



Heretical Musings on the Coming End-of-Time Battle

Yossef Bodansky

June 2015

Executive Summary

- * The Middle East is full of premonitions that the fateful “End-of-Time Battle” is about to erupt.
- * Three mega-trends reflect just how onerous the post-Intifada upheaval of the greater Middle East has become. The three mega-trends are at the supra-national level, the sub-national level, and the status-quo level that includes the national level.
- * The supra-national level is the horrific and irreconcilable struggle between Sunni and Shiite Islam. To decide the Jihad, it is imperative to destroy Saudi Arabia and Israel in order to liberate and hold Islam’s three Holy Shrines.
- * The sub-national level is the aggregate impact of the revival of the minorities and their desperate struggle to survive the onslaught from the above Jihads. Most significant is the ensuing awakening of the minorities in the neighboring non-Arab powers – Iran and Turkey.
- * The status-quo level that includes the national level is the desperate and largely doomed quest by the forces left outside the supra-national level and the sub-national level mega-trends to retain some relevance. The greatest absurdity of this mid-level is the emerging unity of goal and purpose between Ayman al-Zawahiri’s al-Qaida and Obama’s Washington.
- * The only Arab leader cognizant of the gravity of the turmoil and actually trying to address the core issues is Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. But he is attacked by both domestic and international foes.
- * Thus, for as long as Sisi remains ostracized and alone in his desperate struggle, and for as long as the Fertile Crescent of Minorities is not empowered as a stabilizing entity, the greater Middle East will continue its blood-soaked slide to the fateful apocalyptic “End-of-Time Battle”.



About ISPSW

The Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy (ISPSW) is a private institute for research and consultancy. The ISPSW is objective and task oriented and is above party politics.

The increasingly complex international environment of globalized economic processes and worldwide political, ecological, social and cultural change, brings with it major opportunities but also risks: thus, decision-makers in the private sector and in politics depend more than ever before on the advice of highly qualified experts.

ISPSW offers a range of services, including strategic analyses, security consultancy, executive coaching and intercultural competency. ISPSW publications examine a wide range of topics connected with politics, economy, international relations, and security/defense. ISPSW network experts have worked – in some cases for several decades – in executive positions and thus dispose over wide-ranging experience in their respective fields of expertise.

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.



Yossef Bodansky



Analysis

The Middle East is full of premonitions that the fateful “End-of-Time Battle” is about to erupt. The relentless incitement by the Islamic Caliphate about the coming apocalyptic clash at the Plain of Dabiq (north of Aleppo in the Syria-Turkey border region) is being reinforced by the cynical election policies of the Erdogan Government. However, the dominant reason for the widespread grassroots anticipation for an imminent “End-of-Time Battle” is the superstitious interpretations of such phenomena as recurring blood moon, inexplicable yet seen sun storms, and odd patterns of extremely hot weather and sand storms. Elder sheikhs, fortune tellers and mystics all over the greater Middle East interpret these events as the harbingers forewarning of the coming “End-of-Time Battle”.

These grassroots convictions and expectations are of immense importance under current conditions. Presently, the greater Middle East is witnessing the clash of three major mega-trends. Because of the widespread belief in the coming fateful apocalyptic clash, the habitually traditionalist populace of the greater Middle East is now ready to accept, or at the least tolerate, radical outcomes that would have been unacceptable and intolerable a couple of years ago.

The three mega-trends reflect just how onerous the post-Intifada upheaval of the greater Middle East has become. The three mega-trends are at the supra-national level, the sub-national level, and the status-quo level that includes the national level.

The supra-national level is the horrific and irreconcilable struggle between Sunni and Shiite Islam. As aptly demonstrated in the fratricidal carnage in Iraq and Syria – both sides go back to invoking their respective heroes of Sunni-vs-Shiite historic battles in order to mobilize the troops and legitimize their campaigns. Both sides recruit volunteer militias all over the world on the basis of religious affinity and zeal. The deep seated acceptance of this trend is manifested in the spreading attacks on Shiites by local Sunni zealots all over the world.

Moreover, the major supra-national level now dominates key political and strategic issues such as the ascent of Iran, the survival of Saudi Arabia, and freedom of navigation in the regional maritime choke points (Strait of Hormuz, Bab-al-Mandab and the Suez Canal). The rising and assertive Iran is fighting to consolidate its regional hegemony through the establishment of a Shiite Crescent. Similarly, the Islamic Caliphate is asserting its distinction and divine right to lead Sunni Islam in this fateful clash by focusing the Jihad on occupying Sunni-inhabited lands and eradicating the Shiites and other deviants (Alawites, Druze, Christian Arabs, etc.). Territories and communities captured by either side are ethnically cleansed by horrific cruelty of all the alien population. Places of worship of the other side are taken over, desecrated and destroyed as a proof of the supremacy of the winning side’s claim to the right Islam.

To be recognized as the leaders of Islam – both Sunnis and Shiites must control the Holy Shrines in Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. Thus, there emerges the imperative to destroy Saudi Arabia and Israel in order to liberate and hold these three Holy Shrines. Both sides are cognizant that their fateful quest for the leadership of Islamdom cannot be completed until their respective Jihad culminates in the raising of their respective banners over the three Holy Shrines. Given the grassroots zeal now feeding these respective Jihads and quests for the fateful apocalyptic “End-of-Time Battle” – no compromise or slowing down are possible.



Ultimately, two years ago in 2013, the Sunni Jihadist leaders in al-Jazira could still be convinced to accept a partition whereupon they were to control the predominantly Sunni parts and have the Shiites and minorities control theirs. The Mahdist Mullahs in Tehran were not certain in their ability to impose Shiite regional hegemony and were ready to consider strategic compromises. The key elements of the Fertile Crescent of the Minorities in Syria-Iraq were sufficiently viable to act as a stabilizing buffer. In their insistence on imposing political solutions unacceptable to all grassroots throughout the greater Middle East while creating false expectations among the zealot leaderships – the US-led West ruined the chance for compromise. Hence, the possibility of reconciliation is no more. Presently and into the foreseeable future, the rise of the apocalyptic Sunni Caliphate and the revival of Mahdist Shiism emanating from Iran ensure that no compromise is possible, and that both sides will go on pursuing the fratricidal carnage until one side vanquishes and eviscerates the other.

The sub-national level is the aggregate impact of the revival of the minorities and their desperate struggle to survive the onslaught from the above Jihads. The outbreak of the Intifada's in 2011 and the ensuing collapse of the modern Arab State led to the concurrent revival of the Fertile Crescent of the Minorities as the key stabilizing element of the greater Middle East. However, by Spring 2015, the minorities are exhausted and despaired. The ongoing and unabated fratricidal carnage in Syria and Iraq proves to all minorities that they can only trust their own kin, and, to some extent, brethren minorities, for their own survival. Moreover, the commitment to self-survival in the face of the escalating Jihads profoundly transforms the respective struggles, and, consequently, the role of all minorities in the regional mega-trends.

While the minorities' desperation and resolve have been building over the last few years – the most recent events in Iraqi-Syrian Kurdistan have had a shock effect. Rhetoric notwithstanding, the US-led West failed the Kurds. The US-led West refuses to provide crucially needed military assistance and expertise while demanding Erbil's acceptance of a viable, unified and Shiite-dominated Iraq as a precondition for US help. Simply put, the Kurds, Yazidis, Assyrians and other minorities of northern Iraq and Syria were left to bleed and be massacred on the altar of the Obama White House's commitment to empowering Tehran and its proxy Baghdad.

The Kurds and all other minorities took note of the perfidy of the US-led West. This comes on top of the active opposition of the US-led West to the Russian commitment to the minorities of the Levant – the Alawites, the Druze and the Maronites. The region's minorities concluded that no political negotiated settlement imposed or endorsed by the US-led West can provide for their existence or salvation. There is no alternative to fighting on bitterly in order to secure their own ethnocentric pockets of habitation. The challenge facing all minorities is no longer preserving their distinction and heritage. The challenge is now very prosaic – staying alive as individuals and communities.

Hence, the Maronites, Alawites, Druze, Kurds and even Shiite Arabs (Lebanon's HizbAllah) are consolidating their respective ethnocentric pockets at the expense of larger, national or regional, interests. There emerged discernable grassroots mobilization and willingness to endure losses and sacrifices in order to preserve one's home and destiny. There is even willingness to consider alliances with other minorities. There are Yazidi and Assyrian forces in the ranks of the Kurdish militias, and there are Maronite and Orthodox Christian forces in the ranks of the HizbAllah. Fearful of the imposition of Takfiri Islamism by the Caliphate, Sunni Arab tribes also increasingly adopt the pattern of minorities' self-survival. The dread of the Iran-sponsored Shiite forces slows down this trend.



Most significant is the ensuing awakening of the minorities in the neighboring non-Arab powers – Iran and Turkey. Both countries have been basing their regional messianic aspirations on the declared destinies of a dominant ethno-nationality – the Persians in Iran and the ethnic Turks in Turkey. Hence, both countries have resisted the publication of census data for fear of exposing the relative weakness of their respective dominant nationalities.

Iran is already developing long-term stability problems. There hasn't been a real census in Iran for a long time so the population's composition is only rough estimates: Persians 51-61%, Azeris 16-24%, Kurds 7-10%, Lur 6%, Balochis 2%, Ahwazi Arabs 2-3%, Turkmen and Turkic tribes 2-3%, others 1%. There are already stability problems with the Azeris, Kurds, Ahwazi Arabs and Balochis-Sistanis (on the Pakistani border). Irredentist movements are already active throughout Iran with the Azeris yearning to join Azerbaijan, the Balochis and Sistanis yearning to join Pakistan-Afghanistan, the Kurds yearning to establish their greater Kurdistan, and the Ahwazi Arabs yearning to establish their own independent state which will have special relations with the Shiite Arabs of Iraq and the eastern Arabian Peninsula. So far, the Mullahs have enough power and resolve to slaughter and suppress the minorities into relative quiet. But for how long?

Turkey is also developing long-term stability problems. As well, there hasn't been a real census in Turkey for a long time so the population's composition is only rough estimates: Ethnic Turks 63-65%, Kurds 18%, Alavis 12%, and other minorities 5-7%. This estimate does not count the few millions of illegal and semi-legal Turkic refugees from the Balkans, Central Asia and China. They increasingly exacerbate Turkish militant chauvinism with dreams of pan-Turkism and an empire stretching from the Balkans in the west to Xinjiang in the east. Meanwhile, the main irredentist struggles in Turkey intensify. The Kurds have had a long history of secessionist insurrection. However, Turkey's support for the anti-Kurdish Sunni Jihadists in Syria and Iraq has awakened solidarity nationalism and secessionism. Similarly, the Alavis – the "Turkified" Alawites – are also awakening in response to Turkey's active support for the anti-Alawite Sunni Jihad in Syria and are increasingly resorting to the use of force.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is cognizant of the challenge and has recently embarked on an intense campaign of grassroots indoctrination and incitement. Ankara is reviving Turkish militant chauvinism by any means possible. In late-May 2015, for example, Turkey celebrated with great chauvinistic fanfare and huge expenses the 562nd anniversary [sic.!] of the conquest of Constantinople by Turkish armies (on 29 May 1453), the transformation of the city's great churches into mosques, and the establishment of Istanbul. The national celebrations include ceremonial prayers, media campaigns, new movies, and mass public nationalistic ceremonies. The Turkish media delves on a prophesy attributed to Prophet Muhammad that the conquerors of Constantinople will become the leaders of the Muslim World – just as the Ottoman Caliphate was for over four centuries. The media campaign also highlights the surrender of Christendom to Islamdom in the aftermath of the fall of Constantinople.

The status-quo level that includes the national level is the desperate and largely doomed quest by the forces left outside the supra-national level and the sub-national level mega-trends to retain some relevance. The greatest absurdity of this mid-level is the emerging unity of goal and purpose between Ayman al-Zawahiri's al-Qaida and Obama's Washington.

Both the supra-national level and the sub-national level are rejecting both the US-led West and the traditional al-Qaida Jihadism. The Islamic Caliphate consider themselves the proponents of Takfiri Jihadism and thus the



true purveyors of Jihad and the legitimate successors of Osama bin Laden's original Jihadist Trend. Shiite Mahdist Iran is the arch irreconcilable foe. The minorities have given up on the modern Arab State as a viable legitimate entity that can protect and secure them against both Sunni and Shiite Jihadism of all shapes and colors.

However, both Obama and Zawahiri are looking at an Islamist reincarnation of the defunct modern Arab State as the sole venue by which they can retain their respective relevance in a region they yearn to dominate but is refusing them.

Obama's Washington is committed to the sustenance of Islamist states – dominated by the Sunni Muslim Brothers or Iran's Shiite Islamist proxies – as the key to a post-Intifada greater Middle East. Washington is refusing to accept the possibility that regional borders be redrawn and new entities be established. The greater Middle East emerging at the end of the Intifada's must be comprised of the erstwhile modern Arab states albeit with new Islamist-popular governments and with greater inclination to operate within the framework of the United Nations and other liberal international fora. Obama's Washington can fathom no other legitimate outcome. Presently, the establishment of a Palestinian state that will ultimately be dominated by the Ikhwan-affiliated HAMAS is the only place where Obama can demonstrate the success of Washington's drive to resuscitate the otherwise doomed and rejected Arab statehood.

Zawahiri's al-Qaida is becoming irrelevant to the regional turmoil. The Islamic Caliphate has taken over the Jihad previously identified with bin Laden. The well-established cooperation between al-Qaida and Iran is hurting al-Qaida's standing in a region succumbing to the primacy of the historic Sunni-Shiite cataclysmic fighting. Therefore, al-Qaida is studying a new initiative to prioritize the establishment of a modern state even if through a coalition government. The driving force behind the initiative is a prominent al-Qaida ideologue going by the name Abdallah bin Muhammad. He calls for waging "political guerilla wars" in order to infiltrate existing State governments and gain Islamist influence and power from within. Abdallah bin Muhammad stressed that small Jihadist emirates of the kind advocated by the Caliphate are unsustainable in the modern world. This al-Qaida doctrine is a stretch of the teachings of Said Qutb in the early-1960's.

Ultimately, al-Qaida emphasizes the preference for Ikhwan affiliated governments of the kind endorsed by the Obama White House in Egypt and other countries in earlier phases of the Intifada's. The Jihadist leaders also point out the success of a similar approach in post-Qadhafi Libya where the al-Qaida-affiliated Libya Islamic Fighting Group and the Jihadist Fajr Libya Forces joined the Islamist government in Tripoli and prevented its collapse. A similar approach is being advocated in Syria. The key al-Qaida-affiliated Jihadist entities, including Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, and other smaller Jihadist forces, have all moderated their Jihadist rhetoric in recent months. They all expressed their readiness to join the "moderate Islamist" Jaish al-Fatah and to support the establishment of a coalition government in Damascus after the toppling by force of the Assad regime.

In both Libya and Syria these steps have been undertaken solely in order to warrant extensive military, financial and political support from the US-led West. The Jihadists could not have entered, and seized power in, Tripoli without the US-organized NATO bombing. The Syrian al-Qaida-affiliated Jihadists are cognizant that their only chance to ever reach Damascus is in the wake of US/NATO bombing and military intervention. Hence the seeming embrace of the state-based political solutions advocated by Obama's Washington.

The only Arab leader cognizant of the gravity of the turmoil and actually trying to address the core issues is Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. He repeatedly met with the leaders of al-Azhar University and urged



them to spearhead an effort to liberalize and moderate Islam – particularly Sunni Islam. Sisi wants the Imams to counter the radicalization of Islam in the classrooms and mosques. “You, imams, are responsible before Allah. The entire world is waiting. The entire world is waiting for your next word because this [Muslim] Nation is being torn apart,” Sisi told the leaders of al-Azhar. However, progress is far from being satisfactory because of domestic opposition from Islamist circles and Egypt’s endemic economic problems that keep radicalizing the destitute and hungry. Moreover, Turkey’s Erdogan is leading a relentless campaign to delegitimize Sisi. On 22 May, Erdogan reiterated that Muhammad Morsi is still the legal President of Egypt. “I have consistently said at international platforms that I do not accept Sisi as the president. ... To me, the President of Egypt is not Sisi, it is still Morsi,” he declared. “It is not possible for us who believe in democracy to accept such a coup.”

Thus, for as long as Sisi remains ostracized and alone in his desperate struggle, and for as long as the Fertile Crescent of Minorities is not empowered as a stabilizing entity, the greater Middle East will continue its blood-soaked slide to the fateful apocalyptic “End-of-Time Battle”.

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