



The Khorasan Pledge

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Executive Summary

It's Spring in the Middle East. Hence, conditions are most conducive for escalation and efforts to consolidate tangible results. Finding viable long-term solutions to the festering conflicts is extremely challenging if not impossible. Moreover, the fighting and trauma have markedly exacerbated the profound mistrust between Shiites and Sunnis. At the crux is the role of Shiite Iran in the new-old Middle East.

The ascent of DI'ISH (The Islamic State of Iraq and Sham) and its Emirate of the Euphrates Valley is really about whether the Sunni Jihadist movement can secretly cooperate with Iran and receive assistance via the IRGC's Quds Forces. DI'ISH insists that by cooperating with Iran's Quds Forces – Al-Qaida betrayed the sacred cause of Sunni Jihadism. In late-April 2014, the DI'ISH escalated the theological struggle by introducing "the Khorasan Pledge" that replaced the traditional Bayat (secret oath of allegiance) to Al-Qaida's Ayman al-Zawahiri and Mullah Omar. The DI'ISH commanders and senior Emirs joining the "Khorasan Pledge" are cognizant that the schism that erupted in Al-Jazira will spread and might ultimately split the entire Jihadist Trend on the basis of Takfiri orthodoxy.

The Takfiri schism emanating from Bilad al-Sham and Iraq is already exacerbating and intensifying the myriad of conflicts plaguing the rest of the Middle East. Saudi Arabia is a major victim of the escalating Takfiri schism. And then there are sub-plots and struggles in Egypt, as well as in both southern and northern Jordan, that will be affected by the Takfiri surge and the Iranian exploitation thereof.

It is because of the ascent of Takfiri Jihadism in Al-Jazira that both Jordan and Israel broke away from the US embrace regarding their strategy in southern Syria. Israel and Jordan jointly stood up to the Obama White House and refused to both get overtly involved in the Syrian civil war against Assad's Damascus and spark a regional war involving Iran and the HizbAllah that would spread to Jordan. The strong position of both governments was far more anti-Obama than pro-Assad. This strong position also reflects the overall decline of the US posture even among the closest of allies.

Spring and early Summer 2014 will not be boring.



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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.



Yossef Bodansky



ANALYSIS

This is Spring,
And this is the hand of Spring
Wiping the blood off his face.

Adonis, *Al-Hayah*, 11 April 2014

(Adonis is Ali Ahmad Said Esber, a Syrian poet and essayist, born on January 1, 1930.)

It's Spring in the Middle East. The rising temperatures and the end of rain and snow make fighting more pleasant. Moreover, the stifling heat and humidity of the Summer are yet to begin. Hence, conditions are most conducive for escalation and efforts to consolidate tangible results.

However, with very few exceptions, the warring sides of the Middle East emerge from the bitter fighting of the second half of 2013 and the harsh winter that followed quite exhausted and embittered. Rather than return to the carnage, attrition and suffering of past years – wider than ever segments of the grassroots populace are inclined to resign to fate and embrace relative security, stability and livelihood. The governments on whose lands fighting and insurrection continue are cognizant of the trend and are therefore eager to reach whatever compromise possible with the grassroots populace in order to defuse and stifle the resumption of indigenous insurrections.

Alas, this is not to be. The existential and quintessential demands of the majority of protagonists do not lend themselves to compromise. Most fundamental is the irreconcilable rift between the unprecedented resolve of sub-state entities (tribes, clans, urban interest groups, etc.) to dominate their lives and fate, and the imperative for states to reassert their preeminence. Furthermore, many of the sub-state interest groups are cross-border entities and thus incompatible with the attempted revival of the centralized modern state. The growing relevance of the sub-state entities led to the awakening of the historic and never truly dormant enmities and power struggles between the region's minorities and the Sunni-Arab Al-Jazira. These enmities and mistrusts not only have a profound impact on the support for modern states but, more important, on the grassroots willingness to consider, let alone support, democratic governance where central power reflects demography.

No legal and governance reforms will erase the revival of these heritage-legacy conflicts. Absent creative innovative relations between state authorities and sub-state grassroots populace – these enmities will continue to fester and provoke more foci of insurrection and fratricidal violence. No matter how attrited and exhausted, sub-state grassroots populace will not give up the struggle for their self-determination for they no longer trust any other entity and source of power to protect them and provide for their well-being. Thus, even though there is genuine desire among both the elites and grassroots to bring the current fratricidal carnage to an end – the prevailing conditions and mega-trends in the greater Middle East make it impossible. Finding viable long-term solutions to the festering conflicts is extremely challenging if not impossible.

Meanwhile, these lingering tensions provide fertile ground for outside forces – both regional states and Jihadist movements – to challenge these mega-trends and exacerbate the carnage in quest for their own strategic, economic and theological interests. The evolving conflicts that will become even more lethal and fratricidal are between the forces/trends trying to consolidate the heritage-based new regional order and between the forces/trends advocating radical changes including the return to a mythical glory of yore.



Ultimately, the fighting and trauma have markedly exacerbated the profound mistrust between Shiites and Sunnis. At the crux is the role of Shiite Iran in the new-old Middle East.

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Back in Summer 2012, the Jihadists interpreted their imminent triumph in Afghanistan and Pakistan, coupled with the ascent of Iran, as the beginning of the fateful “End-of-Time Battle” for the Middle East. According to the Sayings attributed to Prophet Muhammad, the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Khorasan (which encompasses the Central Asian republics, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kashmir and Iran) would create conducive conditions for Islam’s triumph in the “End-of-Time Battle”. According to the Prophet’s Sayings, Jihadist forces would then arrive in the Middle East from the East and wage the fateful victorious battle for the liberation of Bilad al-Sham and Al-Jazira, and the establishment of the Mosque of Al-Aqsa in Jerusalem (Islam’s original Qiblah – that is, the direction of prayers – in 610-623) as the center of a new Caliphate.

Since the outbreak of the Arab Intifada’s or Awakening, the Jihadist Shurah has been working on laying the ground for Islamist-Jihadist ascent in the Middle East. Extensive organizational, financial and security support has been provided to the various Islamist-Jihadist entities throughout the Middle East by teams of highly trained Jihadist operatives called “the Son of the Soil/Land” (Ibn ul-Balad) that operate within non-state regional and heritage frames of reference. As well, special and terrorist operations have been conducted jointly by teams of the revitalized “Shadow Army” (Laskhar al-Zil) that had been trained in Afghanistan-Pakistan and Chechnya, and elite Jihadist networks of the various localized “Al-Qaidat Jihad” (the Foundation of Jihad) movements throughout the region that are also organized along heritage lines since the middle of the first decade of the 21st Century. The outcome of this effort is now apparent in the growing presence and influence of foreign volunteers in Bilad al-Sham and Al-Jazira (Syria-Iraq), the Sinai Peninsula, and Libya-Egypt.

The dramatic transformation of the Sunni Jihadist trend has influenced the realignment of the Turkish-Iranian grand strategy. Since the original outbreak of the Arab Intifada’s back in late 2010, both Ankara and Tehran have been torn by conflicting vital interests. Both powers have always had a common end objective – to suppress the possible ascent of traditional Sunni Arabism hailing from Bilad al-Sham and Al-Jazira. However, they have differed on the regional posture that would contain this ascent of Arabism. Ankara has been determined to expand its regional hegemony to the detriment of the traditional power system originating from the Arabi an Peninsula by establishing a north-south Sunni Wedge that will absorb the House of al-Saud. Tehran has been loath to give up on its east-west Shiite Crescent with Lebanon’s HizbAllah and Iraq’s Shiite Government that gives Iran access to the shores of the Mediterranean. Presently, the common denominator of both powers remains the determination to quickly dominate the Sunni heartland between central Syria and western Iraq. At the same time, the Iranian-Turkish fierce competition on implementation and supremacy remains the key to the escalating fratricidal war in Syria and Iraq.

This is why the ascent of DI’ISH (aka The Islamic State of Iraq and Sham) and its Emirate of the Euphrates Valley is so problematic for both Ankara and Tehran. The power struggle between DI’ISH and the various Jihadist groups affiliated with Ayman al-Zawahiri’s Al-Qaida (such as Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, etc.) is really about the quintessential issue whether the Sunni Jiha dist movement being neo-Salafi –and thus inherently anti-Shiite – can secretly cooperate with Iran and receive comprehensive assistance via the IRGC’s Quds Forces (weapons, funding, guidance, shelters in Iran, etc.).

The conflict became vicious and vindictive in late-February after the assassination in Aleppo of Abu-Khaled al-



Suri – Zawahiri’s personal emissary to Bilad al-Sham and Abu-Musab al-Suri’s closest friend. The assassination not only resulted in escalation of the fighting between Jihadist forces in northern and central Syria – but also started a profound theological debate about whether the Jihadist movement should uncompromisingly confront all apostates and Shiites or cooperate with some of them in the expedient pursuit of such higher goals as the establishing an Islamist Caliphate in the greater Middle East.

In mid-April 2014, the DI’ISH escalated the dispute with a major symbolic step of great significance. DI’ISH’s Abu-Muhammad al-Adnani set the tone with a fierce communique. “Al-Qaida today is no longer a Foundation of Jihad,” he wrote. “Its leadership has become a hammer to break the project of the Islamic State.” The threat cannot be tolerated because “the leaders of Al-Qaida have deviated from the correct path [of anti-Shiite zeal]. They have divided the ranks of the mujahideen in every place.”

In late-April, the DI’ISH escalated the theological struggle by introducing “the Khorasan Pledge.” Muhammad al-Adnani explained that drastic steps were imperative because “Al-Qaida deviated from the rightful course,” and therefore “it is not a dispute about who to kill or who to give your allegiance. It is a question of religious practices being distorted and an approach veering off the right path.” Nine prominent Al-Qaida Emirs from the Middle East, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, and Iran declared their allegiance to the new Emir of the Faithful Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi al-Qurashi – the Emir of DI’ISH. The nine are Sheikh Abu Ubaidah al-Lubnani, Abu al-Muhammad al-Urduni, Abu Jurair al-Shamali, Abu al-Huda al-Soudani, Abdulaziz al-Maqdisi (brother of Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi), Abdullah al-Punjabi, Abu Yunus al-Kurdi, Abu Aisha al-Qurtubi, and Abu Musab al-Tadamuni. Simply put, the Emirs accepted “the Khorasan Pledge” over their Bayat (secret oath of allegiance) to Zawahiri and Mullah Omar.

The nine Emirs published a lengthy theological thesis in which they explained the urgent imperative to adopt “the Khorasan Pledge” in the context of the history of the Jihadist struggle in the Middle East and beyond. They analyzed the dispute over the Takfiri quintessence of the Jihad and especially the dispute between Abu-Musab al-Zarqawi and Zawahiri over the Jihad in Iraq in the first decade of the 21st Century. This theological dispute is even more prevalent in the current war in Bilad al-Sham “where it was the duty of DI’ISH to reach out and provide support for its people, to defeat the conspiracy of the two armies – the Syrian Army and the Free [Syrian] Army.” Cognizant of the inevitable triumph of the Jihadist forces, the nine Emirs explained, “the forces of infidelity and apostasy quickly sowed the seeds of hypocrisy, using new groups under Islamic sounding names to be a rival and an obstacle to the Islamic State.” The Emirs allude to the Al-Qaida affiliates that were guided by Abu-Musab al-Suri into secret cooperation with Iran’s Quds Forces in order to sustain their Jihad. They refuse to accept the excuses of Al-Qaida leaders that “the groups did not have any courage to enforce judgements over those who disobey Sharia, under the pretext of avoiding a clash with the people or due to their inability and incapacity, although they enforced in secret more than they did out in the open.”

On the contrary, the nine Emirs stress, the tacit and expedient cooperation with Shiite Iran was not limited to the Jihadists under duress in Syria but was rather a new trend in the Islamist movement. The most glaring example of the theological corruption of the Islamist-Jihadist creed is “former Egyptian President Muhammad Mursi, who was proven to be an apostate, even for those who had a semblance of comprehension. Or was it an indication of a new kind of Jihad?” The Emirs emphasize that Mursi’s rapprochement with Iran and other apostate states, as well as refusal to launch a Jihad against Israel, while he was ostensibly the Egyptian leader on behalf of the Muslim Brothers was a conscientious betrayal of the Islamist creed. Mursi and his allies made “a political call, without mentioning the question of arms. They replaced many Sharia terms with new concepts,



which carry different interpretations.” It is because of this deviation from the right and righteous path that the Islamists lost power in Egypt.

The nine Emirs regret that they did not rise to meet the challenge earlier – before the Muslim Nation suffered so much. In conclusion, they write, “we ask Allah for forgiveness for being late to reveal the truth and fix what we corrupted, disobeyed, and did not accept. Thus, we wrote this message to the Muslim Nation and to ask forgiveness from our Lord. We showed that DI’ISH was right. It raised the banner without hesitation, weakness, or account to anyone but Allah. We count them as such and, as long as they persevere, they have [our support and allegiance] for its Emir of the Faithful Sheikh Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi al-Qurashi and our obedience in fortune and adversity and in hardship and prosperity, without challenging his command. But if it alters or deviates, it will only get from us what others had gotten before.”

Although the theological campaign surrounding the “Khorasan Pledge” glosses over the specific issue of Sunni-Jihadist cooperation with Shiite Iran, it is very explicit about the viciousness of the ensuing fratricidal fighting. DI’ISH holds the establishment Jihadist trend responsible for starting the destruction of Bilad al-Sham, Iraq and northern Al-Jazira on the altar of relations with Iran. Abu Ali al-Anbari, a DI’ISH senior commander from Iraq now fighting in Syria was very explicit about the intensity of the fight against Al-Qaida-affiliate forces. “Either we eliminate them or they will eliminate us,” he repeatedly told a commanders’ gathering. Both the DI’ISH commanders and senior Emirs joining the “Khorasan Pledge” are cognizant that the schism that erupted in Al-Jazira will spread and might ultimately split the entire Jihadist Trend on the basis of Takfiri orthodoxy.

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The Takfiri schism emanating from Bilad al-Sham and Iraq is already exacerbating and intensifying the myriad of conflicts plaguing the rest of the Middle East. Saudi Arabia is a major victim of the escalating Takfiri schism and the crisis is aggravated by the deterioration of the King’s health and unresolved succession process. In principle, the Takfiri DI’ISH should have been the guardian and protégé of Riyadh because of their uncompromising anti-Shia and anti-Iran posture. However, DI’ISH also undermines the preeminence of the tribal power structure in Al-Jazira and thus harms the Shamari Nation – the bulwark of support for the Nagdi tribes of central Saudi Arabia who are the main supporters of the Abdallah faction of the House of Al-Saud and provide loyal recruits for the Saudi National Guard.

In the western part of Bilad al-Sham, the long-established coalition of minorities (Alawites, Druze, Maronites, etc.) that dominates security and the economic elite (urban Sunni Arabs, Armenians, etc.) continues to consolidate their hold over the viable areas of pre-war Syria and Lebanon. While strategic fighting are drawing to an end, a lot of mopping up are yet to be completed and Jihadist terrorism will continue for a long time to come. Only then will the massive task of rebuilding the country begin. However, the triumph of Assad’s Damascus is now irreversible irrespective of the extent of growing Turkish and Qatari intervention and even possible US-led Western military intervention. The inner-Sunni vicious fighting over Takfiri orthodoxy vs cooperation with Iran’s Quds Forces effectively self-neutralizes the Sunni Jihadist forces in the greater Aleppo area – the war’s last main front. Meanwhile, the Sunni Arab grassroots rush into Assad’s fold in quest for protection against the carnage wrought by the DI’ISH-Al-Qaida fratricidal fighting. Presently, the alliance between Damascus and Tehran on sustaining the Shiite Crescent – the on-land access to the Mediterranean – contains the HizbAllah’s provoking of Israel, restrains the Shiites political ascent in Lebanon, and provides military sustenance against Sunni onslaught.



In the north, the de-facto unified Kurdish entity is now projecting power into both Turkey (through the revival of PKK insurgency) and north-central ex-Iraq. In late-April, Kurdistan Region President Massoud Barzani signed a secret document affirming that “confederation will resolve our [all-Kurdish] issues.” The document outlines a program legalizing and organizing the gradual integration of other Kurdish entities into an Erbil-led political entity. Erbil thus provides the framework for other Kurdish zones - starting with Turkey’s - to secede and join Erbil.

Along the Euphrates Valley from Aleppo to Baghdad, the DI’ISH Emirate increases pressure on Baghdad. To withstand the onslaught, Shiite-Arab Mesopotamia is increasingly beholden to the leadership from Najaf and Qarbala that facilitates the growing flow of recruits and funds to sustain Baghdad’s war effort. However, Baghdad is incapable of ignoring the dominance of both Tehran and Qom (the enduring legacy of the Grand Ayatollahs Sistani-Ha’eri agreement of August 2004 over the control of Najaf’s Great Mosques that was orchestrated by the Sadrists and enthusiastically embraced by the US to the detriment of the future of the greater Middle East). Shiite Baghdad is desperately trying to stem the tide and contain DI’ISH and the Sunni-Arab awakening in Al-Jazira but has so far failed. The increasingly sectarian character of the battle for Baghdad and the vitriolic Shiite propaganda accompanying it send the Sunni populace into the fold of DI’ISH and away from the Al-Qaida affiliates.

Further south, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States are increasingly vulnerable to the Shiite ascent in the eastern Arabian Peninsula as reflected in the growing instability in Bahrain. Both Tehran and its regional protégés operating under the umbrella of the Islamic Republic of Eastern Arabia are emboldened by the US abandonment of Riyadh and all other Gulf States. They are convinced they can escalate their insurrection from Kuwait to Yemen’s Houthis with confidence that there will be no US-led retribution. In eastern Arabia, Riyadh is increasingly beholden to the Saudi Ikhwan (a different local militant movement that has nothing to do with the Egyptian Ikhwan and is akin to the Russian Cossacks on the fault lines of the North Caucasus) to fight and contain the local Shiite insurrection. However, the Saudi Ikhwan is a Takfiri creed whose world view is very similar to that of the DI’ISH. It is therefore only a question of time before their leaders will gravitate toward the “Khorasan Pledge” despite the DI’ISH’s clash with the Shamari and Nagdi tribes. The overall stability and unity of Saudi Arabia will then be challenged.

Meanwhile, Doha keeps double dealing in its quest for regional preeminence. Qatar is tacitly acting on behalf of Iran throughout the region for strategic and financial gains. On the one hand, Qatar is Turkey’s closest ally in the campaign to sponsor and unleash the Al-Qaida-affiliated forces in Syria and Iraq in order to contain both Shiite Iran and the Takfiri Sunnis, and instead further the north-south Sunni Wedge that will ultimately undermine the House of al-Saud. Then, Doha is convinced, it will be able to share hegemony with Tehran over the rest of the GCC and the Arab World as a whole. Iran is convinced that the aggregate outcome of the triumph of Assad’s Damascus and the fratricidal carnage of the DI’ISH-Al-Qaida fighting will prevent Turkey from ever consolidating a north-south Sunni Wedge challenging the preeminence of Iran’s east-west Shiite Crescent. Hence, while Qatar’s renewed audacious ascent has been instrumental for the furthering and sponsorship of a wide myriad of Al-Qaida-affiliated Jihadist forces all over the Greater Middle East that undermine all pro-Western forces and governments - at the end Qatar will remain beholden to Iranian backing against Saudi Arabia and the GCC.

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And then there are sub-plots and struggles in Egypt, in southern Jordan, and the unity between the HAMAS and



the PA (that has just begun at the time of writing and is therefore too early to write on), that will be affected by the Takfiri surge and the Iranian exploitation thereof.

The struggle for Egypt is on the verge of a major escalation as the key sponsors of the Jihadist cause in Syria are now committed to a similar campaign against Egypt. The overall strategic objective is to prevent the emergence of an inward-looking regional order based on the Arab heartland shielded by the Fertile Crescent of Minorities and thus excluding the external forces. A strong and stable Egypt is considered a cornerstone of such a regional posture. Since Russia is the primary supporter and sponsor of the emerging regional order – the sponsors of the Jihadists are convinced the Obama Administration supports them just as President Obama is supporting their Jihad in Syria.

Jihadist sources directly involved in the sponsorship of Jihadist causes in Syria and Egypt report on the comparable effort against Egypt. According to these Jihadist sources, “attempts to create a Free Egyptian Army in Libya have been identified, with the participation of the Ikhwan [Muslim Brothers] and Al-Qaida and under Qatari-Turkish-Iranian patronage, in addition to plans to target vital installations, including Cairo International Airport, the storming of prisons to free Ikhwan detainees, and spreading chaos to sabotage the presidential elections.” The Libyan intelligence services permit the advance preparations. “Factories in Libya are making Egyptian army uniforms and distributing them to members of the Free Egyptian Army, in preparation to enter the country in the future and implement those schemes and awaiting the zero hour, which will be set by the intelligence agencies that control them,” the sources explained. Large quantities of weapons, vehicles and other equipment are being delivered to the Egyptian groups and stored in the Darna Emirate (in eastern Libya) pending dispatch into Egypt.

The Emir (Commander) of the Free Egyptian Army is Sharif al-Radwani. He is currently running the training camps and weapon storage sites of the Free Egyptian Army in Libya. In recent years, Sharif al-Radwani participated in the Jihads in Syria, Lebanon, and Afghanistan-Pakistan. The key commander responsible for coordination with foreign sponsors and intelligence services is Ismail al-Salabi. He is a senior member of the Al-Qaida high command. Significantly, Ismail al-Salabi is a friend and confidant of the head of Qatari intelligence, Ghanem al-Kubaisi, and both meet frequently. The senior commanders are also coordinating with the supreme leaders of the clandestine arm of the Muslim Brothers the launch of terrorist operations inside Egypt. The Jihadist sources specified that “Kami al-Saifi and Ismail al-Salabi, who are both in Al-Qaida, were in contact with the Ikhwan’s Deputy Supreme Guide Khairat al-Shater and have a special role to play in creating instability prior to the upcoming presidential elections.”

The overall activities in the training camps in Libya suggest that the Free Egyptian Army is comprised of a few distinct elements each of which joined in after building expertise and cohesion in other Jihadist fronts – mainly Syria and Libya. The best organized and best trained are the “Al-Qaida elements” under the command of Sufian al-Hakim. They joined the training camps as a cohesive unit with well-defined cells and networks – including inside Egypt. They receive weapons, ammunition and other sophisticated equipment in the camps. The first cells are already being smuggled across the Libyan borders. The largest element of the Free Egyptian Army is comprised of Egyptian students who fled to Libya. The military commander of these forces is Abu-Fahd al-Zaz – a veteran of the fighting in Syria who returned to Libya to help launch the Jihad in Egypt. The liaison officer with the Qataris in the training camps is Abu-Ubaida – a veteran Al-Qaida commander who had worked with the Qataris in Libya, Syria and other sensitive projects. Qatari intelligence and military officers are present on Libyan soil and visit Abu-Ubaida frequently to inspect the camps and get progress reports.



Significantly, the Free Egyptian Army is being organized and run separately but parallel to the ongoing expansion of the armed Jihadist groups in and out of the Sinai – particularly the Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (Supporters of Jerusalem) forces. The Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis started as Sinai-based and Egyptian offshoots of the HAMAS forces in Gaza affiliated with the Egyptian Muslim Brothers (of which the HAMAS is an extension). In mid-July 2013, soon after the Egyptian military overthrew the Mursi administration and saved Egypt from collapse, the Ikhwan established a command post at the Gaza Beach Hotel in the Gaza Strip. The primary mission of the command post is to organize and run the Islamist resistance and, should the need arise, a civil war in Egypt. The Ikhwan cooperate closely with the HAMAS and the various Al-Qaida-affiliated neo-Salafist and Jihadist forces in Sinai.

The Gaza Beach Hotel command post is run by Mahmud Izzat Ibrahim – a senior deputy of the Supreme Guide known as “the Iron Man”. HAMAS sources claim that he is Shater’s right hand man and deputy for special projects in the underground/ clandestine apparatus. Initially, there were at least six Egyptian senior operatives in the Gaza Beach Hotel, as well as a few HAMAS and other Arab Jihadist leaders help the Egyptians. In mid-August 2013, the number and seniority of the Egyptians at the Gaza Beach Hotel command post rose markedly. Most important was the arrival of the supreme leader of the clandestine arm of the Ikhwan. Both the real name and nom-de-guerre of the commander are unknown. The most senior HAMAS officials are referring to him as “Mr. X” and hold him at great reverence. The key to the power of “Mr. X” is that he received his Takfiri education from Sheikh Abdul Meguid al-Shazli – the mentor of both Shater and Supreme Guide Muhammad Badei. Some twenty senior commanders and operatives of the clandestine apparatus of the Ikhwan arrived with “Mr. X” – bringing the total of Egyptians at the Gaza Beach Hotel command center to over 30 on top of the few dozen Palestinians and other Arab Jihadists who assist in running operations not only in Egypt but also throughout the Middle East.

The Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis in its current structure and role was funded in late-August 2013 by the Ikhwan leadership. The turning point was a deal between Deputy Supreme Guide Khairat al-Shater and Muhammad al-Zawahiri – Ayman’s brother and leader of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad – that brought the HAMAS special operations command into the deal. As part of the agreement, the Ikhwan committed to supplying both Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis and the HAMAS with weapons from Libya that would be delivered through the Gaza tunnels. Qatar agreed to fund these weapons and both Qatari and Turkish intelligence officials coordinated the weapons purchase and delivery with their Libyan counterparts. Little wonder that HAMAS officials often refer to Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis as “the military wing of the Ikhwan” in Egypt. However, the Ikhwani supreme leadership remained apprehensive about their dependence on the Gaza Strip and the Sinai, and therefore, explained the Jihadist sources, “kept planning to form its own militia” – the Free Egyptian Army.

Meanwhile, explained Jihadist sources, the Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis was being converted into an elite Jihadist force “made up of HAMAS militants, youths of the Ikhwan, and fighters trained in Afghanistan.” Indeed, the Gaza Beach Hotel command post is coordinating closely with Ramzi Mowafi – the Egyptian Al-Qaida leader known as the Chief of Sinai – and the Jihadist army in the Sinai. The first manifestation of the new cooperation is the emergence in the Sinai of a new Jihadist group – “The Communicators with the Mahdi” – that although comprised mainly of Palestinian members of the HAMAS and Islamic Jihad from the Gaza Strip is focused on fighting the Egyptian Security Forces.

Fall 2013 saw the beginning of sustained operations at the heart of Egypt. The first strikes were amateurish and caused extensive harm to bystanders. The Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis apologized and explained that the attackers “did their best in terms of monitoring and planning so as to avoid injuring any innocent Muslim.” Ansar Bayt al-



Maqdis stressed that the ultimate objective of the mujahideen is “attacking [the government] without inflicting harm in the ranks of the Muslims” and called on all Egyptian Muslims “to come together around their mujahideen brothers in their war against” the security forces. An official identified as Abu-Osama al-Masri emerged as the chief spokesman of Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis.

In winter 2013-2014, the Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis became sufficiently strong and stable to escalate operations throughout the heart of Egypt – from Cairo to the Delta and Suez Canal cities. The Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis networks have since carried out numerous car-bombings, shooting attacks and assassinations of senior security personnel. The Jihadist commanders consider this the beginning of a long Jihad that will ultimately restore Islamist government in Egypt. The Jihadists are escalating their Jihad to destabilize Egypt through “the battle for avenging the Muslims of Egypt.” According to the Jihadist sources, the primary objectives of the Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis are “to target vital installations, mainly the bombing of the Aswan High Dam, which was at the top of their target list, in addition to targeting a number of churches, places of worship, and police and army facilities.”

In early 2014, the Jihadists announced the formation of a new Jihadist group called Ajudat Misr (Soldiers of Egypt) in order to further separate between the Sinai-Gaza Jihad and the Jihad at the heart of Egypt. Ajudat Misr formally announced itself on 23 January 2014. The first communique stressed the group’s commitment to eradicating the “criminal elements” within the Egyptian government and took credit for more than a dozen attacks since November 2013 that had been previously claimed by Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis and other Jihadist entities. The Ajudat Misr further defined its position within the rising Jihadist forces in Egypt in early April 2014. The Ajudat Misr explained that the veteran Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis are “our brothers” who provide extensive help for the Jihadist struggle in Egypt including “information about the movements of the officers and personnel of the criminal services, and their addresses.” Presently, the communiqués of Ajudat Misr are the most prominent claims of responsibility for Jihadist terrorism at the heart of Egypt.

The Jihadist sources stressed that once the Free Egyptian Army, the new forces of the Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis and the Ajudat Misr, as well as a myriad of localized Jihadist-Takfiri networks are unleashed – Cairo will be shocked by the spread and magnitude of the violence. The Jihadist leaders and their sponsoring states are convinced that “Egypt is in a real crisis” and that Cairo is incapable of meeting the new challenge. “The ignorance of the security forces and intelligence services of these new elements of terrorism is disastrous,” the Jihadist sources stressed.

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Meanwhile, the extent of the spreading Jihadist-Takfiri threat was clearly manifested in the riots in Maan, southern Jordan, on 22-23 April 2014.

Islamist tribal youth rioted against the reign of King Abdallah II – first in the Al Hussein Bin Talal University and later all over town. Initially, the rioters’ demands had to do with food, employment and conditions at the university (the extent of imposing Islam). Subsequently, the demands focused on the Islamic character of the Hashemite Kingdom and its relations with Syria, Israel and the West. There were exchanges of automatic fire and at least one rioter – a 22-year old militant – was killed and dozens wounded (from shooting and from police clubs).

The Maan riots broke out in response to the imposition of new terrorism law that effectively prevents legal volunteering to cross-border Jihads (such as Syria, Iraq or Chechnya) and curtails Islamist-Jihadist incitement



and recruitment at home. Hence, the initial rhetoric of the rioters notwithstanding – the Maan riots were over the role of Jordan in the region: A participant in the Jihadist up-surge or part of the anti-Jihadist conservative-tribal milieu. With King Abdallah II committed to the latter policy – the Maan riots were indeed anti-Hashemite in all but the shouting of slogans.

Hence, the Maan riots constitute a major threat to the stability of the Kingdom. The Hashemites' survival depends on the Beduins – the central tribes and the southern tribes. Security is sustained by efforts of the Beduin tribes against the agrarian-Palestinian population in the Amman area and northwards to the Syrian border. The non-Beduin population is now a distinct majority in Jordan. The agrarian-Palestinian population is increasingly Islamist-Jihadist and anti-monarchy. The threat is in the cracks among Jordan's Beduin tribes. For long, the southern tribes have been gravitating to the influence of their kin across the border in northwestern Saudi Arabia – the most radical and Takfiri-oriented Islamist-Jihadist groupings in Saudi Arabia led by the Imams of Buraydah in Al-Qassim. Hence, the further the southern tribes withdraw from supporting the Hashemites and into the fold of the Islamists-Jihadists – the bolder the Islamists-Jihadists in the north and center become in their endless desire to overthrow the King and establish an Islamist State with Palestinian preeminence.

Simply put, there are not enough of the fiercely loyal central Beduin tribes and Circassians to save the Hashemite Monarchy should a massive eruption – like the September 1970 to July 1971 “Black September” revolt – happens again.

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The Hashemite Kingdom has every reason to fear for its own stability and survival in lieu of the concurrent developments in northern Jordan and southern Syria.

The morning of 16 April 2014 saw a major turning point in the Syrian conflict. A couple of F-16s of the Royal Jordanian Air Force attacked vehicles inside Syria as they were trying to cross the Jordanian border from Syria in the area of al-Ruwaishid. The Jordanian bombing destroyed all or most of the vehicles and caused heavy casualties among the personnel.

The vehicles destroyed were “technicals” belonging to Jihadist forces. A column of vehicles carrying heavy weapons (small-caliber guns, heavy machine-guns and rockets) and dozens of Jihadist fighters was withdrawing under attack by the Syrian military. With the Syrian forces closing in, the Jihadists decided to seek shelter across the Jordanian border in an area densely populated by refugees and northern tribes (who are part of the agrarian-Palestinian milieu). The Jordanian border guards fired in the air and shouted at the Jihadists that they could not cross the border with their weapons and vehicles. When the Jihadists pushed on, the Jordanian Air Force was called in and the F-16s bombed the Jihadist column while still on Syrian territory but in very close proximity to the border.

The Syrian military withdrew and did not intervene. The official response from Damascus to the Jordanian bombing put the incident in larger perspective. Damascus did not criticize Jordan for bombing targets on Syrian territory. Instead, a Syrian senior military official simply told senior diplomats from friendly countries that Damascus and the Syrian military had nothing to do with the incident. “No military or armored vehicles belonging to the Syrian army moved towards the Jordanian border, and so what was targeted by the Jordanian air force does not belong to the Syrian army,” said the statement he read.

The significance of the Jordanian bombing lies in the overall context. The bombing was the climax of ten days in



which both Jordan and Israel broke away from the US embrace regarding their strategy in southern Syria.

Back in early Autumn 2013, there was great quandary about the future US-sponsored strategy against the Assad regime. The plans of Obama's Washington and their allies relied on a US-led Western military intervention (capitalizing on a major provocation such as the Jihadists' Chemical attack in Damascus) that would be exploited by a major Jihadist force in northern Jordan to advance quickly, occupy Damascus and declare the end of the Assad reign. But this scenario failed to materialize as the intelligence communities in the US and virtually all Western allies questioned the "official version" of the Damascus attack and refused to participate in the military intervention campaign advocated by the Obama White House. Politically besieged and isolated, President Obama abandoned military intervention in Syria.

Hence, Jordanian intelligence permitted US Intelligence ("Mukhabarat Amriki") and their Saudi Arabian counterparts to organize in early Autumn 2013 a meeting with key Jihadist commanders from southern Syria even though they were formally affiliated with Al-Qaida. Saudi Deputy Defense Minister Prince Salman bin Sultan, who is in charge of the Syrian southern front for Riyadh, attended the meeting – thus highlighting its significance. The main Jihadist delegation was led by Bashar al-Zoubi, the Emir of Jabhat al-Nusra in southern Syria. Zoubi is originally from al-Taiba, a small town in the Daraa region. Before the war, he was a truck driver and a smuggler between Syria and Saudi Arabia. He was caught a few times by the Saudis and started doing petty jobs for Saudi intelligence. When the war broke, he joined the FSA forces in the Daraa area. A few months later he was approached by Jordanian and Saudi intelligence and convinced to switch to the Jihadist forces and ultimately assume command of the Fallujah Brigade in the Houran. By Spring 2012, Zoubi was already the best ally of Jordanian and Saudi intelligence in southern Syria.

For the early Autumn 2013 meeting with the Americans and Saudis, Zoubi brought with him Abu Muhammad al-Julani, the Supreme Leader of Jabhat al-Nusra who is originally from the Golan Heights area, and Abu Muthanna, the Emir of the Jabhat al-Nusra Emirate in the southwest section of the Houran – that is, on the border with Jordan. The representatives of the US Intelligence ("Mukhabarat Amriki"), the Saudi Arabian and Jordanian Intelligence Services decided to form and equip a new force of "moderate Jihadists" in northern Jordan for a major decisive offensive on Damascus. Although the fighters would come from a myriad of Saudi-sponsored Jihadist entities in southern Syria, the force would come under the command of Bashar al-Zoubi and would thus nominally belong to Jabhat al-Nusra. US Intelligence ("Mukhabarat Amriki"), along with the Saudi Arabian and Jordanian Intelligence Services, would provide "extensive training" and equipment in camps in the al-Rasifa region north of Amman. According to a Jihadist commander, the training he received were conducted "with direct US supervision" at every stage.

Jordanian Intelligence remained concerned about the extent of control over this force since more than 2,000 of the Jihadist mujahideen in its ranks are from the Jordanian Salafist-Takfiri creed that is also involved in Islamist insurrection in Jordan. The spiritual guides of these Jordanian Jihadists include the key sponsors of "the Khorasan Pledge". Thus, these Jihadists can be expected to conspire against the Hashemite Kingdom irrespective of their involvement in the Syrian Jihad. Increasingly apprehensive about the US-sponsored Jihadists in their midst, in the last few days of March 2014 the Jordanians flew more than a thousand Jihadists and their weapons from Marka airport in Amman to Antakya in the Hatay province of Turkey. The Jihadists from Jordan reinforced highly experienced but depleted Jihadist units, mostly comprised of Chechens, for the early April assault on Latakia.

The first units of Zoubi's new Jihadist force were deemed combat ready in early Spring 2014. On the night of



5/6 April, a Katiba (Battalion) of some 350 US-trained and -equipped “moderate Jihadists” (including muja-hideen from Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and other Al-Qaida-affiliated entities) crossed from northern Jordan on their way to Damascus. They were to link up with some 150 local Jihadists and together march on Damascus using the western route that runs parallel to the border with Israel on the Golan Heights. On the night of 7/8 April, the column was ambushed by the Syrian military that had followed the local Jihadists. By mid-day, the 350 Jihadists entered an abandoned fortified site of the Syrian military called Tal al -Ahmar that overlooks the key road from Quneitra into the center of the Golan Heights.

The Syrian military started bringing in heavy forces (tanks, IFVs, self-propelled artillery) of the 90th Brigade – one of Maher al-Assad’s elite forces – with local auxiliary militias (including Iraqi and Lebanese HizbAllah units). Damascus was adamant on not only blocking the Jihadists’ advance on Damascus but on clearing the strategic Tal al-Akhmar. This was a routine reaction of the Syrian military to localized surges by any rebel forces.

Enter the Obama White House. On 9 April, the upper-most echelons at the Obama White House started demanding that Israel strikes the Syrian 90th Brigade before they could attack the Jihadists at Tal al -Akhmar. The Obama White House argued that the movement of Syrian heavy forces was exceeding and violating the 1974 cease-fire agreement. Jerusalem argued that there was no doubt that the Syrians would withdraw the moment they cleared Tal al-Akhmar and that having to choose who sits near the Golan Height border – Israel prefers the Syrian Army to the Al-Qaida-affiliated Jihadists. Moreover, any Israeli strike would be an intervention in the Syrian civil war and thus likely to spark a regional war involving Iran and the HizbAllah, and spreading to Jordan (from where the Jihadists had arrived). Israeli senior officials described the pressure of the Obama White House as “intense and ugly”. However, Jerusalem did not go to war.

Over the next couple of days, the 90th Brigade pushed the Jihadists from Tal al-Akhmar to another abandoned strong point called Tal al-Ahrar that is closer to Jordan. By then, the Jihadists suffered at least 100 casualties with a couple of dozen wounded abandoned near the Israeli border fence (from where they were picked up and taken to Israeli hospitals). The Syrian military had forces at the ready. A composite force of 90th Brigade units and militias, both local and foreign, besieged Tal al-Ahrar the moment the Jihadists entered. Once again the Obama White House started pressuring Jerusalem in a most ugly manner – demanding anew that Israel attacks the Syrian forces. The Obama White House warned that should Israel refuse to strike the Syrian forces the US would blame Israel for the collapse of the negotiations with the Palestinians – as Secretary of State John Kerry did at the Senate hearings. Nevertheless, Israel continued to refuse striking the Syrians.

Meanwhile, once it became clear that the Jihadists would not reach Damascus, the “Mukhabarat Amriki” recommended that a major diversion be launched. The Martyrs of the Yarmouk Brigade – known as the “last FSA brigade” in the Daraa area – was instructed to hastily organize and launch a large-scale attack on the Air Force Intelligence Headquarters in Wadi al-Zaidi, at Daraa’s entrance, no later than April 13. Brigade commander Brig. Gen. Abdullah al-Qaraiza was to lead the attack. Since the Martyrs of the Yarmouk Brigade hardly exists in reality, the Saudi Arabian and Jordanian Intelligence Services convinced the Jihadist commanders of the local Jabhat Thuwar Suria and Jabhat al-Nusra Brigades to contribute the bulk of the forces for the “FSA” operation. However, as the extent of the collapse of the Jihadist advance on Damascus was becoming clear, Jordanian Intelligence became apprehensive about the consequences of any additional provocation launched from northern Jordan and vetoed the attack on Wadi al-Zaidi.

Forces of the 90th Brigade completed clearing Tal al-Ahrar and nearby villages on April 14. The remaining Jihadists – numbering 100-150 mujahideen – started making their way back to Jordan with Syrian forces in hot



pursuit. The Jihadists hoped to rely on support, supplies and even fire-power from other Jihadist forces in the area. Therefore, they evaded the strongly protected border area and instead moved eastward toward the Daraa area and on to Zoubi's al-Taiba. From there, the exhausted Jihadists tried to reach the border in the al-Ruwaishid area in the southeastern wing of the Houran that is considered an area controlled by Zoubi. However, Amman was now far more petrified about the impact that the Takfiri and Jihadist forces would have on the agitated and radicalized population in northern Jordan than Bashar al-Assad's forces. Hence, in the early morning of April 16, when the remaining Jihadist forces tried to cross into Jordan, they were bombed by the Jordanian F-16s.

Assad's Damascus comprehended the new dynamics. Hence, on 18-19 April, Syrian Intelligence reached out to the commanders of numerous Jihadist units in the Damascus area – started with the Jobar and Douma areas – then battered by the Syrian military. The Syrian Intelligence emissaries offered the Jihadist commanders safe passage for themselves and their forces if they withdrew southwards toward Jordan – as far south as the area stretching from Daraa to Quneitra (for as long as they don't approach the Syrian-Israeli border). The leaders of the Syrian Liberation Army, the Brigade of the Beloved Mustafa, and the Imprisoned Sheikh Omar Abdul-Rahman Brigades – the last two formally affiliated with Al-Qaida – immediately accepted the offer of Syrian Intelligence and started their way south on 20 April. Local self-defense militia units, rather than the Syrian military, replaced the withdrawing Jihadists. The Jihadists took with them the surplus weapons that had been pushed into the Damascus area from Jordan in recent months in preparation for the major offensive against Damascus that never came. Consequently, Damascus significantly increased the Jihadist pressure on Amman – compelling Jordanian Intelligence to further reassess their commitment to the US-sponsored anti-Syria Jihad.

At the political-level, the US pushed a large Jihadist force out of Jordan in attempt to revive the fighting in the Damascus region. When this force ran into trouble – as was to be expected given the intensity of the Syrian preventive sweeps along the main routes leading from Jordan – the Obama White House refused to accept failure. Instead, the Obama White House pressured Israel to strike Syria and risk starting a regional war with Syria, Iran and the HizbAllah. The US pressure was intense and ugly. The remnants of the Jihadist force then tried to return to Jordan in daylight – a move that would have implicated Jordan in participation in the Syrian civil war. Despite US pressure – Jordan bombed these forces when they tried to force their way into Jordan. Senior Jordanian officials concluded that taken together, the events since mid-April amount to “the disintegration of the southern front” of the Syrian opposition. They insist that Jordan originally agreed to participate in the endeavor and provide facilities on Jordanian soil “under Saudi and US pressure” Amman could not withstand. The Maan riots prove Amman must not deal with Jihadists ever again, they stress.

Both Israel and Jordan stood up to the Obama White House and refused to get overtly involved in the Syrian civil war against Assad's Damascus. The strong position of both governments – that coordinated and consulted at the highest levels – was far more anti-Obama than pro-Assad. This strong position also reflects the decline of the US posture even among the closest of allies.

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Spring and early Summer 2014 will not be boring.

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