



The End is Nigh

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Executive Summary

- * The Middle East – particularly Bilad ash-Sham and adjacent areas – is on the verge of a profound transformation. Ever attuned to the intricacies of grassroots dynamics in the developing world and not just the Middle East, the Kremlin is the driving force behind this profound transformation.
- * In early 2016, the Russians and their allies are closer than ever before to realizing the Fertile Crescent of Minorities as a viable strategic entity comprised of a few building blocks supported by Russia. At the same time, there is a sense of urgency and foreboding in the Kremlin that compels Moscow to move fast toward implementation even when not every detail is decided upon and not every potential problem is resolved.
- * The mega-trends in the Sunni Arab world are the main reason for the growing sense of urgency throughout. Far from being defeated, the Islamic State/Caliphate is on the verge of a major strategic offensive that if permitted to unfold will profoundly change the face of the entire region and of Sunni Islam. The key to Baghdadi's grand design is a pincer move on the three Holy Shrines of Islam – Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. A localized pincer attack will focus on destroying Israel while the major offensive will focus on the two foci of Sunni Arab power – Egypt and Saudi Arabia.
- * The mega-trends – namely, the rise of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities, the collapse of the modern Arab states and the ascent of tribe- and clan-based local entities in their stead – have reached the point of irreversibility. The Russians are destined to win a decisive victory because their vision of the greater Middle East is virtually identical to the desires of the grassroots populace.

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Analysis

The Middle East – particularly Bilad ash-Sham and adjacent areas – is on the verge of a profound transformation. The magnitude of this political earthquake will be rivaling the 1923 abolishing of the Ottoman Empire/ Caliphate and the carving of the Arab Middle East into entities that would eventually become modern Arab states. The quintessence of the new transformation is the rise and empowerment – first de-facto and ultimately de-jure – of new smaller entities deriving their legitimacy from the indigenous grassroots aspirations and their manifests destinies at the expense of the modern Arab states of Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan and subsequently more. The fracturing of the modern states and the rise of sub-state entities based on blood-loyalties (ethnic groups, tribes, clans and extended families) in their stead has been unfolding since the outbreak of the Intifada's – aka the "Arab Spring" – in 2011. However, the transformation has never reached the point of full implementation and legitimization until now.

Presently, ever attuned to the intricacies of grassroots dynamics in the developing world and not just the Middle East, the Kremlin is the driving force behind this profound transformation. There is a growing sense of urgency in the Kremlin to complete the transformation of the greater Middle East before worse things happen. The Russians began implementing the vision they've had since 2011 - namely, stabilize the Middle East on the basis of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities that contains the spread of volatile Jihadism in the Sunni Arab heartlands of al-Jazira.

Thus, the Russian-sponsored effort to consolidate Minority entities in the region that used to be Iraq, Syria and Lebanon is near completion. Full implementation will take time but the general principles are clear. Ultimately, implementation of the Russian grand design is the best chance to avoid the region's other alternative for a post-Intifada future – the Jihadist-instigated cataclysmic apocalyptic End-of-Times Battle that will set the entire region aflame and inflict a calamity unlikely to be reversed for generations. For the Kremlin, the ascent of Minority-based entities jointly comprising the Fertile Crescent of Minorities is the key to the long-term stability in the greater Middle East.

Significantly, basing the regional stability on the Fertile Crescent of Minorities has been the Soviet and Russian perception for several decades. However, for as long as the internationally recognized modern Arab states seemed viable and stable – Moscow elected not to challenge the state-system. Once the Intifada's erupted and the legitimacy and functioning of the modern Arab state vanished, the Kremlin quickly resumed focusing on the Fertile Crescent of Minorities as the buffer between the volatile Sunni-Arab heartlands and the non-Arab aspirant regional powers of Turkey and Iran – and thus the key to long-term stability in the entire tumultuous region. The dramatic and rapid ascent of Jihadism starting 2012-13 as the most viable pan-Arab trend vying to replace the modern state as the dominant socio-political trend convinced the Kremlin of the urgent imperative to consolidate sub-state entities based on indigenous grassroots, ethno-centric identities and aspirations, as the key to the containment, and ultimately defeat, of the Jihadist onslaught.

In early 2016, the Russians and their allies are closer than ever before to realizing the Fertile Crescent of Minorities as a viable strategic entity comprised of a few building blocks supported by Russia. At the same time, there is a sense of urgency and foreboding in the Kremlin that compels Moscow to move fast toward implementation even when not every detail is decided upon and not every potential problem is resolved. This apprehension is clearly manifested in the character and escalation of the Russian direct intervention in the Middle East since Fall 2015.



There is no question that the Russian military intervention in Syria has profoundly changed the war and the overall posture in the country. Russian-supported Syrian forces are consolidating an “Alawistan” in the west – stretching roughly from Daraa in the south to Aleppo in the north. This is the viable part of the old Syrian State – encompassing the nation’s security-minded population and elites, educated urban population and elites, as well as the national security and economic infrastructure. The Assad administration effectively controlled the region in Autumn 2011, but lost major parts starting Spring 2012 due to cross-border Jihadist onslaughts and policy errors of Damascus. The current Syrian and allied offensives are extremely effective. Consequently, ever wider segments of the Sunni population within the western parts are once again casting their lot with Damascus. The protection of the Druze in southern Syria on the Jordanian border by a massive Russian bombing campaign clearly demonstrates the Kremlin’s genuine commitment to the minorities. Ensnared between the Shiite HizbAllah and the Sunni Jihadists – the Maronites, Druze, Alawites and other minorities of Lebanon are gravitating into the fold and protection of the nascent “Alawistan”. The Jihadists are on the defensive and their defeat is inevitable throughout these western parts. It is now only a question of time and cost in blood until the consolidation of a viable “Alawistan”.

In the northeast, a unified Kurdistan is rising with Russian support. Mustafa Barzani has long championed capitalizing on the Intifada’s in order to unilaterally implement the Kurds’ age-old yearning for a state of their own where they will no longer be subjected to oppression and slaughter by local rulers. Despite widespread grassroots ardor to establish a viable Kurdistan – the Kurds themselves have repeatedly failed to overcome the desperate opposition of Turkey and its US-led western allies. While the Kurds have recently received military and economic support from a wide variety of states, Russia is the first power to threaten Turkey not to challenge the ascent of the Kurdish entity. The Kremlin guaranteed the Kurds that Russia will defend them should Turkey invade even at the risk of a “big war” between Russia and Turkey. Meanwhile, although there are profound differences between, and different legacies to, the key segments of Kurds in the former Syria and former Iraq – there is clear understanding among all Kurds that absent an all-Kurdish unity and cooperation, they will become once again victims of Turkish hatred and world indifference. The road to a Kurdish entity is thus irreversible.

To the south, the Iranians and Russians are consolidating a viable Shiite Iraq. Rhetoric to the contrary notwithstanding, Baghdad and its patrons no longer strive to control the majority of the Sunni zones and the Kurdish lands. The social, human and financial costs of attempting to impose a viable Iraq are no longer tolerated by the Iraqi Shiite grassroots. Instead, the focus of Baghdad is on the protection of Shiite populated areas and a few contested mixed-population areas. The consolidation of a viable Shiite Iraq is of great importance to Tehran as manifested in the recent sending of Qassem Soleimani to Baghdad to oversee the transformation. Meanwhile, the accelerated development of the oil riches of the south is strengthening the local elites. As well, Iran is transforming the Arab Shiite Iraq into the springboard for liberating the Arab Shiites and the oil rich lands of the eastern Arabian Peninsula.

Israel, effectively the southern edge of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities, is militarily strong to the point there is no longer a viable regional threat to its existence. Israel can now withstand protracted rocket and missile warfare – so Jerusalem is less inclined to focus on preemption of, and knee-jerk reaction to, localized provocations. Israel is increasingly accepted by conservative Arab powers as an ally, is drawing closer to Russia on account of similar analysis of the region and mutual interests, and is drawing away from the United States because of profoundly different readings of the greater Middle East. With the Palestinian issue off the table (except for rhetoric in the West) – Israel can, and does, concentrate on regional undertakings including support



for the Fertile Crescent of Minorities, and the Kremlin encouraged alliance with Greece, Cyprus and Egypt that shields the Minorities from the West.

Significantly, the consolidation of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities is sufficiently important for Moscow to warrant public rebuke of Bashar al-Assad over his vow to restore the old Syria by force or politics. Bashar al-Assad has repeatedly vowed in the past to restore Syria. His “sin” this time was the arrogant and overconfident tone, as well as the high-profile insistence on a viable Syria, just as the Kremlin is stressing the imperative for decentralization and perhaps inevitable dismemberment of the region’s modern Arab states including Syria.

The mega-trends in the Sunni Arab world are the main reason for the growing sense of urgency throughout. Far from being defeated, the Islamic State/Caliphate is on the verge of a major strategic offensive that if permitted to unfold will profoundly change the face of the entire region and of Sunni Islam. Indeed, the much heralded setbacks of the Islamic State forces in Iraq are the result of tribal change of allegiance and the diversion of the main Jihadist forces to other priority Jihad fronts. The same main causes, the collapse of tribal deals and the diversion of elite forces away from the main battlefields, also account for the setbacks in Syria. However, the anticipated offensive, and not the day-to-day situation on the battlefield, is the implementation of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s quest for expediting and facilitating the End-of-Time Battle. To a great extent, the fighting in both Syria and Iraq are strategic holding battles aimed to shield and buy time for the unleashing of the End-of-Time offensive. The same can be said about the fighting of the Islamic State/Caliphate forces in Libya.

The key to Baghdadi’s grand design is a pincer move on the three Holy Shrines of Islam – Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. A localized pincer attack will focus on destroying Israel while the major offensive will focus on the two foci of Sunni Arab power – Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Israel is to be subjected to a Jihadist pincer onslaught with one attack coming from Jordan (after the toppling of the Hashemite Kingdom) via the West Bank and the other from the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip. Jihadist commanders in Iraq expect the attack on Israel via Jordan to come immediately after they consolidate their hold over the pertinent parts of Iraq. “Our Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi made it clear, and repeated the words of our commander Abu Muhammad al-Adnani: Today in Baghdad, tomorrow in Jerusalem,” wrote one commander. “My brothers, we’ve made a vow to Allah that the Jews will not take pleasure in occupying the holy land of Palestine,” wrote top operative Abu Bakr al-Muhajer. “Our next meeting will be in Palestine, or Washington, or wherever, until the sacred Caliphate rules the world.”

Baghdadi’s overall plan for dominating the Arab Middle East is far from being an outlandish grand design. Both Saudi Arabia and Egypt are in the throes of unprecedented crises that put the future of both countries in doubt. One attack pincer will come from the north – from the heart of al-Jazira (Syria-Iraq) – with the Jihadists coming down into Najd (where Riyadh is) and on to the Hijaz (where Mecca and Medina are). The second attack pincer will come from Libya in the west – with the Jihadists advancing eastward first to Cairo and then across the Red Sea to the Hijaz. Once in control the Holy Shrines the Jihadists will dominate the entire Muslim World.

Egypt is close to losing control over its huge population and the state’s ability to feed and house them. The protracted failure of Egypt’s macro-economy leads to uncontrolled urbanization that breeds radicalized despaired youth (that, for example, can no longer afford to marry even at a later age). The prestige of Cairo as a unique global power – Umm al-Dunya – is being doubted due to Egypt’s loss of the historical predominance over the Nile waters as well as the hegemony over the vast desert spaces to the west. Sensing Cairo’s growing vulnerability, the Jihadists escalate their campaign of attrition by terrorism that penetrates deeper and deeper



into the heart of urban Egypt. The Jihadists are convinced that any thrust into the heart of Egypt will be met and reinforced by indigenous Jihadist insurrections in most of the towns of Egypt.

Saudi Arabia is in the throes of an economic catastrophe as a result of skyrocketing expenditures and nose-diving oil prices. The radicalized, discontent, unemployed and unemployable Sunni youth in the slums of western Saudi Arabia are gravitating to militancy as the lavish handouts that in the past bribed the disquiet youth into inaction are no longer available in Riyadh's coffers. Both the quagmire in Yemen and the entanglement in the Turkish regional designs undermine the nation's security forces and their ability to save the House of al-Saud from violent eruptions. Riyadh is perceived to be uniquely vulnerable because it is in the midst of a very complex and challenging generational succession crisis. Little wonder the Jihadists are convinced that their forces will be welcomed by Jihadist insurrections as they strive to topple the House of al-Saud.

Thus, given a correct combination of Jihadist pressure from the outside and Jihadist uprising or insurrection inside – both governments can be paralyzed, profoundly challenged, and conceivably overthrown. Both Egypt and Saudi Arabia can then be dismembered by conflicting grassroots interests and charismatic aspirant Islamist leaders. Even if the success of the Jihadists will be partial – under duress neither Egypt nor Saudi Arabia will be able to exercise their historic roles as regional powers whose gravitas can project and enshrine stability in the entire Sunni Arab world. Under such conditions, the spread of the Caliphate's Jihadism will accelerate. The horrific ramifications of the Caliphate's threat to Mecca and Medina, let alone control over them, will become reality.

Thus, the Kremlin is convinced, and not without good reasons, that the consolidation of a Sunni-Jihadist regional state controlling the Holy Shrines and the neutralization of the main powers – Egypt and Saudi Arabia – will give tremendous boost for all Sunni Islamists-Jihadists. This means the emboldening and empowerment of the Islamists-Jihadists in the Caucasus and the greater Central Asia – that is, the soft underbelly of both Russia and China (Xinjiang). After all, several thousand Jihadists from both the Caucasus and the greater Central Asia have fought in Syria-Iraq, as well as have been radicalized and trained as commanders and organizers of the Jihad in their own homelands. Hence, the Kremlin is adamant on preventing this horror scenario before the Jihadist flames spread closer to home.

Therefore, the Kremlin focuses on attaining short-term objectives, albeit imperfect, that will both prevent the impending crisis and serve as the foundations for ensuing long-term solutions. The Kremlin-supported entities – initially the Fertile Crescent of Minorities (including Israel), and then Saudi and Egypt – will encircle and ultimately stifle the Sunni Jihadists while strengthening local powers in order to prevent the Jihadist pincer attack from succeeding. The Kremlin's focus on expedited pragmatic solutions – namely, a regional order – already has impact on Russian and Chinese relations with key local powers – particularly Iran and Israel. Ultimately, Russia and China hope to transform Iran into Persia as far as strategic behavior and regional aspirations.

Coping with Iran has never been a simple challenge. The contribution of Iran and its proxies (mainly the Lebanese HizbAllah and Iraqi Shiite Militias) to the war effort in Syria and Iraq has been huge and decisive. Moscow can't afford to alienate Tehran. On the other hand, since the very beginning tensions with Iran and the Lebanese HizbAllah have lingered over Tehran's characterization of the campaign and "Axis of Resistance" in terms of Iran's own national interests. "Syria is the 35th province [of Iran] and a strategic province for us," explained in February 2013 Hojjat al-Islam Mehdi Taeb, the head of the Ammar Strategic Base, "if we lose Syria, we cannot keep Tehran." There is a latent friction between Iran and the Alawites because Iran aspires to convert the Alawites into Jaafari Shiites while the Alawites are committed to their secretive faith with strong nationalist



undertones. And, while Moscow sees the Alawites as the key to controlling the Levant – Tehran is committed to relying on the Shiite Arab HizbAllah.

However, higher dynamics will determine the future role and posture of Iran. Both Russia and China are coercing Iran – that is, modern-day Persia – into reviving the Persian historic roles as a pole in the global Silk Road and as a Shiite wedge between the radical Sunni blocks of the Middle East and South Asia. It is in this context that Tehran hesitatingly begins Iran's slow return to Persia's historic posture as a Shiite minority connected to both the greater Middle East and the greater Central Asia in a predominantly Sunni Muslim world. Both Beijing and Moscow are convinced that with the transformation of the global economy (led by China in the Silk Road context) and regional security (led by Russia in the context of the anti-Sunni wedge) Iran will gradually slide back into the Persian role. Persia – a Shiite minority in a huge hostile Sunni world – will once again provide a major contribution to the Minorities. The generational succession process in Iran provides for a uniquely opportune time to influence Iran's future leadership. However, Obama's campaign to empower Mahdist Iran as a regional power in return for a rapprochement with the US, and Tehran's enduring focus on a Shiite Crescent all the way to the HizbAllah on the shores of the Mediterranean, constitute major challenges to Russia and China.

The greatest threat to the Kremlin's plans comes from heralded Sunni countermeasures – namely, the US-sponsored Turkish-Saudi onslaught on Syria in the name of removing Bashar al-Assad and establishing viable Islamic states in restored Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. Turkey's Erdoğan, the dominant force behind the Sunni endeavor, is under immense pressure to accomplish his goals before the end of the year – when he can still enjoy the patronage and protection of his soul-mate Obama. Erdoğan is committed to the restoration at all cost of a pan-Turkic neo-Ottoman empire with aspiration to dominate the Turkic world from the Balkans to Xinjiang, and determination to draw theological legitimacy from dominating Mecca and Medina.

Initially, the Saudis and other conservative Arabs were apprehensive of, and hostile to, the ascent of the neo-Ottomans at the expense of the Arab world. However, with the US-sponsored Iranian threat growing (particularly in the aftermath of the Saudi execution of Sheikh Nimr); and with the seeming unstoppable Jihadists literally at the Saudi gates and even inside the slums; and with Egypt besieged and contained by its own crises – Riyadh now considers alliance and cooperation with Ankara as the only viable alternative to succumbing and accepting the Turkish patronage. Alas, Erdoğan conditions Turkish protection of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States on their joining Turkey's relentless campaign against the minorities of Syria and the Assad administration in Damascus. Turkey is sponsoring regional dynamics that will only empower the same Jihadists of al-Jazira that are already threatening the very existence of Saudi Arabia. Riyadh has to believe Ankara's assurances that Turkey will be able to reason with and harness their Jihadist protégés (assuming Erdoğan wants to). Besieged, Saudi Arabia resigned to the notion that there is no better alternative to taking this risk and committed to joining the fight in Syria on Turkey's side and conditions.

The tenuous cease-fire that went into effect on 27 February 2016 gives all key participants a short breathing period to ponder their next moves. The mere international pressure for a cease-fire reaffirms what the Kremlin has long realized – namely, that the wars of the greater Middle East should be brought to an end soon. While intense fratricidal fighting are bound to continue for a long time – the major question is whether these fighting will focus on consolidating the mega-trends that have already emerged or will serve as the instrument for once again disrupting the region in quest of a drastically new posture and leadership. Russia is the driving force of the quest for consolidating the current posture around the Minority entities. The dominant force behind the



quest for a profound change in the regional posture before the conflict is brought to an end is Turkey. Ankara is adamant on crushing both the Kurds and the possibility of a tangible political stability in al-Jazira that will be sufficiently strong and viable to refuse Turkish (neo-Ottoman) hegemony. Toward this end, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other Sunni allies are preparing for a possible military intervention in Syria and the risk of a major escalation and war involving Russian forces. The negotiated Turkish rapprochement with Israel aims to preemptively prevent Israeli active support for the region's minorities and particularly the Kurds.

Ultimately, neither Iranian intransigence, nor a Turkish-Saudi onslaught, will be able to alter the outcome of the turmoil throughout the greater Middle East. The mega-trends – namely, the rise of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities, the collapse of the modern Arab states and the ascent of tribe- and clan-based local entities in their stead – have reached the point of irreversibility. Hence, the Russians are destined to win a decisive victory because their vision of the greater Middle East is virtually identical to the desires of the grassroots populace. In the era of mobile-phones and massive urbanization it is no longer possible to ignore and contradict the masses even by an absolute dictatorship. Since the outbreak of the Intifada's, the grassroots have proven to be uncompromising and restless, as well as to have overcome the threshold of fear. The grassroots fear of the state's violence has long been the tangible impediment to popular insurrections. It is no more. Hence, since the Kremlin-advocated solutions are based on the empowerment of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities and other sub-state entities in agreement with the indigenous grassroots aspirations – Russia's quest for a profound transformation of the greater Middle East will succeed and endure.

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



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.

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