



The End Is No Longer Nigh

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Executive Summary

* The greater Middle East appears to be on the verge of an unprecedented explosion - the amalgam of a multitude of smaller clashes, eruptions and conflicts. The grassroots - both Arab and minorities - are pushed to the limit by regional developments that constitute existential threats.

* Most important is the return of the Sunnis vs. Shiites ubiquitous abhorrence and the quest for both dominance and revenge. These dominant trends, that have taken over all other localized dynamics, have been both capitalized on, and exploited by, the aspirant regional powers - Iran and Turkey. Determined to preserve the modern states, the US supports both Turkey and Iran.

* Ultimately, the core-crises afflicting the grassroots cannot be resolved fully. Russia is leading the effort to defuse the region, including the reversal of the Iranian and Turkish ascents. Cognizant of the unique role of the minorities, including Israel, as a regional stabilizing force, Russia relies on them as a key element of the effort to consolidate a bottom-up regional order.

* Left to be seen though, is whether the Russia-led efforts to build a bottom-up region will be able to defuse the desperate and volatile grassroots before the top-bottom pressure by the de-facto alliance of Turkey, Iran and the US sparks the dreaded region-wide most violent Intifada that will absorb all grievances, starting with the Sunni-Shiite dispute, and set aflame the entire greater Middle East for a long time to come.

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Analysis

The greater Middle East appears to be on the verge of an unprecedented explosion – the amalgam of a multitude of smaller clashes, eruptions and conflicts.

Once again, the grassroots – both Arab and minorities – are pushed to the limit by regional developments that constitute existential threats. The still unfolding escalation of the fighting is throughout the entire region and among virtually all the forces involved. This is because the populace dreads the looming regional posture to the point of committing to fight for their current posture, as well as their future and destiny. This escalation is all the more unfathomable because, for almost two years now, since mid-2016, the greater Bilad al-Sham has been moving toward the ending of hostilities and the acceptance, albeit grudgingly to most, of a regional order they all could live with. Imperfect and unsatisfactory as this order might have been – it would have brought to an end the horrific fratricidal carnage engulfing the region. The exhausted and browbeaten populace has long yearned for stability and quiet even if at a high cost.

Back at the beginning of the decade, the region-wide Intifada, commonly known as the Arab Spring, was a grassroots rebellion against the modern state, westernization and other foreign influences. In mid-2011, the Muslim Brothers' leader Sheikh Yussuf al-Qaradawi explained the trend to Vladimir Titorenko, then the Russian Ambassador to Qatar. "Russia must accept the truth that bloody and corrupt regimes in Arab countries must go, and that people have gotten sick of their old governments which must be replaced by the power of society. When these countries get rid of their expired rulers, they will be able to build prosperous societies that are based on our authentic traditions." Even the most conservative and seemingly stable Kingdoms, Sheikhdoms and Emirates would not be spared this fate, Qaradawi stressed, "their turn will come too."

Alas, the Arab modern state refused to go without a fight. In Egypt, Field Marshal Abdul Fattah al-Sisi toppled the Muslim Brothers' Muhammad Morsi and seized power just before the country succumbed to chaos. In Shiite-dominated Iraq, Prime Ministers Nouri al-Maliki and Haider al-Abadi unleashed the military against both secessionist segments of the population (Kurds and Sunni Arabs) and the Jihadists. In Syria, President Bashar al-Assad subjected his country to an ongoing carnage against both Jihadists and predominantly Sunni Arab localized foci of power. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States escalated their oppression of their secessionist and increasingly radical Shiite minorities.

Still, all these extremely violent efforts have failed to contain, let alone reverse, the grassroots' determination to free themselves from the clutches of the modern state and to redefine their lives in traditional frameworks – mostly tribal and ethnocentric. While centralized strongmen remained in power, their own and their states' legitimacy among the populace has all but evaporated. Indeed, Libya and Yemen fractured along ethnocentric lines with no reversal in sight. By mid-2016, there were widespread indications that the strongmen at the helm in Syria, Iraq and Jordan were sufficiently pragmatic to face reality and permit profound reforms at the grassroots-level. The populace resigned to imperfect if tolerable solutions combined with the gradual cessation of hostilities.

However, concurrent foreign interventions by both regional and great powers conveyed the message that the grassroots solutions would be sacrificed on the altar of these powers' higher self-interests. Consequently, during the winter of 2017/18, there emerged growing dread among the grassroots that the post-state posture they have all fought and suffered for so long is being taken away from them just when it finally was within grasp. Hence, as the pressure from the outside powers kept growing, the grassroots kept retreating to their



rock-bottom identities and manifest destinies as the driving forces of their desperate struggles. Thus, there is less and less willingness to consider compromises. Instead, there is widespread resolve to guarantee virtually at all cost the bare minimum for self-survival under indigenous conditions and NOT within westernized modern frameworks. This is because these modern frameworks have not only failed to deliver salvation, but they actually delivered untold suffering on the grassroots.

The dominant trends that have taken over all other localized dynamics have been both capitalized on, and exploited by, the aspirant regional powers – Iran and Turkey.

Most important is the return of the Sunnis vs. Shiites ubiquitous abhorrence and the quest for both fateful dominance and revenge. The ascendance of the Iran-led Shiites gives unprecedented self-confidence and audacity to local Shiite communities that, in turn, sends all the Sunnis into wrathful reaction. Both Sunnis and Shiites have extremely high expectations for a Divine Outcome of the current conflagration – the return of the Shiite Mahdi or the Apocalyptic End-of-Days Battle at Dabiq for the Sunnis. Both traditions foresee the current fighting inevitably leading to a major cataclysmic clash. How major is the big unknown – but both sides are determined to try and attain the historic maximum out of the current crises and carnage whatever the human cost.

In this context, the increasingly xenophobic yet chauvinistic main regional nations – Arabs, Anatolian Turks and Persians – both hate and despise each other. They also compete with each other on the dominance of the future of Islam by occupying the three Holy Shrines in Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem, and the region as a whole. Toward this end, they make transient alliances to better destroy their respective nemeses.

These main populace-groupings (Arabs, Anatolian Turks and Persians) are immersed in their respective fights against the minorities – especially the Nosayrah (post-Muslim sects such as the Alawites, Druze, Akhmediya, etc.), the Jews and the Kurds. The minorities must not be permitted to constitute buffers to unchecked expansion by the main populace-groupings, to sustain their historic strategic-economic prominence, or challenge the monolithic dynamics aspired to by each of these populace-groupings. Transient pragmatic alliances – most notably between Iran and the Alawites – need not distract from the ultimate objectives of the leading three populace-groupings.

Until the still-unfolding earthquake, the emerging regional order was based on a bottom-up approach and largely decentralized entities in order to attract the grassroots and win over their acquiescence, perhaps even support. However, because of the imperative to be legitimized by the Kuffar's [infidels'] "civilized world order" – it was accepted and recognized that some form of Daula [administrative state] was inescapable. In contrast, both Iran and Turkey have been committed to centralized top-bottom states through which they would be able to rule the Arab milieu and particularly the Holy Shrines of Islam. In that, they found a staunch ally in the US that is also committed to centralized governance (a pro-Iran Shiite regime in Baghdad and a pro-Turkey Sunni Ikhwani regime in Damascus) in order to expedite the US control over these lands and their riches, as well as banish Russia.

The resurrection of modern states and/or empires/caliphates will not change the basic premise of the greater Middle East. There is no stopping of the determination and despair of the grassroots groupings to become masters of their own respective fate and destiny. Nor is there any stopping of their resolve to guarantee localized self-rule capable of shielding themselves against the return of the carnage of recent years. The urgent imperative for greater power in order to resist the lingering central forces has sent the grassroots groupings



into forming ad-hoc coalitions based on the largest yet lowest common denominators – Sunni vs. Shiite, and Arabs vs. “others”. The looming threats are way too horrendous for local leaders and notables to attempt interim-level or longer-term associations. People and leaders alike are convinced that extreme measures are imperative in order to address the challenges and threats associated with the looming catastrophe.

Throughout, US strategy in the Syria-Iraq theater has been confusing at best. Despite President Trump’s announcement of the forthcoming withdrawal of US troops from Syria and the official curtailing of US ground operations in Iraq – the presence of US troops increases, US involvement in proxy (aka allies) operations escalates, and new training of Jihadist forces are launched, mainly in al-Tanf near the Jordanian border. Testifying in the US Senate on 26 March 2018, CENTCOM commander General Joseph Votel explained that “the intervention of the Coalition and regional powers in the Syrian conflict has blocked Assad’s ability to recapture major portions of northern Syria, [while] entrenched opposition fighters and VEOs [Very Extreme Organizations] across Syria continue to challenge regime control.” Votel acknowledged that the US declared goal of “Assad must go” to make place for the empowerment of “moderate Islamists” in Damascus has failed. The US undeclared goals of preventing and/or stalling the consolidation of Russia and Iran in the Syria-Iraq theater is not faring any better.

Thus, the aggregate impact of the US-driven/-led undermining of any and all efforts to defuse the regional conflicts at the grassroots level, most notably the Russian failed Sochi initiative, has resulted first and foremost in the weakening of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities. Under the excuse of preventing Russia from having any achievement, the US fermented the radicalism, and built up expectations, of both Turkey and Iran. Both emerged as America’s de-facto proxies undermining the Russian and allied influence. Turkey does so by reaching out south (as well as west and east) to reclaim hegemony over the entire Ottoman Caliphate and the Turkic World of yore. Iran does so by reaching out west (and north and east as well) to reclaim hegemony over a Shiite corridor to the Mediterranean and the Arabian Peninsula. In the process, Turkey and Iran position themselves as the standard bearers of Sunni and Shiite Islam respectively, and with it the owners of the deep historic enmities and hates.

The Iranians and Turks, and the US that relies on Jihadists to challenge both (and everybody else), have resolved to determine the fate of the region against the wishes of the grassroots. The grassroots, however, have resolved to revolt and prevent this at all cost. They are gravitating around core-identities – Sunni and Shiite – and are making Faustian deals with dominant powers – Iran- and Turkey-affiliated – in order to jointly fight the other groupings and the great powers. Yearning for strategic stability and the defeat of pan-Islamic Jihadism by making ethnocentric and tribal identities supreme – Russia sides with the minorities and local populace-groupings. Thus, the US and Russia find themselves on a collision course throughout the entire region.

This dynamic makes the regional surges of Turkey and Iran associated with, and identified as, the ascent of Sunni and Shiite Islam respectively. Hence, the clashes between these competing non-Arab powers evolve into the harbinger of the apocalyptic clash between Sunni and Shiite Islam. This escalation is expedited because both non-Arab powers are racing to fill the vacuum created by the concurrent collapse of the Arab World and all-Arab self-identity. The emaciation of the Arabs is driven by the collapse of the leading Arab states. Saudi Arabia self-destructs by reforms addressing correctly identified issues but being implemented in haphazard horrific self-defeating manner. Hence, the loss of heritage-based authority is being exploited by the ascent and spread of grassroots radicalism and instability among the Kingdom’s Sunni Arab youth. Egypt is overwhelmed



by economic-demographic crises, the crucial struggle for the waters of the Nile, escalating Jihadist insurrection, instability in Sudan and Libya spreading into Egypt, and the eroding legitimacy of official Cairo. Consequently, lesser powers – most notably Jordan and the Gulf States – succumb to pressure because they can no longer rely on backing by the main Arab powers.

Iran has seized the initiative – focusing on the destruction of Israel and Saudi Arabia under the banner of restoring Sharifat Ali and the prominence of Shiite Islam. The establishment of the on-land corridor to the Mediterranean through Iraq, Syria and Lebanon aims to facilitate this fateful surge of Shiite Islam. The Pasadaran, primarily their Jaysh al-Quds, are responsible for the entire undertaking – from the surge to the Mediterranean, to the confrontations with Israel and Saudi Arabia, to the strategic build-up in Syria to make military presence irreversible, and to the political take-over of Iraq via the election.

However, things are far from simple. The election in Iraq reflects the polarization of the Shiite Arab grassroots with the anti-Persian Shiite Arab camp slightly stronger than the Iran-dominated pan-Shiite camp. This crisis will not be resolved until after the inevitably contentious nomination of a successor to the old, ailing and revered Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Hosseini Sistani. Meanwhile, Russia and Israel challenge the Pasdaran's Shiite Crescent to the Mediterranean both politically and militarily with no intention of compromising with Iran. As well, the minorities in Iran escalate and spread their insurrections against the ruling Persians with the Pasdaran responsible for suppressing them. The aggregate impact of these crises and challenges is the growing opposition to the ascent of the Pasdaran-driven faction to succeed Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and define Iran's future polity.

Turkey does not fare better. Stymied in northern Syria and Iraq by spreading and escalating fighting with the Kurds – Turkey is looking eastward to spreading pan-Turkism in Central Asia, Xinjiang and eastern Siberia. Turkey also remains focused on the greater Middle East – starting with the adjacent Syria and Iraq – but ultimately coveting the entire areas controlled by the Ottoman Caliphate at its peak. Turkey will escalate its drive after the general elections on 24 June 2018. Meanwhile, the insurrection of the minorities in Turkey – mainly the Kurds and Alavis – against the ruling Highland Anatolians continues to spread. There are also growing instability in Turkey and grassroots hostility to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's neo-Ottoman pan-Turkic Islamist doctrine that are reinforced by the economic crisis. Grassroots discontent will not be enough to prevent Erdogan's electoral victory – but it will increase Turkey's domestic instability and penchant for external adventures as justification.

Meanwhile, this dynamic also gives both Iran and Turkey impetus to impose their regional hegemony by establishing region-wide axes of dominance – east-west and north-south respectively. As well, both powers strive to encircle and stifle the greater Middle East by establishing presence and bases – Turkey in Qatar, Sudan and Eritrea, and Iran in Yemen. Both Iran and Turkey are thus capable of choking maritime traffic in both the Bab al-Mandeb and the Strait of Hormuz.

Ultimately, the core-crises afflicting the grassroots cannot be resolved fully. They must therefore be defused before any practical solution is attempted. Discussing and/or negotiating the imposition of states' regimes, boundaries, social and economic posture are now irrelevant and futile for as long as the grassroots are immersed in fighting out the core-conflicts that they are convinced (not without reason) are the sole key to their very survival, let alone well-being and future. The cornerstone of any feasible bottom-up regional arrangement is the consolidation of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities as a viable entity. The alliance/coalition of minorities would serve as a buffer preventing the Islamist-Imperial Iran and Turkey from attempting to take



over the region and establish hegemonic claims and zones of influence, as well as contain the eruption and spread of Sunni Arab Jihadism from the heart of al-Jazirah. Cognizant of the unique role of minorities as a regional stabilizing force, the Russians have sought to rely on them as a key element of their effort to consolidate a bottom-up regional order. The Kremlin's failed Sochi initiative was based on this premise.

Russia, that has become the preeminent great power in the Middle East, by now realized that a new form of Westphalian States with new borders was inevitable in order to attain long-term stability and legitimization at the grassroots level. This is a profound change of the Kremlin's earlier position that insisted on the territorial integrity and inviolability of the borders of existing states. This change came as a result of the Russian extensive first-hand exposure to the grassroots – their aspirations, despair and resolve. Presently, the Kremlin aspires for interim-level entities that are small enough to satisfy the tapestry of the grassroots and large enough to deal effectively with the economic, regional, and political challenges of the modern world such as urbanization and energy-based economies.

On 20 April 2018, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov stated the change. The Kremlin now accepts that it is "hard to know if Syria's borders will remain as they are" in a future agreement. He acknowledged that the Kremlin "did not know how the situation in Syria would evolve in terms of the country maintaining its territorial integrity" once the war was over. "We don't know how the situation is going to develop on the question of whether it is possible to keep Syria as a single country," Ryabkov concluded. The same principled approach applies to Iraq as well. This perception stands in stark contradiction to the US commitment to top-bottom centralized states.

The Kremlin anticipates the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Syria and Iraq as part of the conflict resolution. On 18 May, President Vladimir Putin told Bashar al-Assad during their summit in Sochi that "in view of the significant victories and success achieved by the Syrian army in its fight against terrorism, and the start of a more active phase of the political process, foreign armed forces will be withdrawing from the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic." The Russian presidential envoy to Syria Alexander Lavrentiev stressed that Putin's statement "involves all foreign troops in Syria including the Turkish, American, Iranian and HizbAllah." Russia is not a party because of the agreement on Russian bases.

Meanwhile, unfolding events throughout the Middle East are harbingers of the crises to come. Iraq is plagued by growing tension and sporadic clashes as the polarized Shiites are waiting for the emergence of a new government in Baghdad. The US and Iranian meddling do not help. Saudi Arabia is yet to recover from the attempted coup by members of the House of al-Saud on 21 April 2018 and other challenges to the de-facto ruler Prince Muhammad bin Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud. His unilateral imposition of reforms shakes the Kingdom to its core without any viable solution in sight. The riots in Jordan that were provoked by economic issues have quickly evolved into Islamist challenge to the Hashemite monarchy. The violent clashes in Gaza focus anew on Israel's right to exist. The outbursts of violence were encouraged by Iran in order to divert Israel's attention from the situation in Syria.

Russia is leading the effort to defuse the region. Russia has opened discussions with the Kurds of both Syria and Iraq – offering oil deals to the Iraqi Kurds in order to entice them to be more active in consolidating the Fertile Crescent of Minorities. In early June, over 70 Sunni Arab Sheikhs at the heart of Syria announced their revolt against foreign forces and alien ways of governance. The revolt is aimed mainly at the US proxy SDF. Russian intelligence experts were instrumental in negotiating with these and other tribes non-violent co-existence with the Assad administration.



Ultimately, the most important and indicative of things to come are the agreements between Avigdor Lieberman and Sergey Shoygu and between Vladimir Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu on evicting Iran and other Jihadist entities from Syria, by force if necessary. The Russian-Israeli agreement reflects very concrete and shared understanding of the future of Syria and the entire region with focus on bottom-up grassroots solutions and the centrality of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities (of which Israel is a key element). Israel's pro-forma denial under US pressure need not distract from the importance of the understanding.

Left to be seen though, is whether the Russia-led efforts to build a bottom-up region will be able to defuse the desperate and volatile grassroots before the top-bottom pressure by the de-facto alliance of Turkey, Iran and the US sparks the dreaded region-wide most violent Intifada that will absorb all grievances, starting with the Sunni-Shiite dispute, and set aflame the entire greater Middle East for a long time to come.

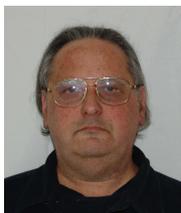
Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

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.

He is the author of eleven books – including *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* (*New York Times* No. 1 Bestseller & *Washington Post* No. 1 Bestseller), *The Secret History of the Iraq War* (*New York Times* Bestseller & *Foreign Affairs Magazine* Bestseller), and *Chechen Jihad: Al Qaeda's Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror* – and hundreds of articles, book chapters and Congressional reports.

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



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