



Whither Bilad al-Sham

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Executive Summary

- * Bilad al-Sham has a unique heritage and evolving territory in the annals of Islam. According to Muslim mysticism, the End of Times will start from Sham.
- * By now, local governments throughout the greater Middle East have no inkling how to cope with unfolding catastrophes at the grassroots level. With no remedy on the horizon, the entire greater Middle East is bracing for a rapidly expanding and escalating summer of discontent. Alas, the absence of viable concrete solutions is sending the Believers into embracing mysticism and apocalyptic expectations.
- * At the same time, however, there is now a unique opportunity to capitalize on the despair and yearning for localized solutions in order to attain peaceful regional bottom-up compromises based on the Fertile Crescent of Minorities and localized Arab heritage-based entities. Failure to empower these localized entities will only reinforce the grassroots despair and conviction that the endless and worsening crises and destitute are indeed the harbingers of the apocalyptic wars as promised by the Jihadists. For the despaired grassroots of the greater Middle East, this will become a self-fulfilling prophesy and wars will spread from Bilad al-Sham with no end in sight.

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Analysis

Bilad al-Sham, or just Sham, has a unique heritage and evolving territory in the annals of Islam. This is a key to comprehending its role in the still unfolding violent drama in the Hub of Islam. According to Arab Islamist geographers, originally “the term Sham referred to an area that now includes parts of modern Turkey, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia”. Only since the middle of the 20th Century, Sham became the Greater Syria - encompassing modern Syria and adjacent areas in southern modern Turkey, Lebanon, and the northern half of Palestine (that is, Israel, the Palestinian Authority and Jordan).

According to Muslim mysticism, the End of Times will start from Sham. “There shall be a scented, perfumed, beautiful wind coming from Sham that will take the soul of every Believer,” Prophet Muhammad said according to a Hadith.

Far more important to the current political-military posture is the conviction among Muslims that the End of Times and the arrival of al-Masih [the Messiah] will be preceded by the apocalyptic Malahem [the fateful epic battles and wars of the apocalypse]. Islam’s decisive Armageddon will take place near Dabiq in northern Syria north of Aleppo. “The last hour will not come until the Romans arrived in al-A’maq or Dabiq, and an army consisting of the best people on earth in those days will hasten them from Medina,” Prophet Muhammad predicted according to a Hadith reported by Abu Hurayrah. This means that the ensuing liberation of all Muslim lands, including the Holy Shrines, the conquest of Constantinople and Rome (that is, challenging Muslim nemeses and the Christian West), and the empowerment of a righteous divine Caliph over the entire Muslim-ruled world will originate from Sham.

In recent years, since the late 20th Century, these apocalyptic prophecies have increasingly become part of the mainstream convictions throughout the greater Middle East. Professor Jean-Pierre Filiu, a former French diplomat with extensive experience in the Arab Middle East, warned in his 2008 book *Apocalypse in Islam* of “the fast-growing belief in Muslim countries that the end of the world is at hand.” Even before the eruption of the Great Intifada (aka “Arab Spring”), the ongoing failures and defeats in the Arab Middle East were widely perceived as the harbingers of an imminent End of Times. “In the minds of the most impassioned believers, each bloody defeat draws the moment of ultimate and total triumph that much nearer,” Filiu observed.

Arab Jihadist scholars found in all on-going events in the Middle East - from the Arab-Israeli confrontation, to the US-led invasions of Arab lands, to the Great Intifada - indications of the fast approaching Malahem. In 1997, Yussuf Muhammad Amr predicted that “the twenty-first century will witness the disappearance of the Jewish impiety and of those who support it, with the return of Islam to power.” In 2002, Hisham Muhammad Abu Hakima presented contemporary definitions of the main forces in the Battle of Armageddon. “The Islamic forces, believing in Allah and in Him alone, will be found in Sham [Greater Syria] and in al-Jazirah [the Arabian Peninsula], whereas the stalwarts of the forces of the Dajjal [the arch-nemesis of the Messiah or Antichrist] will be the Jews and their henchmen,” he wrote. Both sides will be closing in on each other before the fateful eruption in Sham. Sheikh Faraz Rabbani, recently stressed the growing value and relevance of Ismail Ibn Kathir (c.1300-1373) and particularly his book “The Signs before the Day of Judgment” to the understanding of the unfolding Jihad in and around Bilad al-Sham. “The very last group of Believers that will be on this earth before the Day of Judgment will be in the land of Sham; therefore, the land of Sham will be the very last land to have Muslims on it right before the end of times,” Ibn Kathir wrote according to Rabbani.



There are numerous traditions and popular myths in Islam about the immediate and concrete harbingers of that apocalyptic eruption at the End of Times. These popular traditions provide the Believers with the early or advance indications that the Day of Judgment is about to arrive. One of the popular traditions about such harbingers is that the cataclysmic eruption will take place, and fire will consume the entire region, when the Three Great Rivers dry out. The rivers are the Euphrates and Tigris of Um al-Rafidayn [The Mother of the Twin-Rivers or Mesopotamia] and the Nile of Bilad al-Cananah [The Land of Canaan or the greater Egypt]. The ensuing eruption of the cataclysmic war will originate from the land surrounded by these rivers - Bilad al-Sham.

Presently, the entire greater Middle East is facing unprecedented drought and drying up that will only intensify as the hot summer drags on. Consequently, there are widespread riots, some turning very violent, over the shortages of water in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Iran. Water supplies are being cut to a few hours a day, and the quality of water is rapidly deteriorating to being brown and stinky. In many urban slums and remote villages there are no longer any water supplies as local wells - both legal and illegal - are drying up.

Some of these rivers' drying up is man-made - the outcome of the beginning of filling up of the artificial lakes of the Ilisu Dam in Turkey on the Tigris and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam in Ethiopia on the Blue Nile, as well as the forced filling of the Ataturk Dam on the Euphrates, in order to compensate for the lingering drought. As well, the drought from which the greater Middle East has been suffering for a decade now also has an aggregate impact on the levels of water coming down from nearby mountains and feeding tributaries. In the case of northern Iraq, the flow from western Iran is in all-time low.

The acute and worsening shortages of water, as well as the ensuing shortages of most basic food and electricity (because of the paralysis of hydro-electric stations), are sending the grassroots population to the streets in widespread riots from Iran to Egypt and from Turkey to Saudi Arabia. What began as indigenous rage over the plight of daily life has quickly evolved into communal protests against higher authorities and the ruling states. A myriad of grassroots heritage grievances is coming to the surface. Significantly, in all the countries, more segments of the grassroots populace are participating in the ongoing protests and riots than at the height of the original Intifada's of 2011-12. The current depth of fury is greater, and the issues raised are more profound.

In western Iran, the local minority-nationalities - the Kurds and the Ahwazi Arabs - started protesting over acute shortages of water, electricity, food, and other services. The demonstrations quickly became violent riots with the crowds blaming the predominantly Persian national authorities in Tehran of discrimination on the basis of ethnicity. Significantly, the riots and protests have spread rapidly to include national minorities that are less affected by the shortages of water and power. Presently, there are disturbances, riots and even violent insurrection in areas inhabited by Kurds, Ahwazi Arabs, Baluchis and Azerbaijanis. Where local police fail to quell the riots, Persian units of the Pasdaran and Baseej are brought in and they frequently use live fire against the rioters. Tehran is clearly cognizant of the gravity of the crises that broke to the surface.

In Shiite central and southern Iraq, protests over acute shortages of water and electricity due to the drying up of the Euphrates and the Tigris quickly escalated. On-site observers at the heart of Arab Shiite Iraq noted that "social grievances that once simmered on the back burner have boiled over in a series of protests that have spread to several cities." In increasingly violent riots, "people have vented their anger over unemployment, high prices, power cuts and a lack of usable water." These protests represent "an explosion of rage at an entire system that has brazenly robbed Iraqis of the chance for a better life," explained Iraqi expert Fanar Haddad. The frequent use of deadly force by both the military and Shiite militias has failed to quell the riots. On the contrary, the rioters started shouting anti-Iranian and anti-clerical slogans. In Najaf, rioters burned signs in



Iranian institutions that have Khomeini's picture on them - an unthinkable transgression. Starting in Basra and spreading to Najaf, Karbala and other Shiite cities, rioters stress the failure of post-Saddam Iraq that was established 15 years ago in the aftermath of the US-led invasion of 2003. The demonstrators are now calling for a regional autonomy for the Shiite Arabs - at the least a status similar to that of Iraqi Kurdistan.

These calls are getting louder and louder - challenging the delicate process in Baghdad of agreeing on a predominantly Shiite government acceptable to pan-Shiite Tehran. On 19 July, Iraqi Shiite leader Moqtada al-Sadr decreed that "the people's revolution is a right," and that he supports the people's "revolution of the angry." Addressing the people's justified grievances should take precedence over forming a new government. "All political blocs which won in the current elections should suspend all political discussions to form alliances and other, until the protesters' legitimate demands are met and a serious committee is formed to work with the government in coordination with protestors in order to fulfill their demands," Sadr stated.

Meanwhile, Sadrists are closely cooperating with Shiite Arab Sheikhs throughout southern Iraq and the Baghdad area in order to organize a million-man demonstration on Friday, 20 July. Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi warned that the security forces will open fire because there are "subversive elements among the protesters." On Friday morning, the commander of the Iraqi elite police forces, Major General Thamer al-Husseini, declared any and all demonstrations "illegal" and backed his threat with a massive show of force by the security forces throughout the entire Shiite area. Nevertheless, hundreds of thousands braved the cordon and demonstrated in the afternoon. "Our demands are people's demands," explained a protester in Baghdad's Tahrir Square. "We want drastic solutions. We want to change the government. It has been 15 years, and there is no employment, no services." The people of Basra "will no longer remain silent. ... It has been 15 years, and still they [the Government] haven't been able to provide us with electricity," explained a protestor. "We are just poor people who have come to demand their rights," explained another in Basra's main Square.

In Syria, local tribes, mainly Sunni Arab but also Kurdish, reach out to the Assad government, and by default Russia, for humanitarian help. The US-led forces that claimed to have liberated Sunni Arab Raqqa and the increasingly dry Euphrates Valley have proven unwilling to, and incapable of, helping the destitute civilian population. The situation in the predominantly Kurdish northeastern Syria is not better. In contrast, numerous Russian and Syrian government convoys deliver huge quantities of humanitarian aid to the hard-hit areas without any demand from the people. These convoys brave US-led coalition air strikes and ambushes by US-led local forces. As well, aircraft and helicopters drop supplies in remote areas. The Sunni Arab tribes do get the message as they are forcing the Jihadists in their midst to surrender, vacate the area and move to the Idlib enclave. The Kurdish authorities in Rojava announced their intent to reach comprehensive agreements with Damascus. (The US betrayal of the Kurds in Manbij in favor of a deal with Turkey did not help.)

In Jordan, riots have been spreading and escalating all over the country since spring. Protests started over new taxes and growing shortages. With time, larger crowds joined demonstrations over the acute shortages of water, work, fuel, cooking oil, electricity, and food. Riots of varying sizes persist in all key Jordanian cities - Amman, Zarqa, Irbid, Karak and Salt. The riots now threaten the political stability of the country. With the grassroots despaired over their own bleak future and enraged by the humanitarian aid accorded to millions of Syrian refugees (that Amman correctly attributes to pressure from the US-led West) while they don't receive anything - public outrage is increasingly focused on the Hashemite Royal Family. Since Jordanian economy and society are beyond repair, at least in the near-term, wider eruption in Jordan is increasingly likely. Indeed, Islamist elements now organize violent riots that not only protest the socio-economic destitute - but offer



Islamist solutions as a viable alternative and principled challenge to the monarchy and its legitimacy.

The most dangerous riots in Jordan take place in the increasingly Islamist-radical south bordering Saudi Arabia's Qassim Province. Qassim, particularly capital Buraydah, has long been the center of radical Islamist opposition to the House of al-Saud. Little wonder that the local populace has reacted harshly to the reforms of Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman and the overall deterioration of the economic posture due to fall in oil prices, mismanagement, corruption, and misguided reforms. Panicked, Riyadh reacted with brute force and intensified the crackdown on dissent. On 11 July, the Saudis arrested in Buraydah the prominent Islamist scholar Sheikh Safar al-Hawali, three of his sons, and his brother Sheikh Saadallah. Hawali is the venerable leader and leading theologian of the Islamist opposition, the founding leader of the Sahwa movement back in the early 1990's, and a key scholar of apocalyptic visions and doctrines with emphasis on the liberation and cleansing of the Holy Shrines (in Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem) by Jihadists as a precursor to the End of Times. According to sources in Riyadh, Hawali was arrested because of his just published book "Muslims and Western Culture" that harshly attacks the House of al-Saud, the socio-economic reform policies, and the friendly relations with the US, the UAE, Israel and Egypt. Significantly, the book alludes to the harbingers of the End of Times when the divine al-Masih will take over the Holy Shrines from the current unworthy custodians - the House of al-Saud.

Meanwhile, the Iranians renew their claim to the Holy Shrines in the name of Shiite Islam. In mid-July, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei urged the removal of the House of al-Saud from the custodianship of the Holy Shrines and the establishment of a religious all-Muslim (both Sunni and Shiite) council in their stead. "The holy lands of Mecca and Mina belong to all Muslims," Khamenei stated, "it does not belong to rulers of Saudi Arabia."

By now, local governments throughout the greater Middle East have no inkling how to cope with the catastrophes - with the shortages of water, the marked decline in food production, the massive internal migration and dislocation from rural areas that overwhelms the already collapsing urban slums filled with refugees from fighting and carnage, and, most important, the intensifying radicalization of the grassroots that challenges the governments' own legitimacy. The lowest common denominator of all grassroots protests and riots is the further alienation from, and rejection of, the state authorities for their failures to take care of the people at a time of dire need. Significantly, while the Islamists provide justification and logic for overthrowing governments and delegitimizing modern states - they offer no concrete or timely solutions to the plight of the grassroots. Hence the grassroots increase their gravitation around ethno-centric heritage frameworks [Qaum] - mainly tribes and extended families.

With no remedy on the horizon, the entire greater Middle East is bracing for a rapidly expanding and escalating summer of discontent. The Kuwaiti Professor Abdullah al-Shayji warned in *The Gulf News* of the impending escalation. "As the summer kicks in, the scene in the Arab world looks bleak. ... [T]here is little cause for cheer." The current crisis is the outcome of "the dysfunctional and at times chaotic Arab politics." Shayji observes that in most countries the people now redefine themselves along "sectarian, tribal ethnic lines, which perpetuate a fragmented and broken societies and political systems." There might be no way back from this transformation of society throughout the Middle East.

Alas, the absence of viable concrete solutions is sending the Believers into embracing mysticism and apocalyptic expectations. Since the current plight can neither be alleviated nor explained - it must indeed be the harbinger of higher dynamics. The widespread suffering, along with the dramatic signs of divine catastrophes, thus create the grassroots expectations of an impending cataclysmic eruption heralding the Day



of Judgment. It is because of this distinction, rather than the day-to-day carnage, that the ongoing Jihad in Bilad al-Sham is so uniquely crucial to the future of the entire greater Middle East, and, to a great extent, the entire Hub of Islam.

After all, as the Hadith, recorded by both Abu Dawood and Ahmed, articulates, Prophet Muhammad stressed the significance of Sham as the blessed key to the End of Time. Prophet Muhammad told his companions: "It will be such [time] that many armies [of Islam] will be mustered. An army in Sham, an army in Iraq and an army in Yemen." A companion asked: "If I live that long, which do you choose for me?" And Prophet Muhammad replied: "I choose Sham for you, because it is the best of places, and the land that Allah has chosen for his special bondsmen ... [and] for Allah Ta'ala has guaranteed that He will look after the land of Sham and its inhabitants."

Meanwhile, the wars in and for Bilad al-Sham are in their seventh year. That the fratricidal carnage is taking place in the same geographic area does not mean that there is commonality between the various wars unfolding simultaneously. There is, however, a sense shared by all that the conflicts and carnage might finally be coming to an end because the participants and the population at large are exhausted. Hence, all key participants - the regional states (mainly Turkey and Iran, but also Israel), the various Jihadist movements, and the grassroots ethno-centric [Qaum] groupings - get ready for a possible final surge to guarantee their vital interests before curtain.

Eager to avoid such a calamity, local population groupings are eager for reconciliation deals with Damascus and its Russian patrons that will alleviate the threat of escalation and provide bare necessities for the prostrate population. The deal about the Golan border offers useful outline for future deals. While the overall political framework was worked out between Moscow, Jerusalem, Damascus, Amman and Washington - the real success on the ground is the result of Russian-led mediation and reconciliation deals with the individual tribes and extended families in the area. The decisive driving factors for these deals are the growing reputation for comprehension of local dynamics and fairness of the GRU's negotiation teams, the fairness of the MP units (particularly Chechen Muslim MPs) overseeing the implementation of these agreements, and the lavish humanitarian aid that follows all agreements. It was indigenous tribal forces, rather than Syrian shelling and bombing, that compelled local Jihadist forces in the Daraa area to cease fighting, then surrender or leave.

Similarly, Sunni Arab tribes in the Idlib enclave, the bastion of Sunni Jihadism where Dabiq and A'maq are located, are reaching out to the Russians for reconciliation deals and military help against the Jihadists, particularly the Turkey-sponsored units. Should these Sunni Arab tribes be prevented from completing the reconciliation deals with the Russians and Damascus, there will be a huge eruption of destitute and despair. Given the symbolism of the eruption, the ensuing fighting will spread and set the entire greater Middle East aflame. A multitude of indigenous conflicts are now once again threatening to escalate and spread.

At the same time, however, there is now a unique opportunity to capitalize on the despair and yearning for localized solutions in order to attain peaceful regional bottom-up compromises based on the Fertile Crescent of Minorities and localized Arab heritage-based entities. In order to secure their own localized vital interests and self-identities, these minority and Arab entities will constrain the ability of both Iran and Turkey to project power regionally. Failure to empower these localized entities will only reinforce the grassroots despair and conviction that the endless and worsening crises and destitute are indeed the harbingers of the apocalyptic Malahem as promised by the Jihadists. For the despaired grassroots of the greater Middle East, this will become a self-fulfilling prophesy, and, as the Hadith predicts, the Malahem will spread from Bilad al-Sham all



the way to the Holy Shrines (Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem) and beyond with no end in sight.

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

About the Author of this Issue

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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.

