted as part of the tapestry of minorities in order to both reach the shores of the Mediterranean and contain any Sunni Arab ascent. This regional doctrine peaked between the early 1950's and the late 1970's, and was manifested in the Iranian-Israeli alliance. Presently, the Chinese are attempting to resurrect Iran's role in a rejuvenated Silk Road and are pressuring Turkey to also gravitate in this direction.

The roots of the current change and crisis are in the first decade of the 21st Century. The Bush administration attempted to come to terms with an ascending Iran in order to buy quiet in Iraq and, to a lesser extent, Afghanistan-Pakistan. Emboldened, Tehran abandoned all self-restraint associated with the legacy of minority identity in favor of a new role of an assertive regional hegemon. The Islamic Republic prioritized reversing the global posture of Shiite Islam from that of persecuted victim to that of a dominant Mahdist power avenging centuries of discrimination and persecution by Sunni Arabs. Desperate to reach a grand rapprochement with the Mullahs' Tehran to secure Obama's own political legacy – the Obama White House has reinforced and encouraged these grandiose aspirations of Tehran to the detriment of the most stalwart allies of the US (starting with Israel and Saudi Arabia).

Consequently, two major and interwoven trends now dominate and will determine the ultimate outcome of the great Intifada – the future of the northern parts of al-Jazira (the greater Bilad al-Sham) and the Fertile



Crescent of Minorities, and the quintessence of Iran's own self-perception of its regional and global ascent.

In the tapestry of forces that is emerging, both Syria and Iraq are no more (and Lebanon has long vanished). The minorities and urban elites are consolidating victory in western and central Syria that is dominated by Damascus. Meanwhile, the predominantly Sunni Arab grassroots, as well as several Christian communities, are gravitating toward Damascus for fear of the Jihadists. In the absence of viable indigenous socio-economic leadership, the Jihadists dominate the Euphrates valley from central Syria southeast of Aleppo to the Iraqi heartland just west of Baghdad, and the populated desert areas gravitating to the Euphrates valley, as a single unified entity. To the east, there is growing schism between the Iran-dominated Shiite leadership in Baghdad and the indigenous Shiite Arab leadership that is looking up to Moqtada Sadr and the rejuvenated Sadrist movement. In turn, the Sadrists enjoy theological and political support from Persian-oriented elements in Qom, Iran. The most fierce fighting throughout the region are along the fault lines between the Jihadist bloc and the traditional societies that refuse to accept their preeminence – the Sunni Arabs to the west, the Kurds to the north, the Shiite Arabs to the east, and increasingly the Sunni Beduins and Druze to the south.

All around the heart of al-Jazira the minorities are awakening. The Kurds of both Syria and Iraq have established a unified state in all but name. Along the shores of the Mediterranean, the Alawite awakening is strong and has resolved to support Bashar al-Assad's Damascus against the ascent of the Sunni Jihadists. Significantly, the Alawite forces also increasingly resist effort by both Iran and the HizbAllah to transform the Alawite unique religion back to Jaafari Shiism. The awakening of both the Kurds and the Alawites (Alavi in Turkish) is also spreading like wild fire into their long-oppressed communities inside Turkey. The Maronites are raising their heads against both the ascent of the HizbAllah and the radicalization of the Sunni minority. More and more Maronite militias are taking part in the otherwise Sunni-vs-Shiite fratricidal fighting spreading throughout Lebanon. It is only a question of time before Walid Jumblatt's Druze will also join the fray. In Iran, the Ahwazi Arabs are also rising up and escalating their guerrilla warfare and urban terrorism against the Islamic Republic's authorities.

Meanwhile, Iran and its Shiite allies (mainly the HizbAllah from Lebanon and a host of Shiite militias from Iraq and even Pakistan) are desperately trying to hold onto their strategic gains in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Using Abu-Musab al-Suri and other al-Qaida luminaries - Qasem Soleimani's Quds Forces are manipulating some of the most extremist – even Takfiri – Sunni Jihadist forces against both Damascus and Baghdad (who are ostensibly Tehran's allies) in order to prevent the ascent of inward focused regimes that will empower the minorities and Arab Bilad al-Sham at the expense of Iranian Shiite domination. For the Mahdists, reaching the shores of the Mediterranean on-land and dominating the corridor (Iraq, Syria and Lebanon) is considered the greatest achievement of the Mullahs' Tehran except for preserving the Islamic Revolution itself. For as long as the specter of sustaining this corridor to the sea exists – it'll be difficult to change Tehran. Khamenei and his inner-circle consider the deal with Obama an international recognition of their aspirations, rights and current regional posture. Tehran has no reason or incentive to step back from its assertive Mahdist doctrine.

Nevertheless, the great majority of the populace in both Syria and Iraq do not aspire to be part of the Iran-dominated corridor to the Mediterranean. However, their empowerment means enjoining with foci of power the US-led West considers sworn enemies and against the Islamists-Jihadists the West has been supporting and striving to empower over the last three years. With the population increasingly exhausted by the suffering of the last few years – the emerging grassroots effort to force a solution on the local state authorities as well as the outside world is becoming hostile to the US-led West, and not without good reason. Hence, if the US-led



West wants to retain influence in, and access to, the greater Middle East – there must be a profound change of policy to supporting the indigenous grassroots aspirations.

In the aftermath of three years of chaos and carnage wrought by the great Intifada's and their manipulation by the US-led West, the local powers would no longer surrender their control over the quest for, and implementation of, regional solutions. Local powers focus on restoring the preeminence of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities and conservative-traditionalist al-Jazira (and particularly Bilad al-Sham) as the two pillars of regional stability. This means a delicate balancing between the irreversible empowerment of sub-state entities and the sustenance of nationalist state-level authorities. Both the sub-state and state-level entities that rise in Damascus and Baghdad, and hopefully also Beirut, are at the expense of pro-Iran elements. The traditional elements trusted, respected and feared by all facets of the grassroots are the only legitimate forces capable of restoring central power in the face of the determined Jihadist opposition from both Sunni and Shiite movements. Significantly, the traditional leaders sponsored by Saudi Arabia are far from democratic but acceptable to the Sunni Arabs of the Euphrates valley and the north-south tribal heartlands on al-Jazira – that is, the Arab lands now contested by both the Jihadists and Iran. This outcome will be a major challenge for the US-led West because the US has demonized, rejected and alienated virtually every indigenous leader and movement in the greater Middle East in the name of pursuing “democracy” that is alien to, and thus rejected by, the vast majority of the grassroots.

The ascent of the minorities is also far from simple for the US-led West. All minority leaders now consider a strong Israel as the only guarantor of their ability to withstand the stifling Iranian surge and the Jihadist onslaught. However, the main US-led Western intervention in the Fertile Crescent of Minorities is the incessant pressure on Israel to “make peace” with the Palestinians who refuse to give up on their historic quest to destroy Israel. Meanwhile, the entire Arab World dreads the ensuing weakening of Israel – their sole hope for an umbrella against Iran now that the Obama White House has committed to the empowerment of Iran as a regional power. The Arab leaders care solely about Israel's ability to defend them and not about the Palestinians – for long a revolutionary and destabilizing force in the Arab heartlands notorious for helping Saddam Hussein's occupation of Kuwait. Obama's preoccupation with the peace process at the expense of the anti-Iranian umbrella is perceived by all Arab leaders as yet another proof of the US hostile disregard of the conservative Arabs and their vital interests.

In the Levant, the Druze and the Alawites are pulling their erstwhile allies the Maronites into awakening and rejection of Islamist stifling from both Sunni and Shiite entities. The Kurds of both Syria and Iraq have already established their unified state in all but name. The economic power of the Kurds coming from oil will enable them to further consolidate their state. This development is already inspiring the Alawites, Druze and Maronites to emulate. Being pragmatic, the minorities' leaders, including Kurdistan's Massoud Barzani, are cognizant that in the modern world they will have to accept some political arrangements recognizing the existence of modern states – Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Thus, the minorities will retain significantly more power than before the outbreak of the Intifada's. To survive, the Arab states will have to recognize their inherent weakness and the diffusion of power – particularly to the minorities.

Ultimately, however, the consolidation of indigenous socio-political order in the Fertile Crescent of Minorities and al-Jazira can be accomplished successfully only if Tehran faces reality and evolves anew as a minority power the way Iran used to be during the days of the Shah. In contrast to the short-sighted and misguided US-led West, both Russia and China base their Iran policies on rejuvenating and reinforcing the traditional Persian



doctrines in Tehran. Both Russia and China strive to create vested interests for Tehran to return to the traditional roles played by Persia in regional policies. Presently, these efforts have failed to enable the supporters of the traditional-nationalist strategies to overcome the power bastions of the Mahdists – but they prove a good start nonetheless. Helping the Russians with economic incentives for the right foci of power in Iran will help. As well, it is important for the international community to articulate which role and what regional power will a traditional Iran have in the new post-Intifada greater Middle East that is rising from the ashes. Such clarifications will assuage the dread of marginalization among many of the leading Mullahs.

The most dominant historical tenet prevailing in the greater Middle East from the dawn of history is that foreigners, even great powers, come and go without leaving much impact other than the carnage inflicted during their transient stay. Obama's America is not different, albeit more intrusive and destructive than most invading powers. The indigenous tapestry of peoples and foci of power have always dominated and will continue to dominate the greater Middle East. This tapestry can be best described as the interaction between the Fertile Crescent of Minorities and conservative-traditionalist al-Jazira (mainly Bilad al-Sham). These entities constitute the two pillars of regional stability. No matter the extent of foreign intrusion – the region always returns to relying on these two foci of power. They thus remain historically dominant no matter what.

In the current phase of regional dynamics, the rebound of both the region and the two foci of power will be faster and more powerful because of the return in force of historic-new Russia to regional dynamics. Tsarist Russia has long been the traditional nemesis of both imperial Iran and Turkey and their regional ascents. As well, Russia was the historical patron and guardian of the minorities of the Levant – the Alawites, Druze, Maronites, Armenians and Jews (an issue now reinforced by the Kremlin's unyielding commitment to the well-being of the large Russian Jewish and non-Jewish community in Israel – the largest outside the former Soviet Union). With Putin's Kremlin effectively standing up to Obama's White House and pushing the US-led West out of the region – Russia is buying time and space for both indigenous sub-state powers and state authorities to restore themselves, define new pragmatic modalities for power sharing, and stabilize a new-old stable greater Middle East. Left to their own devices and permitted to rely on their historical legacies, the leaders of both the Fertile Crescent of Minorities and conservative-traditionalist al-Jazira will save their own peoples and finally establish a viable regional order in the aftermath of three years of needless and destructive Islamist Intifada's still hailed by the US-led West as "the Arab Spring".

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