



The End is Still Nigh – New Developments in the Middle East and Beyond¹

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Executive Summary

- * The greater Bilad al-Sham is crossing a major threshold between a tormented past and an uncertain future. There exists the potential for marked improvement and stabilization of the regional posture.
- * The Summer of 2017 saw nearly two simultaneous events that heralded both the end of the old posture and the hope for a new beginning. The first event was the recognition that Bashar al-Assad won the war in Syria, and the second was the referendum for independence in Iraqi Kurdistan.
- * The Kurds realized they can no-long thrust neither the state government nor US-led Western assurances. As such, the Kurds became the standard bearers for the region's other minorities in their quest for self-determination and self-rule in the post-carnage Middle East.
- * Both Turkey and Iran are adamant on capitalizing on the irreversible collapse of the Arab-centric power hub in order to revive their own respective regional Caliphates/Sultanates as the springboard for their respective global ascent. Ankara and Tehran are determined to prevent the ascent of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities because once it emerges as a viable geo-strategic entity - the ability of Iran and Turkey to realize their respective hegemonic aspirations will have all but vanished. Therefore, it is imperative to suppress the current Kurdish national ascent on top of the implacable historic enmity between Turks, Persians and Kurds.
- * Regional leaders and foci of power are cognizant of Assad's victory and of the urgent imperative to accept the regional order pushed by Putin - Assad's patron and savior. The alternative is the eruption of far greater chaos and violence the outcome of which nobody can predict.
- * The still escalating inner-Shiite Arab crisis will give the final push for the de-facto, or even formal, disintegration of Iraq, and will expedite the resolution of the Kurdish challenge and the consolidation of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities.
- * The entire greater Bilad al-Sham is at a threshold that, if capitalized on in time, can finally bring to an end the fratricidal carnage that has been bedeviling the region since the beginning of the decade and usher in an era of relative stability. Implementation depends on quickly consolidating the Fertile Crescent of Minorities. In late September, the Kurds made the first decisive step toward the realization of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities by declaring their intent to realize their manifest destiny and establish their own entity. This bold initiative

¹ See also: Bodansky, Yossef, *The End is Nigh*, in: ISPSW Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy, issue 408, March 2016, Berlin

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should be capitalized on in order to expedite the establishment of the entire Fertile Crescent of Minorities before a next cycle of horrific violence sets the greater Middle East aflame anew.

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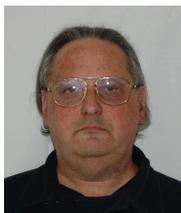
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Mr Bodansky is a Director at the Prague Society for International Cooperation, and serves on the Board of the Global Panel Foundation and several other institutions worldwide.



Yossef Bodansky



Analysis

The greater Bilad al-Sham - and most likely the entire Middle East - is crossing a major threshold between a tormented past and an uncertain future. There exists the potential for marked improvement and stabilization of the regional posture. The local populace, disillusioned with the failed western-origin modernity and exhausted by the fratricidal carnage that modernity wrought, knows what's next for the region - the ascent of inwardly looking entities based on nationalities and tribes. Left uncertain is whether the US-led West will accept the resolve of the grassroots and their leaders to determine their own fate and future, or whether the West will continue to attempt to impose its commitment to the failed modern Arab states through political-economic coercion and military intervention and carnage.

The Summer of 2017 saw two nearly simultaneous events that heralded both the end of the old posture and the hope for a new beginning. The first event was the recognition that Bashar al-Assad won the war in Syria, and the second was the referendum for independence in Iraqi Kurdistan.

In early September, the UN peace talks mediator Staffan de Mistura acknowledged that Assad was winning the war and that the Syrian opposition had to face reality. "For the opposition, the message is very clear: if they were planning to win the war, facts are proving that is not the case. So now it's time to win the peace," de Mistura said. He stressed that there was no alternative to accepting a long-term political solution palatable to the grassroots. "Victory can only be if there is a sustainable political long-term solution. Otherwise instead of war, God forbid, we may see plenty of low intensity guerrilla [conflicts] going on for the next 10 years, and you will see no reconstruction, which is a very sad outcome of winning a war."

In mid-September, Lieutenant General Aleksandr Lapin, Russian Chief of Staff in Syria, claimed victory for the Assad forces and their allies, and stressed that the government was effectively in control of most of the territory. "To date, 85 percent of the Syrian territory has been liberated from militants in illegal armed formations," Lapin stated. "The operation against the [Jihadist] militants in Syria will continue until their complete and assured destruction."

While the West-sponsored self-anointed political leadership of the Syrian opposition insisted on the continuation of the armed struggle until "Assad is gone" - the opposition's military leaders were more pragmatic. In late-September, Riad al-Asaad, the founder and first commander of the Free Syrian Army, all but acknowledged the defeat. He conceded that "the conventional warfare strategy used by the Free Syrian Army and allied militias for many years is no longer effective in defeating pro-government forces." He argued that "only a reversion to grass-roots insurgency" could still enable the armed opposition to "regain and maintain the military edge" before it was too late. Asaad urged the remaining Syrian armed groups - irrespective of ideology and affiliation - "to start conducting guerrilla warfare in order to regain the strategic initiative in the war against the Syrian Arab Army."

Then, in late September, the Kurds rose over their bickering and announced to the world their determination to realize their manifest destiny - the establishment of an independent Kurdistan.

In Iraqi Kurdistan, the referendum on independence from Iraq conducted in the "autonomy zone" left no doubt about the aspirations of the Kurds. The voter turnout was an impressive 72 percent, with 92.73 percent of the voters casting the 'YES' ballots, and 7.27 percent casting the 'NO' ballots. Despite overwhelming majority, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) leader Masoud Barzani was conciliatory in his first speech. He



acknowledged the overwhelming support for secession from Iraq and independence - but did not close the door on retaining some relations with Baghdad. He urged Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and other senior officials “not to close the door to dialogue because it is dialogue that will solve problems.” Barzani also sought to “assure the international community of our willingness to engage in dialogue with Baghdad.” As well, KRG senior officials reminded Western diplomats in Erbil that the referendum was “non-binding and will not lead automatically to independence.” It was only a symbolic manifestation of the Kurds’ “long-cherished dream of statehood.”

Concurrently, Syrian Kurds reiterated their quest for a federated status and expressed their willingness to negotiate with the Assad Administration. “The Syrian Kurds have been clear from the beginning that they are strategically and ideologically against separation,” PYD leader Salih Muslim explained. Damascus reacted positively. Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem stated that “the Kurdish Syrians want to have a form of set rules within the Syrian border, and this is negotiable.” The declared willingness of the Syrian Kurds to remain as part of Syria explains the Russian assertion that the Assad Administration was in control of 85% of Syrian territory. The Russians include the areas held by the Kurdish PYG forces as loyal to Damascus.

Taken together, in late September, the grassroots of one of the prominent minorities - the Kurds - declared their unyielding resolve to realize their manifest destiny and achieve long-denied self-determination. The Kurds realized they can no-long thrust neither the state government nor US-led Western assurances. As such, the Kurds became the standard bearers for the region’s other minorities in their quest for self-determination and self-rule in the post-carnage Middle East.

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The vanishing lure and legitimacy of the modern Arab state - the creation of the Sykes-Picot Agreement a century ago - and the ascent of the minorities now spearheaded by the Kurds are the harbingers of the implementation of the reorganization of the Middle East on the basis of the desires of the region’s grassroots rather than the decisions of foreign leaders in the US-led West. The defeat of the predominantly Islamist-Jihadist opposition in Syria and Iraq means that the forces bent on establishing “Islamic States” in the region have been vanquished and that the challenges and threats to the ascent of alternate solutions have been largely removed. The overwhelming success of the Kurdish referendum indicates that the ascent of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities - both as the viable alternative to the erstwhile states and as the guardians of the grassroots-driven new regional order - has become irreversible.

Still, the continued transformation of the region has markedly complicated the ability of the region’s minorities to realize their manifest destinies and finally bring solace to a tormented and emaciated region. Most damaging to the interests of the minorities have been the reverberations of the expanding foreign interventions, especially of the US-led coalition. As well, the ongoing formulation of long-term strategies by Turkey, Iran and other regional powers on the periphery has focused on regional hegemony and the consolidation of tightly-controlled zones and corridors in order to facilitate that hegemony. Both Turkey and Iran are unified in their desire to suppress the minorities, but are divided as to the ultimate zones of their respective hegemonic aspirations.

There are profound differences between the various foreign interventions.

The US-led coalition is adamant on restoring the old system of modern Arab states even though it has been rejected by the local populace and the indigenous elites. Regarding Syria, Washington refuses to face the



reality as depicted by de Mistura. “The regime and the regime supporters cannot declare a victory solely based on a map and colors of positions on the ground,” explained Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, David Satterfield. “The reconstruction of Syria depends very much on that credible political process.” In mid-September, the US rejected the French proposal for a new contact group because it might legitimize the Assad Administration and provide it with indirect support through the funding of reconstruction with Assad still in power. The US demands that humanitarian aid and reconstruction be withheld until Assad is toppled and the US-approved “leadership” is empowered. Simply put, the US is willing to let the destitute innocent civilians - those recognized as the primary victims of the conflict - continue to suffer lest their salvation be considered an achievement of Assad.

The US policy toward the Kurdish referendum is equally self-centered. The US was opposed to the referendum from the very beginning and has exerted incessant pressure on Erbil to cancel the referendum despite overwhelming popular support by the vast majority of Kurds. The moment the polls closed, the US reiterated its objections. The US was “deeply disappointed” because the vote would “greatly complicate” the regional situation. “The United States opposes violence and unilateral moves by any party to alter boundaries.” In late September, Washington reiterated that the US “does not recognize” the Kurdish “unilateral referendum” and the expressed grassroots aspirations. “The vote and the results lack legitimacy and we continue to support a united, federal, democratic and prosperous Iraq,” Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said in a statement. “These aspirations, ultimately, cannot be advanced through unilateral measures such as this referendum.” Washington thus emerged as the most prominent and vocal champion of the Iran-controlled unified Iraq.

In principle, Russia, China and their allies remain committed to empowering the minorities as the key to long-term regional stability. On Syria, the Kremlin considers de Mistura’s statement a vindication of the Kremlin’s long-held position that although Assad won the war - there will have to be reorganization of the country in order to meet the aspirations of the long-suffering populace. Russian experts have long argued that it is imperative to recognize the reality of the awakening of the local self-identities - from tribes to nationalities - throughout the entire Middle East, and not just Syria. Ultimately, the grassroots will refuse to abandon the local entities that have sustained them through several years of ordeal of war and destitute in favor of some vague promises by “the international community” of a future under central governments, whomever the leaders. However, both Russia and China dread post-Kosovo nationality-based secessionism because of their own internal problems, mainly with nationalities driven by Islamist-Jihadist zeal, and therefore are inclined to seek a solution that will keep a formal reiteration of the territorial integrity of both Syria and Iraq.

Ultimately, Russian experts advised the Kremlin, the quest for self-determination by the minorities will prevail if only because their awakening is unstoppable. Therefore, the Kremlin decided not to oppose Kurdish independence and even support it whenever possible. Thus, the Kremlin decided to continue with the proforma urging of both Erbil and Baghdad to “discuss their future together” while basing the pragmatic policy on the realization that the two will inevitably separate. Moscow has supported the Kurdish cause since the 1940's, and “the historic ties [the Russians] have forged with the Kurds are firm and valid.” The Kremlin does not consider Kurdish secession a calamity. Russia intends to capitalize on the multitude of political, economic, energy and historical relations with the Kurds in order to establish strong influence over future Kurdistan from the very beginning. The Kremlin is apprehensive because the US has long been “serving Iranian interests” in the region - starting with enabling Iran to “gain control over Iraq” to the detriment of Russian interests. The US strong support for Baghdad against Erbil is perceived as yet another drive to further consolidate Iranian hegemony in the Middle East.



Indeed, the initial Russian reaction to the outcome of the Kurdish referendum covered all contradictory elements of the situation. The Russian statement covered all aspects of the issue. On the one hand, Russia will continue to maintain “unwavering commitment to the sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of the friendly Iraq and other Middle Eastern states.” At the same time, however, the Kremlin stressed that “Moscow respects the national aspirations of the Kurds.” Moscow is against both unilateral steps and punitive measures. Instead, the Kremlin believes that “all disputes that may exist between the Iraqi federal government and the government of the Autonomous Kurdish Region can and should be solved through constructive and respectful dialogue, with a view to devising a mutually acceptable formula of coexistence within a single Iraqi state.” Significantly, the Russian statement equates between the Governments in Baghdad and Erbil.

According to the Kremlin, Putin’s position in the discussions with Erdogan in late September reflected the above policy. Putin not only tempered down Erdogan’s threats, but reiterated the Kremlin’s support for “the national aspirations of the Kurds,” albeit with preference given to the territorial integrity of Iraq. Erdogan refused to accept Putin’s positions.

The Kremlin contrasted the quest for independence by the Iraqi Kurds with the YPD’s quest for autonomy in Syria and Damascus willingness to negotiate the issue with the Syrian Kurds. For Moscow, the Kurdish initiative was part and parcel of the growing importance of the minorities’ issue. The Kremlin praised Damascus for being “prepared to discuss self-government affairs with Syrian Kurds after the eventual victory over the terrorist group calling itself the Islamic State.” The Kremlin then went beyond the narrow Kurdish issue, expressing Moscow’s “welcome and support [for] the Syrian government in its efforts for achieving national reconciliation and creating comfortable conditions for the existence of representatives of different ethnic and religious segments of society within one Syria.”

China also attempted to reconcile public policy focused on territorial integrity with the benefits Beijing’s regional interests can get from Kurdish self-determination. “The Chinese government supports Iraq’s sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity,” read the official statement in Beijing. Yet, Beijing did not dismiss the Kurdish aspirations and rights as irrelevant. Instead, China expressed hope that “the relevant sides can resolve the differences via dialogue, and find an inclusive solution that takes into account history and reality, to jointly protect Iraqi and regional stability.” Beijing has expressed willingness to accept the Kurdish vote for independence provided both Erbil and Baghdad agreed.

Discussing Beijing’s real policy, Chinese senior officials acknowledged that their stand on the Kurdish self-determination question was “intricate”. For decades now, China has had friendly relations with the Kurds, and China maintains a consulate in Erbil. However, Beijing opposes a unilateral Kurdish declaration of independence fearing the impact on other secessionist movements - most notably China’s own Uighurs. Therefore, Beijing will support an independent Kurdish state provided it was established “with the consent of the Iraqi central government in Baghdad and other countries in the region.” Beijing is convinced that the Kurdish quandary “is not necessarily insoluble,” and that a combination of bilateral and regional negotiations can bring about a viable solution. Ultimately, China is more interested in the benefits of an independent Kurdistan than dreads the impact on Uighur secessionism. Therefore, the Chinese senior officials opined, “Beijing could opt to allow the emergence of an independent Kurdistan while remaining rhetorically opposed to it at the same time. That kind of approach has been a common tactic of Chinese diplomacy in the region.”

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Both Turkey and Iran are adamant on capitalizing on the irreversible collapse of the Arab-centric power hub - that is presently driving the Arab interior and controlling the Holy Shrines of Islam - in order to revive their own respective regional Caliphates/Sultanates - one Sunni and one Shiite - as the springboard for their respective global ascent. While the extent of Sunni-Shiite and Turkish-Iranian cooperation has varied and swung in recent years - Ankara and Tehran are unified in their determination to destroy the Arab-centric foci of power and prevent the ascent of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities - namely, the buffer standing between them and the Arab heartlands they are adamant on controlling and exploiting. Simply put, once the Fertile Crescent of Minority emerges as a viable geo-strategic entity - the ability of Iran and Turkey to realize their respective hegemonic aspirations will have all but vanished.

Therefore, it is imperative for both Ankara and Tehran to suppress the current Kurdish national ascent on top of the implacable historic enmity between Turks, Persians and Kurds. Indeed, both capitals made strenuous efforts in the first half of September to convince Erbil to abandon the referendum and any notion of a Kurdish quest for self-determination. The campaign peaked with the dispatch, by Tehran, of Quds Forces Commander Qassem Soleimani, and, by Ankara, of the Chief of Turkish Intelligence Hakam Fidan. They arrived in Erbil secretly in quick succession and delivered ultimatums to Barzani. Tehran and Ankara will not permit the emergence of any Kurdish entity in the aftermath of a referendum or under any other excuse, and will undertake all necessary and possible measures - including the use of force - in order to prevent and reverse any Kurdish ascent. After Soleimani and Fidan left, Erbil had no illusion whatsoever as to the hostility and resolve of both Ankara and Tehran.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's inner-circle has been stressing the point that any form of Kurdish self-determination is detrimental to the very existence of Turkey and its ability to rise anew as a global power. Hence, the Turkish reaction to the Kurdish referendums in both Iraq and Syria should be assessed in the context of Turkey's overall rejection of the West and focus on its neo-Ottoman pan-Turkic course, that, under Erdogan, has a very strong Islamist character. As well, Ankara is assessing the looming Kurdish threat in the context of the internal transformation of Turkish society. Most important is the reduction of the number of Turks, and polarization between the conservative-chauvinistic Turks of the Anatolian highlands (Erdogan's main bastion of power) and the westernized-secular Turks of western Turkey (the country's economic engine). The dichotomy between the Turks of the interior and western Turkey is growing because the increasingly assertive Alavi communities spread between the two groups of Turks, separate between them, and thus enhance the polarization of the Turkish populace. Any eruption of minorities can bring Turkey down through strife and implosion of the economic bubble. On these issues, Tehran also dreads the impact of any eruption by the minorities on the hold onto power by a shrinking Persian majority, and the threat of widespread grassroots discontent on the unstable economy.

Turkey is at the forefront of the anti-Kurdish struggle. The Turkish strategic rationale is very clear and very explicit: Kurdish ascent threatens Turkey's ability to rise and reclaim its long-overdue role as a global power. Ankara is emphasizing the impact of Kurdish self-determination on Turkey's own long-term regional aspirations rather than articulating concrete short-term implications. Ultimately, Erdogan is adamant on crushing ALL the Kurds. The excuse is Kurdish awakening in Iraq and Syria - but the real objective is Turkey's own Kurds. Tehran follows closely with growing apprehension as a result of the solidarity demonstrations in Iranian Kurdistan. Iran is also most apprehensive about the strategic impact of the referendum given the close relations between Kurdistan and Israel.



Ibrahim Karagul, one of Erdogan's closest soul-mates, articulated Ankara's perception of the Kurdish menace in a late September series of articles for *Yeni Safak*. "We are not discussing Iraq's territorial integrity, but Turkey's territorial integrity. We are not trying to secure only Iraq's future, but especially Turkey's future," Karagul argued. "The war in Syria and Iraq is going to be spread into Turkey; the threat we are trying to stop at our borders today is going to progress all the way inside Anatolia." The reawakening of Kurdish nationalism is the primary instrument of the West in redrawing anew the maps of the region in order to suppress the rising indigenous powers, starting with Turkey. An independent Kurdistan will become "an operation area in which foreign armies will settle in the heart of the region, attempt invasions like in the Crusades era. Soon, as many Israeli bases as the US bases will be established on Turkey's border, on Iran's border, with missile ramps also set up. This zone is going to be dehumanized, alienated from the region and turn into a project field similar to the occupation of Palestine territory." The emerging regional reality is "a trap is set for Turkey" aimed to enable the West to "divide Turkey in the future," Karagul warned.

For Karagul, and Erdogan, the mere conduct of the referendum and the overwhelming support for the Kurdish independence are mortal threats for Turkey. "The danger is greater than we predict, closer than we think. Turkey is face to face with the most serious threat in the history of its Republic. ... It has now been declared that this is the beginning, that Turkey included, the period of geopolitical disintegration has started." The West's springboard established in the Kurdish zones and the greater reliance on "the terrorist organizations they founded" will evolve into a "direct attack" aimed to cause "the fall of Turkey." Karagul elaborates that "a plan is being implemented in the north of Iraq and Syria - similar to how the Crusades took over the region piece by piece - that a foreign region is being formed."

Karagul sees no alternative to a decisive regional war. He warns that "if we do not want the war inside Anatolia, we must take action. ... We must break that zone, destroy that foreign garrison area and save both Turkey and the entire region." Karagul stresses the sense of urgency. "Turkey needs to take action with a historical awareness. There won't be an option like this in a year, because regional conditions will be matured and we are going to have to defend ourselves inside Anatolia." Currently, there is a historic window of opportunity for Turkey. "History has given us a wide area of maneuver. This time we are strong and we have the opportunity to intervene in many crises. Also, for the first time in three decades, regional rapport has formed against the West's plans to invade and divide. The rapport between Turkey, Iraq and Iran gives hope in this sense. Hence, Turkey's political mind will fulfill its historical responsibility, remain loyal to its centuries-old tradition and continuity and show the will that makes us Seljuks, that makes us Ottoman, that makes us Turkey. A Turkey against internal invaders, against outside interventionists will shape the region and history."

Karagul echoes Erdogan's long-standing conviction that the current crises will enable Turkey to reverse the last century of emaciation and humiliation by the West. Failing to do so, Turkey will succumb to a new cycle of debilitating Western conspiracies. "The traumas of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century are still in our memories. We have the understanding to grasp how the game was set up, how the 'American Middle East' plans were made, who were mobilized for this aim, that elements such as Daesh and the PKK were released on the ground as the herds of invasion leaders and what may follow these exhaustion wars." There is an urgent imperative for Ankara to rise to the challenge and strike out preemptively as this is the heritage of Turkey's great eras. "If we don't do something today, immediately, now, despite all the mental operations, betrayals and obstacles, we need to understand that we will miss out on a history, that it will never come again, that they are going to want to have Turkey debated in the near future the way we debated Iraq. This is the kind of mindset, identity, thought with which political history has been made since the Seljuks. The



Ottomans spent centuries on this thought and insight. This is the reflex underlying the Anatolian resistance, the Republic of Turkey. Now, after the Anatolian resistance, history is this time at the verge of a new rise or destruction. Turkey will either grow or shrink.”

Karagul emphasizes that Erdogan’s policies are based on, and derived from, this world view and logic. Erdogan is convinced, according to Karagul, that “the matter is not Barzani alone, that Turkey is under siege through Iraq and Syria, that an invasion wave is threatening every country including Turkey.” Erdogan is implementing a grand strategy for modern Turkey “based on the Seljuk-Ottoman-Turkish Republic political tradition,” that is aimed to not only reverse the Western efforts at “stopping Turkey” - but lead the long-overdue ascent of Turkey. Erdogan’s latest warning of Turkish unilateral acts including the use of force, Karagul concludes, “is a warning against the ethnic nationalism presented in the Islamic camouflage from turning into a weapon for imperial plans, a warning against multinational invasion plans. This is why we are discussing Turkey, not northern Iraq, not Iraq’s integrity alone. We are looking at the next step and determining a stance accordingly.”

Erdogan is cognizant that the confrontation with Iraqi Kurdistan will have dire economic ramifications for Turkey. Turkish entities had preferential treatment in Erbil under an agreement between Erdogan and Barzani. In mid-2017, more than 4,000 Turkish companies were operating in the Kurdish zone, including major construction, cement and steel entities. These Turkish businesses are making around \$9 billion a year - a loss Turkish economy can ill afford. Moreover, Turkey stands to lose the immensely lucrative income from the Kirkuk to Ceyhan oil pipeline. Cutting Kurdish oil exports - by pipeline and tankers - will significantly hurt the Erdogan family. Turkey’s energy minister and Erdogan’s son-in-law (married to his daughter Esra) was accused on profiting from the Kurdish oil exports through the control and/or management of Powertrans that trucks oil from Iraq’s Kurdish region and other Erbil-based oil companies. Similar accusations were labeled against Bilal Erdogan, the president’s son. Thus, Erdogan’s readiness to cripple the income of his own family in order to increase the pain of the Kurds testifies as to just how important the struggle against the Kurds is to Ankara.

In the aftermath of the referendum, Erdogan left no doubt Turkey would not accept a Kurdish state under any circumstances and irrespective of any international negotiations or talks. The Kurds, he said, “don’t have an idea on how to be a state. They think that they are a state just by saying it. This can’t and won’t happen.” Turkey is ready to use force in order to prevent the establishment of a Kurdish state. “All options are on the table right now and being discussed,” Erdogan stated, including “an ethnic and sectarian war”. Erdogan dismissed the viability of an Israeli support for the Kurds, stressing that the Kurds “should know that the waving of Israeli flags there will not save you.” Erdogan also reiterated Ankara’s conviction that the Kurdish awakening is the front of a larger and more sinister Western conspiracy against Turkey. “To attempt indolence in a chaotic period when even long-established civilizations are experiencing difficulties is nothing but a gamble of foreign powers. We cannot simply watch as unrest is instigated,” he said. “Northern Iraq, which has opposed its neighbor Turkey while awaiting the support of foreign powers, is bound to be disappointed.”

In early October, Erdogan stalwarts further stressed that the roots of the Kurdish threat were in a Western conspiracy - that is, “plans of the Crusader-Zionist alliance.” Tamer Korkmaz of the *Yeni Safak* explained that the concept of a Kurdish state has long been the crux of an American-Israeli conspiracy to weaken and divide Turkey by exploiting the Kurdish problem. “Since the critical period in which Turkey gained independence from the US, the US-Israel tandem’s scenarios and plans to divide, and re-seize and colonize Turkey have always been in place. Various attempts for chaos, coups and attacks by the terror organizations they controlled have always failed. They are now eyeing northern Syria and northern Iraq this time once again.”



Erdogan himself asserted clearly Turkey's course and future - stressing Ankara's willingness to disengage from the West in order to further Turkey's historic goals. He included in this disengagement the end of Turkey's efforts to join the EU. "We no longer need the membership of the European Union," he declared. "We would be happy to contribute to the future of Europe. If this [accession] does not happen, it does not matter for us. We will continue to advance on our own path."

Iran sees a viable Kurdistan, all the more so pro-Israel, as a major, even insurmountable, obstacle in the consolidating of the Shiite Iranian on-land access to the shores of the Mediterranean. Such a Shiite corridor was to be the primary strategic achievement of Iran's bloody involvement in the fratricidal wars of both Iraq and Syria, and it is inconceivable in Tehran that the Kurds be permitted to reverse this historic achievement of Iran.

Given the grand-strategic high-stakes involved, Tehran considers the Kurdish awakening to be a US-Israeli conspiracy aimed to contain Iran's breakout and emergence as a regional power. For Tehran, such a setback merits long tensions and even a regional war. In early October, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's top military aide Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi articulated Tehran's threat perception and anticipation of war. "We think that creation of a new country or government in the region is desired by the arrogant system, headed by the US and the Zionists, because changing the region's geopolitical borders means permanent tensions and long war between four regional states and a de facto government in the future which wants to be formed and this insecurity and tension is desired by the Zionist regime and the Americans for permanent deployment in the region."

As well, there is a growing fear in Tehran of the awakening of all Sunni minorities against the shrinking Shiite Persian majority in control. In Summer 2017, IRGC Intelligence warned that a Kurdish ascent in Iraq and Syria will embolden all Sunnis and not just the Kurds of Iran. IRGC Intelligence feared the eruption of sectarian insurrections, the losing of Persian-Shiite control over Sunni minorities, and ultimately "an upcoming civil war" between Sunnis and Shiites. Therefore, Tehran ordered the IRGC's "escalating activity in predominantly Sunni areas" in order to suppress all possible opposition and challenges to Tehran's authority. Priority was given to the all-out crackdown of the Kurds. In late September, Tehran ordered the intensification of the suppression of the Iranian Kurds because of the Kurdish demonstrations in support for their brethren in Iraq and their referendum. On 9 October, Iranian Intelligence Minister Sayed Mahmoud Alavi reported the arrest of several terrorists and the capture of large quantities of weapons and explosives. The vast majority of these terrorists were Sunnis - mainly Kurds and Balochis.

The trepidation of both Tehran and Ankara quickly manifested itself in practical cooperation. Close military and intelligence coordination and cooperation against common Kurdish enemies in Iraq and Syria quickly developed since mid-Summer 2017. This cooperation ranges from high-level coordination of contingency plans and specific operations by the chiefs of the military and other senior officers to joint military exercises of various sizes, better coordination of forces in the affected zones. Many of these exercises and coordination also involve the forces and senior officials of Baghdad. In the aftermath of the referendum, Tehran, Ankara and Baghdad closely coordinated the forward deployment of military reinforcements to the vicinity of the Kurdish Autonomy Zone. As well, Ankara and Tehran are considering giving permission to Iraqi Shiite forces to deploy on the border-crossings on their - Turkey's and Iran's - territories so that they can blockade any traffic to and from the Kurdish zone in the name of Baghdad's authority.

Most important, though, has been the gradual development of close cooperation between Iran and Turkey in the conduct of intelligence and special operations inside northern Iraq. The cooperation in such sensitive



operations quickly developed since mid-Summer - once Erbil's commitment to the referendum became clear. The first major joint operation took place in late August. Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (real name Jamal Jaafar Muhammad), the commander of the Quds Forces-controlled Popular Mobilization Units, delivered weapons and supplies to the Turkomen militia al-Hashd al-Turkmani that is controlled by Turkish Intelligence in the Tal Afar area, northwestern Iraq. Since then, the on-site sharing of intelligence regarding Kurdish targets has intensified, and Iran-controlled forces (both Iranian and nominally Iraqi) attacked several Kurdish camps and facilities ostensibly affiliated with the PKK in both Iraq and Syria.

On 4 October, Erdogan made a brief visit to Tehran in order to seal, with his Iranian counterparts, a series of bilateral military and security agreements regarding both Syria and Iraq - particularly the Kurds. These agreements were negotiated between the chiefs of the militaries and intelligence services of both countries, as well as teams of leading experts. Erdogan, Khamenei and President Hassan Rouhani used the occasion in order to publicly state their uncompromising harsh positions regarding the Kurdish issue in its entirety.

"The Iraq issue has become a priority on our agenda," Erdogan stated. Turkey and Iran will never accept the referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan. The involvement of Israel in Kurdish affairs increases the Kurdish threat to both Turkey and Iran. "We don't recognize the illegal referendum in Kurdistan region. At present no world state but Israel supports it. In our view, the decision which has been taken at around a table with Mossad is not acceptable," Erdogan added. "Iran and Turkey have firm positions on this issue which are clear to everyone. We merely deal with the central government in Iraq and consider the referendum in Kurdistan region as illegitimate."

Khamenei concurred that the United States and Israel are the primary beneficiaries from the referendum because of its outcome will be the creation of "a new Israel" that will, in turn, target Iran and Turkey. "The United States and foreign powers are untrustworthy and seek to create a new Israel in the region." Khamenei considers the Kurdish referendum "an act of betrayal against the region" that poses "a threat to the future of the Middle East" with dire repercussions for Iraq's neighbors. Therefore, Khamenei stated, "Iran and Turkey should take every possible measure against the move and the Iraqi government, too, should make decisions and take serious action." Iran's foreign enemies have been trying to keep Iran and Turkey apart and create contention between them. The new Iran-Turkey comprehensive cooperation, Khamenei stressed, is "a major development in the Muslim World" and will be "highly significant and instrumental" in charting the future of the entire region.

Rouhani stressed Khamenei's last point. "Iran and Turkey are the most important names of the region because of their power. In recent days, the relations of the two countries have further developed politically and economically," he explained. "Our main goal is to ensure security and stability in the region. Sectarian discrimination is the plot of foreigners in the region. Both countries do not accept discrimination. Northern Iraq should make up for its mistake. We support the territorial integrity of Iraq and Syria." Rouhani concluded that Ankara and Tehran "would confront the disintegration of Iraq and Syria" with all available means. "Turkey, Iran and Iraq have no choice but to take serious and necessary measures to protect their strategic goals in the region, and the wrong decisions made by some of the leaders of this region must be compensated for by them."

Immediately after Erdogan's return from Tehran, Karagul sharpened his message and intensified his call to arms. The plot against Turkey is accelerating and thickening, and therefore the imperative to strike out against the Kurds before it is too late is more urgent than ever before. "The project carried out through Kurdistan



Regional Government (KRG) President Masoud Barzani in northern Iraq and the project carried out through the Kurdistan Workers' Party's (PKK) Syrian affiliate Democratic Union Party (PYD) in northern Syria are a single plan. Qandil and Erbil have been identified as the two fierce fronts of the same multinational chain of interventions." Through the organization and training of Kurdish forces by the West, "pillaging and destruction are carried to our cities. All of these terrorist organizations have been raised and bred and released on the ground to bring the countries in the region to their knees and to downsize them."

The redrawing of the maps of Syria and Iraq by the friends of the Kurds is just the beginning of a campaign to dismember the region's powers. "The destruction planned in Iraq and Syria will turn next to Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia." Because of its importance - Turkey is the first target of this conspiracy. "The war that we think is happening in Syria and Iraq today is actually Turkey's war. The defense we need to put up there today is to defend not only the integrity of the region, but also to defend Anatolia. The storm that has burned down cities of Iraq and Syria and turned them into ruins will soon turn toward the cities of Anatolia." Unless Turkey acts resolutely and fast, it will have "to build inside Turkey the defense line we failed to build in Syria and Iraq," Karagul warns.

Karagul explains that "there is a deadly showdown between Turkey's nationalization and the multinational will." The long-term strategy of Turkey's enemies anticipates that "through the multinational invasion conducted through the PKK/PYD, by further growing the plan with the addition of Barzani, through the division of Iraq and Syria, a much greater division map is going to be pushed onto every country." The only way to forestall this threat is by military intervention in Iraq and Syria. "If we fear intervention, we cannot defend Anatolia," Karagul stresses. "This is not war, it is homeland defense. Intervening in Afrin, in Manbij, in Ayn al-Arab and in the depths of northern Iraq is homeland defense. It is the effort to prevent a much greater war. Within a year we are going to see Israeli military bases, missile bases, air defense systems at our border and then, we are not even going to be able to move. I repeat: If we are unable to intervene in those regions no matter what, that war will soon be carried into Anatolia, into its cities. We need to choose whether we want to fight on the inside or on the other side of the border."

Erdogan's Ankara is now petrified about the emerging Fertile Crescent of Minorities and is convinced that drastic measures must be taken. Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the ultra-nationalist and pan-Turkic Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) declared that "in the event of KRG separation, Mosul, Kirkuk and Sulaymaniyah must be annexed to Turkey." Several other nationalist leaders from both the MHP and Erdogan's AKP - all close allies of Erdogan - echoed the demand for annexation. Since Erdogan himself declared in early October that "Mosul and Kirkuk are Turkish cities" and had called for "the annexation of Mosul and Kirkuk to Turkey under the National Oath" - these demands are putting Erdogan in a tight spot.

Sadik Unay of the pro-Erdogan *The Daily Sabah* called the emerging regional posture "the neo-medievalism" and warned of its horrendous ramifications. "This neo-medieval regional order characterized by multiple claims of national sovereignty, civil wars, ethnic-sectarian radicalization and weakening national and regional actors constitutes a perfect ground for global players striving to conjure up new micro-states as controllable entities. The latest independence referendum in northern Iraq by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is a perfect illustration of abusing national sentiments to trigger a potentially destructive Pandora's box based on ethnic politics." Little wonder Ankara recognizes the important role of Kurdistan as a trend-setter. Unay notes that confronting neo-medievalism necessitates ad-hoc short-term cooperation even among countries with overall disagreements. "For instance, Ankara, Tehran and Baghdad are forging a strong alliance against a potential



move from the KRG for independence in view of their common national interests while the differences of opinion among the three countries continue on a range of issues, including the future of Syria and the fight against PKK terrorism.”

Ultimately, Unay concludes, Ankara will have to forge a permanent regional order comprised of the Muslim regional powers in order to suppress once and for all the consolidation of neo-medievalism - that is, the Fertile Crescent of Minorities. “Limiting the extent of great power meddling and forming a relatively stable regional order in the Middle East would first and foremost require that four major regional players - Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt and Iran - form common positions on burning issues and local crises. Until these countries find the will and energy to form consensual approaches to harmonize the basic tenets of their regional geo-strategic priorities, the current trend towards neo-medievalism is unfortunately set to continue.”

Tehran shares Turkey’s dread of the rise of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities. Tehran is more worried about the geo-strategic ramifications for the entire region than the impact of the referendum on Iran’s own restive Kurdish population. Khamenei’s Senior Adviser Ali Akbari Velayati warned of the dire ramifications of the US-Israeli conspiracy to empower the Kurds “in eastern Syria [that] signifies their intention to split the region. They have the same plot for Iraq, looking for the formation of a second Israel.” Rouhani also stressed the overall regional ramifications of using the Kurdish referendum as a precedent for other regional entities. “[Launching] wars and the intensifying regional divisions will not be beneficial to any country and all regional governments must try to establish lasting peace and tranquility,” he observed on 10 October.

Iranian political expert Sadegh Maleki analyzed the Iranian policy for the Mehr News Agency (a conservative Islamist organ). He stressed the geo-strategic regional reverberations of the ascent of the Kurds. “Although the referendum and its domino effect is considered a threat for all countries with a Kurdish population, this threat is immediate for Baghdad, close to Turkey and relatively far from Iran,” Maleki wrote. Even though “some Kurdish regions of Iran expressed joy over the results,” it is Tehran’s tight control over the minorities’ population that guarantees that “the Kurds would prefer Iran” to self-determination or joining Turkey.

Maleki considers the implementation of the Kurdish referendum to be the catalyst for a region-wide dismemberment of states that will prove as devastating for the region’s Islamic powers as the original division by the Sykes-Picot Agreement. “If the referendum is not canceled and Erbil is not placed under Baghdad’s circle of power, the referendum then should be considered the starting point of the [new cycle of a] Sykes-Picot Agreement. The only factor that can keep Iraq safe from being partitioned is the full and trusted coordination among Tehran, Ankara and Baghdad,” Maleki argued. “The only way for the Middle East to escape from the crisis and, for Iraq to stay away from being partitioned, is to end the geopolitical rivalries in the region, especially between Iran and Turkey, based on mutual trust and aimed at reaching a geo-strategic alliance at an ideal point.”

Ultimately, however, Turkey, Iran and Iraq do not yearn for a new war against the Kurds. The current conflicts involving Kurds are already militarily challenging - and any new escalation might become debilitating. At the same time, Ankara, Tehran, and, to a lesser extent, Baghdad are determined not to permit a major change in the regional strategic posture that is currently favorable to them. They are determined to stifle Erbil into submission and subservience to Baghdad. However, any effort to force the Kurds through non-violent means is futile. The various economic sanctions and other punitive measures available to Turkey, Iran and Iraq might be painful - but are not debilitating enough to coerce the Kurds into abandoning their historic aspirations. Cognizant that the Kurds are not inclined to give up on realizing their manifest destiny - the great quandary is



how to reconcile the profoundly conflicting policies without a major regional eruption. Erdogan's stalwarts have an unequivocal solution - a major war.

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Throughout, the Russians and the Chinese have been pressuring both Turkey and Iran show restraint and avoid escalation. Both the Kremlin and the Forbidden City will not let Ankara and Tehran risk, let alone reverse, the all-important consolidation of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities - the key to the future of the entire region beyond Syria and Iraq. The Kremlin has threatened Ankara with economic ramifications, particularly in the oil and gas sector, should the crisis with the Kurds escalate. During his brief visit to Turkey, Putin warned Erdogan that a unilateral cancellation of the 50-year agreement with Barzani (2014-2064) over the shipping of Kurdish oil through the Kirkuk-to-Ceyhan oil pipeline could adversely affect the energy agreements with Russia. Erdogan is desperate to sign. Putin explained that the unilateral abrogation of a long-term energy agreement will severely hurt Turkey's international credibility as a partner in the field of energy transportation. Although Erdogan protested the veiled threat, he internalized Putin's message. Indeed, while in Tehran, Erdogan sought Iranian guarantees to substitute any future losses in oil and gas supplies from Russia. Tehran did not commit fully and unconditionally.

By now, regional leaders and foci of power throughout the Middle East are cognizant of Assad's victory and of the urgent imperative to accept the regional order pushed by Putin - Assad's patron and savior. The alternative is the eruption of far greater chaos and violence the outcome of which nobody can predict.

Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman stressed the point in early October. "Assad has emerged victorious in the battle," he noted. "Suddenly, everyone wants to get closer to Assad. ... I see that there is now a long line of countries applauding and wooing Assad, including Western [and] moderate Sunni Muslim [states]." There is no better alternative for Israel or anybody else. Barring a regional arrangement and an end to the crises and wars, Liberman explained, Israel would find itself "on the northern front against the Russians, Iranians, Turks and HizbAllah." Any reasonable regional posture sponsored by the Kremlin will be preferable to a regional war.

Jerusalem, like everybody else in the region, has realized that not only are Moscow and Beijing determined to consolidate the Fertile Crescent of Minorities as the key to long-term stability - but that there is nobody who will be able to prevent this from happening, not even the US. Jerusalem is therefore seeking out an agreement with the Kremlin. Israel is focusing on strategic stability and predictability, as well as a hope to minimize Iranian presence and influence. There are indeed tacit understandings about Russian and Israeli military operations over the eastern Mediterranean, Lebanon and Syria. Russia has committed to effectively keeping Iran and the HizbAllah away from the Golan border, although not as far as Israel would have wanted to. As well, the Kremlin is ready to accept the Israeli bombing campaign against the transfer of strategic weapons to the HizbAllah. Israel will not join a campaign to challenge the Russian hegemony despite American urging to do so.

The overall concept of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities agrees very well with Israel's vision of the greater Middle East. Ultimately, Israel has always been committed to an alliance with the region's minorities, and has consistently supported in words and deeds the aspirations of the Kurds, Maronites, Druze and others. Thus, being integrated into the emerging Fertile Crescent of Minorities is the natural thing to do for Jerusalem irrespective of Washington's fury.



The Maronites and Druze of Lebanon are also committed to supporting and being integrated into the Fertile Crescent of Minorities. National leaders have realized that this is the only way to preserve their very existence and self-identities against the pervasive Shiitization of the country carried out by the emboldened HizbAllah. Only the shielding by great powers and allied minorities can provide the umbrella needed for their very survival. During his late June 2017 visit to Moscow, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt explained to Lavrov that there was an urgent imperative to strengthen the self-identity of the Druze against the HizbAllah. He pleaded for Russian help and accepted the proposed integration into the Fertile Crescent of Minorities as the best and most logical option.

With the military victory all but achieved, the Assad Administration starts to focus on post-war Syria. Damascus is cognizant that there can be no return to the pre-war days. A new Syria will have to emerge from the ashes - taking into consideration the profound transformation of society during the more than five years of horrific fratricidal carnage. As well, Damascus will have to unconditionally accept and closely follow the Kremlin's vision of, and plans for, the future of Syria and the entire Middle East. Hence, Syria will emerge as a most active participant in the consolidation of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities.

Russian experts have a clear idea about the future Syria based on in-depth study of the tapestry of the grassroots populace and the country's economic posture. The crux of the Russian approach is that given the alienation of all people from the modern state - only plans based on the indigenous aspirations of the grassroots populace can be implemented. For the Fertile Crescent of Minorities, the Russian experts focus on the establishment of two adjacent zones - the Alawite zone along the shores of the Mediterranean, and the economic engine of Syria in the strip between Aleppo and south of Damascus. The strip area has mixed population in the urban centers - mainly Sunni Arabs, Alawites, Druze, Armenians and other Christians. This is a unique area where the merging of people on the basis of common socio-economic interests has created a distinct and unique grassroots phenomenon that amounts to "a minority". Taken together, these two zones are the backbone of modern Syria.

The Alawite zone offers the only salvation for the Alawites. Since 2011, the community has endured high levels of casualties - not just young men- that will have tangible impact on the demography for decades to come. Because of the tight-knit tribalism and clannism of the Alawites - the social impact of the attrition is harder on the Alawites than on any other population group in Syria. The depth of hatred between the Alawites and the radicalized Sunni Arabs (who consider them Nosayra that must be killed) necessitates separation in order to avoid endless blood feuds and revenge. Hence, the Alawites need their own space to recover. The Alawites also need space to withstand safely the incessant efforts by both Iran and the HizbAllah to convert the Alawites into Jaafari Shiites. This is an issue that alienates the entire community against Iran and the other Shiite forces, but the Assad's Damascus is incapable of stopping because of their dependence on Iranian and Iran-controlled Shiite forces.

Syria's urban elites have become tormented population. Secularized and westernized than most in the Arab Middle East, they rallied to Bashar al-Assad's promises of liberalization and reforms when he assumed power only to be betrayed by his quest for expedient power. In 2011, they rejected Islamism-Jihadism and refused to join the revolt and thus had their cities occupied by Jihadists from the outside. A large portion of the Syrian refugees and internally displaced come from this area. Subsequently, the remaining population has been subjected to both the heavy fire-power of the Syrian and allied forces and the abuse of the Jihadists because of their modernity. The urban elites thus became the heavy collateral damage of the defeat of the Jihadist forces



in their midst. Now, the entire economic infrastructure of Syria needs to be rebuilt from scratch. It is imperative to revive the multi-national/multi-ethnic character of the local urban populace, and to provide them with the wherewithal for recovery and long-term development. The long-term recovery and success of this region is of crucial importance to the Chinese plans for the New Silk Road in the Middle East.

Significantly, the formation and success of these two adjacent zones has nothing to do with Bashar al-Assad and his power base. On the contrary, these two foci of power in Syria that were originally inclined to support him now have profound doubts on account of Assad's broken promises and disregard of their plight. (The third foci - the Sunni Arab tribes - is broken up and radicalized.) The grassroots in both zones will opt for indigenous leaders who will prioritize the specific zones, rather than following a leader with all-Syrian and regional focus as well as a need for vindication after years of demonization.

In the aftermath of their referenda, the Kurds emerge as the first active participants in the formation of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities. The Kurds have long aspired for nationally-based self-determination and self-governing statehood. Hence, the basic premise of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities is in close agreement with the historic aspirations of the Kurds.

At the same time, the Kurds present formidable challenges to the realization of a Kurdish state and/or self-governing entity. There is no monolithic Kurdistan. The diverse and mutually hostile Kurdish tribes are united by their quest for independence and self-determination. The Kurds are territorially divided by the traditional habitats of the tribes and not by states' borders. Therefore, irrespective of declarations regarding the commitment to the territorial integrity of both Syria and Iraq - there will ultimately be a single Kurdistan. Having endured broken promises, repressions and deprivations for close to a century, the Kurds will not relinquish their quest for self-determination now that it is virtually at hand.

The challenge, therefore, is in formulating the practical modalities for the realizing of the Kurdish aspirations in a prudent and pragmatic manner. The mere preoccupation with the Kurdish referenda in both Syria and Iraq commands the formal tackling of the legal-political core questions regarding the status of the components of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities. There are core issues regarding secession - both separation and divorce - and under what conditions. The international penchant for preserving the territorial integrity of modern states no matter how failed and irrelevant they have become commands a clear definition of the extent of the Kurds' delinking from Iraq and Syria, as well as their post-independence relations with these states. The Kurds are cognizant that they are short on implementation. The referendum is a declaration of intent and commitment but has no built-in actual declaration of independence and effecting a secession from Iraq. "On the road to independence, the referendum is only one step," acknowledged Hoshyar Zebari, briefly the Deputy Prime Minister of Iraq (in 2014).

Hence, in addressing the Kurdish challenge both the local powers and the international community will have to come to grips with the actual implementation of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities. There are complex legal-political challenges in defining the precise legal-political status of the new entities emerging from the wreckage of the modern Arab state system. As well, there are great challenges in defining the borders of the entities. The current boundaries of the Kurdish autonomy zone in Iraq exclude a large segment of the Kurdish population that wants and deserves to be part of the Kurdish state. What is euphemistically called "areas outside the administration" include major Kurdish centers such as Kirkuk, Makhmour, Khanaqin and Sinjar - all of whom are effectively under the control of the Kurdish Peshmerga. As well, there are no viable boundaries for the Kurdish zone in Syria since the existing administrative regions were defined by the Hafez al-Assad's Administration that



was hostile to anything Kurdish. Presently, the Kurdish forces control large swaths of Syria as a result of the fighting against various Jihadist forces but their legal status is ill-defined. The Kurdish frustration with the border issue was articulated by Barzani. “Our borders lie where our tanks stop,” he quipped recently.

Thus, the ascent and realization of Kurdish self-determination will set precedents for the other entities to come. The Kurds are eager to finally realize their manifest destiny and be fully integrated into the global economic system. Toward this end, the Kurds will closely cooperate in formulating the pragmatic amicable solutions for the realization of their aspirations. Furthermore, the Kurds have experience in self-governance of their own zones. They’ve been fairly successful despite immense challenges - from dysfunctional economy, to endemic corruption in Erbil, to problems with export of oil (their primary source of income), and to ongoing bitter fighting with the powerful Jihadist forces in Syria and Iraq. From this perspective, the realization of the Kurdish aspirations will be a good start and a promising precedent-setting venue for the entire Fertile Crescent of Minorities.

The most important southeastern edge of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities is still evolving. The veiled-yet-bitter power struggle in Baghdad will have far reaching impact on the entire Middle East. A faction in official Baghdad is inclined to acknowledge the break-up of Iraq in order to secure the survival and empowerment of Iraq’s distinct Shiite Arab population, and thus its freedom from the stifling Iranian embrace and de-facto annexation. In principle, the fate of Baghdad and the Shiite Arabs will be determined by the success of the desperate efforts of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to prevent the Iranian de-facto annexation and Persianization of Shiite Iraq.

The struggle for the fate of Shiite Iraq escalated in Spring 2017. Encouraged and emboldened by the imminent victory over the Islamic State/Caliphate, Tehran started putting finishing touches on the Shiite Corridor from Iran to the shores of the Mediterranean - swallowing the pertinent parts of Iraq and Syria. The Iranian campaign to swallow Iraq intensified markedly in Spring 2017 with the nomination, in April, of Iraj Masjedi as Iran’s new Ambassador to Iraq. Masjedi is a Brigadier General at the Quds Forces and the right-hand man of its commander Qassem Soleimani. In Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi serves as the connecting element between Qassem Soleimani, who holds the Iraq Dossier among Khamenei’s coterie, and Iran’s stalwart ally in Baghdad - Vice-President Nouri al-Maliki. Together, they are pushing hard for the further integration of Iraq into the Iranian hegemonic zone of influence.

The primary instrument is the myriad of the Shiite militias fighting in both northern Iraq and eastern-central Syria that are loosely organized as the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Units or People’s Mobilization Forces). Because of their zeal, willingness to endure high losses, and good military training - the Shiite militias have repeatedly proven the decisive element in the key campaigns against the forces of the Islamic State/Caliphate in northern Iraq and Syria - all on the edge of the Kurdish dominated areas. The Al-Hashd al-Shaabi are controlled, trained, equipped and led in combat by the Quds Forces with Qassem Soleimani personally involved in all their key battles. Nouri al-Maliki is considered the political “godfather” of the Popular Mobilization Units. He has used their military successes in order to increase the overall political power and role of not only the Iraqi Shiite militias but also the Quds Forces as the facilitators of these achievements.

In June 2017, a major crisis erupted between the leaders of the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi and Abadi’s official Baghdad. First came an open challenge to the legal authority of Baghdad in the name of Shiite purity. Senior commanders argued that obeying religious decrees, most of whom originate in Qom and Tehran, must take precedence over obeying orders from the government in Baghdad. In early June, for example, Qais al-Khazali,



the secretary-general of the Asaib Ahl al-Haq (a faction within the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi) asserted their position. “When religious law is in contradiction with state law, the former prevails,” he stated. There followed accusations by senior commanders that Abadi was personally trying to contain the combat operations of the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi in order to deprive them of military triumphs and the ensuing political power. Hadi al-Amiri, the de-facto commander of the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi and the secretary-general of its Badr Organization faction, publicly accused Abadi of interfering with the fight against the Islamic State/Caliphate. “We have grown tired of working with the prime minister. We have to convince and even beg him before we can launch any operation, and I don’t understand why,” he said in a TV interview.

The roots of the crisis are in a quintessential issue of far greater importance than political power and influence in Baghdad. The outcome of the current crisis will affect the future of Shiite Islam. Historically, Najaf and Karbala were the dominant centers of Shiite Islam between the second half of 7th Century and 1979 when the Shiite leadership was massacred by Saddam Hussein and the survivors accepted the invitation of Ayatollah Khomeini (who himself was sheltered in Najaf from the wrath of the Shah of Iran between 1964 and 1978). Consequently, Iran’s Qom has become the center of Shiite Islam with Iranian clerics, all devotees of Khomeini and Khamenei, assuming prominence. Since 2004, the leadership in Qom has strenuously resisted any effort to revive the Shiite Arab prominence of Najaf and Karbala.

In Summer 2017, the crisis over Najaf and Karbala reached a critical point with the impending death of Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Hosseini Sistani - the extremely popular spiritual leader of Shiite Iraq who is now 87 years old and in failing health. Reports of Sistani’s new health problems invigorated the determination of Qom and Tehran to secure the empowerment of a Persian-controlled cleric as Sistani’s successor.

From the very beginning, Iraq’s nationalist-religious leaders, most notably Moqtada al-Sadr, have rallied to the restoring of the prominence of Najaf and Karbala, and thus Shiite Arab preeminence. In this effort, Sadr fostered a close alliance with Abadi and his political camp. With Iranian pressure growing, Sadr embarked on two milestone trips to Saudi Arabia (in late July) and the UAE (in mid-August). Sadr met with the two up-and-coming leaders of the Arabian Peninsula - Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman of Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Muhammad bin Zayed al-Nahayan. He advocated the establishment of an all-Arab - both Sunni and Shiite - unified front against the Iranian onslaught. Sadr called for the ending of the sectarian schism - Sunni vs Shiites - dominating the Arab World in favor of reviving the heritage conflict between Arabs and Persians. Sadr had concrete proposals for his interlocutors. He expressed willingness to stop the flow, via southern Iraq, of Iranian support for Shiite terrorist networks in the eastern parts of the Arabian Peninsula in return for all-out support for Abadi’s effort to save Shiite Arab Iraq. Sadr returned to Baghdad very encouraged.

Alarmed, Tehran and Qom increased their pressure on Sistani and his inner-circle to accept and legitimize a successor nominated by Qom. In early September, Khamenei dispatched to Iraq two extremely important emissaries. The Chairman of the Iranian Expediency Council Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi led the delegation. He is Iraqi by birth and a former senior leader in the Islamic Dawa Party (that is currently led by Maliki). In mid-August, Khamenei nominated Shahroudi as chairman of the Expediency Council by special decree (succeeding the late Hashemi-Rafsanjani) because he is a dual Iranian-Iraqi citizen. Shahroudi is considered a leading candidate to succeed Khamenei as the next Supreme Leader. The other key member of the delegation was Mohsen Rezaei - presently the secretary of Iran’s Expediency Council. Rezaei is a former senior intelligence official and a former commander of the IRGC with a rank of Major General.



Initially, Shahroudi and Rezaei met in Baghdad with various Shiite political and religious leaders including Abadi, Maliki and several commanders of key factions within the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi. Shahroudi explained that Khamenei sent him in order to convince all the Iraqi Shiite leaders to rally behind Maliki's Islamic Dawa Party in order to create a unified Shiite bloc that will be staunchly pro-Iran. The Iranians received enthusiastic support from everybody except for Abadi.

Shahroudi then traveled to Najaf in order to discuss the future of Arab-Iraqi Shiism in the post-Sistani era. He insisted that the subjugation of Najaf and Karbala to the authorities in Qom must continue unconditionally. Despite the immense religious preeminence of Shahroudi he was rebuffed in a most insulting manner. First, Sistani refused to meet with Shahroudi because he would not accept the message from Tehran. Consequently, Shahroudi did not succeed to meet with the other four leading religious authorities in Najaf. As well, Moqtada al-Sadr refused to meet with Shahroudi, citing the issue of improper Iranian intervention in Iraqi political affairs. Amir al-Kanani, a Sadr lieutenant, explained that Shahroudi sought "to form a pure Shiite bloc bringing together all of the National Alliance's leaders." This is because "Iran has no new project other than the formation of a [pro-Iran] Shiite bloc in Iraq." Kanani warned that "such a sectarian polarization will be countered by a sectarian Sunni polarization and nationalist Kurdish polarization." Sadr vowed to protect the vital interests of Shiite Arab Iraq from both the Iranian stifling embrace and the reverberations of the ascent of Sunni Arab and Kurdish nationalism.

The Kremlin capitalized on the crisis in Baghdad and sent messages to Abadi to have a Shiite Iraq join the Fertile Crescent of Minorities as the crucial edge and benefit hugely from this. The Kremlin opined that the brewing crisis over the succession of Sistani is the harbinger of a fateful development - namely, the growing tensions between Arabs and Persians and the revival of their old enmities. Both Muhammad bin Salman and Muhammad bin Zayed al-Nahayan also sent special messages to Abadi - endorsing the Russian initiative and promising major support, mainly economic but also political.

Thus, the still escalating inner-Shiite Arab crisis will give the final push for the de-facto, or even formal, disintegration of Iraq, and will expedite the resolution of the Kurdish challenge and the consolidation of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities.

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The entire greater Bilad al-Sham is at a threshold that, if capitalized on in time, can finally bring to an end the fratricidal carnage that has been bedeviling the region since the beginning of the decade and usher in an era of relative stability. Minority states or de-facto states (formally cantons) are the key to the long-term stability in the greater Bilad al-Sham and beyond. Implementation depends on quickly consolidating the Fertile Crescent of Minorities comprised of these entities - thus establishing the buffer that will separate between the various foci of power currently feeding the fighting and carnage - most notably Turkey and Iran - and the increasingly radicalized and volatile Sunni Arab milieu that has proven susceptible to inflaming from afar. The Fertile Crescent of Minorities will be instrumental in defusing the ongoing regional conflicts - thus enabling the destitute and prostrate grassroots populace to end the fratricidal carnage while securing their own relative safety. This stability, with the Fertile Crescent of Minorities enshrining it, must be consolidated before Turkey and Iran set the region aflame in pursuit of their strategic grand designs.

In late September, the Kurds made the first decisive step toward the realization of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities by declaring their intent to realize their manifest destiny and establish their own entity. This bold



initiative should be capitalized on in order to expedite the establishment of the entire Fertile Crescent of Minorities before a next cycle of horrific violence sets the greater Middle East aflame anew.

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