



MPC Journal
Mashreq Politics and Culture

Mashreq Politics and Culture Journal

Volume 01, Issue 03

West Asia & North Africa & Occident-Orient Relations

March 2016

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Cessation of Hostilities in Syria – Was John Kerry Outplayed?

“These [ceasefire monitoring] working groups generally become bureaucratic talk shops where nothing is resolved amid unceasing accusations and counterclaims, while the bloodshed continues. Russian and Syria aircraft will likely continue to attack the same groups they are fighting today under the guise of attacking ISIS.”

We are now just over three days into the Russian and American brokered ceasefire (technically a “cessation of hostilities”) in Syria. While the two primary architects of the agreement – Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and US Secretary of State John Kerry – take a victory lap, Syrians continue to die at the hands of the Russian and Syrian armed forces.

What many Syria observers, including me, suspected from the beginning of the ceasefire talks is in fact happening. The Russian and Syrian air forces continue their savage attacks on what they have labelled “terrorists”.

In reality, these are mostly so-called “moderate” anti-regime rebels, many of whom are being either overtly or covertly supported by the United States and some of its allies. In the minds of the Syrians, anyone taking up arms against the government is a terrorist.

Not to be outdone, Russian media releases tout their attacks on ISIS, yet virtually all of the targets hit by the Russians are in areas far from known ISIS positions. These attacks have been conducted northwest of Aleppo, in the large rebel-held areas between Hamah and Homs, along the coastal mountain range east of the city of Latakia (in proximity to the air base used

by the Russians), and even in the eastern suburbs of Damascus.

The situation before and after the “cessation of hostilities” for the Syrian armed forces and the Russian Air Force pilots deployed to Humaymin Air Base remains the same – continue to attack anyone opposing the regime of Bashar Al-Asad, in the name of fighting terrorists, a loophole in the negotiated ceasefire agreement.

The only groups seemingly adhering to the agreement are the moderate rebels – if they dare launch an attack, it would simply draw even more brutal Russian and Syrian attacks, this time with reasonable justification. A cynic could surmise that the ceasefire is nothing more than open season on the rebels.

This is not a surprise to people familiar with the situation in Syria or the players involved – it does seem to be a surprise for Secretary Kerry. While we all hope for an end to the bloodshed in Syria, this agreement will not accomplish that.

Has John Kerry been outplayed by Sergey Lavrov?

It will not have been the first time in this part of the world – I will forego other regions in which Kerry and Lavrov have ne-

gotiated. Lavrov and Kerry have had at least three rounds of either direct or indirect negotiations concerning the Middle East. The results: The flawed Iranian nuclear agreement, the obviously failed Syrian chemical weapons agreement, and now a ceasefire that isn't.

Even the French are outraged by the continuing Russian and Syrian air attacks. French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault said: "We have received indications that attacks, including by air, have been continuing against zones controlled by the moderate opposition.

France has therefore demanded that the task force charged with overseeing the cessation of hostilities meet without delay." The task force to which Ayrault is

referring is the "International Syria Support Group" (ISSG), led by the United States and Russia, charged with monitoring compliance. That is diplo-speak for what I described earlier as a "bureaucratic talk shop where nothing is resolved amid unceasing accusations and counter-claims."

I am afraid we have set up a long-term stalemate where hundreds of Syrians will continue to die while Russia and Syria diplomatically fend off accusations that they are violating the ceasefire – they will continue to strike any target they wish regardless of American and western objections. They have done it before, and they will do it again.

Well played, Messrs Putin and Lavrov.

Rick Francona

Author of Ally to Adversary - An Eyewitness Account of Iraq's Fall from Grace

Art Beyond Asylum: Syrian Artists in Germany

Art is a powerful means of expression. It played significant roles in times of peace and war. While the scene in Syria has become blurred with the emergence of armed extremist groups on one hand, and the atrocities of a bloodthirsty regime on the other, art remains a meaningful weapon against all that darkness.

Fleeing from a war-torn country, many Syrians sought refuge in European countries, most notably in Germany. While the discourses on refugees ranged between supporting and rejecting the settlement of newcomers, there were many negative stories circulated and generalised about all refugees such as the New Year's Eve sexual assaults in Cologne or the bullying of young refugees in [a Munich subway](#). Indeed, parallel to the German "*Willkommenskultur*", there have been [narratives against refugees](#) in Germany, which reflect nothing but the tremendous fear of a significant segment of the German population: Refugees are going to affect the welfare in Germany because they must be provided with financial and social aid. This costs tons of money.

Witnessing the largest exodus in the recent history, it remains difficult to focus on art while other issues seem more pressing to tackle. I believe neglecting art is the first step in the wrong direction.

Somewhere in Germany, a confused soul might be begging the question ... Are there positive signs?

Artistic Signs of Good Faith

In October 2015, a group of refugees – mainly Syrian artists in Germany – organ-

ised a campaign under the title "Thank you Germany" in an attempt to thank Germans for their hospitality of receiving tens of thousands of Syrian refugees in their country. Monas Bukhari, a Syrian artist and the founder of a socio-cultural group called "The Syrian House", said to the [German Press Agency](#): "The campaign aims at producing a photo book and opening exhibitions for Syrian photographers residing in Germany as a kind of appreciation for Germany's generosity." While [hundreds of Syrians](#) joined the campaign across Germany distributing red roses to locals, many Germans in return found the initiative as a sign of good faith.

In cooperation with more than 100 Syrian artists within and outside Germany, the group plans on organising a photo gallery in Berlin for Syrian photographers.

The exhibition, which goes under the name "Smile Of Hope", will host the work of Syrian photographers residing in Syria in order to change the gloomy picture formed in Europe towards Syrian refugees and life in Syria over the past few years.

The same group also organised several musical concerts, in which German and Syrian musicians played different kinds of music side-by-side. This can be nothing but interesting.

On a different occasion on 08 February 2016, Syrian refugees participated in the

celebrations of Rose Monday Carnival in Cologne. The Syrians wore local traditional clothes and danced to the tunes of popular German music. This wasn't all. Syrian folklore bands such as "*Sham Band To Revive The Heritage Of Damascus*" and "*Kurdistan Band To Commemorate The Kurdish Folklore*", organised by the [Educational Centre for Human Rights](#) in Wuppertal, joined the festival to play musical instruments and sing Arabic and Kurdish songs. As [Donald Trump](#) usually says: "It was a beautiful thing."

A Song Wins

At times where Xenophobes and far-right groups claim the futility of integration programs and that Middle Easterners are inclined to be extremists planning to take over Europe, signs point exactly toward the opposite. No matter what the discourse about refugees in Germany is, a song wins the debate.

In cooperation with musician-activists in Bremen, Syrian musicians who fled the civil war built the Expat Philharmonic Orchestra to give back to their new community.

Double-bass-player Raed Jazbeh, who fled to Germany three years ago, embarked a journey of putting a small group of Syrian musicians together in Bremen. This has developed to become an orchestra, which combines songs from Syria and European classical music. The orchestra is composed of Syrian and local musicians defying the rhetoric of fear mongers, whose voices have arisen recently due to the refugee crisis in Europe.

"With music we can liberate ourselves from all the designations," said flutist Fadwa Merkhan to Occupy.com. Merkhan

played in the orchestra's first performance on 22 September 2015 at Sendesaal Theatre in Bremen. The orchestra performed classical, jazz and Syrian music pieces at its premiere.

Musician and singer Ribal Al-Khudri is another example of a Syrian who found a safe haven in Germany. In his [current project](#) "Arabesque", Al-Khudri says that he aims to build cultural bridges between people through music: Syrian artists on one hand and Germans on the other.

These young talents are trying to express the pain of Syrians with a song and draw a beautiful image of cultural Syria away from the image of violence portrayed by the media. It is true that the image of Syria is dominated by war. But it is also true that Syria has a rich culture. These are not only refugees, but also artists.

A Talent Is a Talent

A Syrian filmmaker, who is currently a refugee in Germany, turned into a "YouTube star" after he had cleverly dealt with the issue of integrating refugees in the German society. While the German society is struggling to understand the refugee crisis, the young Syrian Firas Al-Shater – with decent German – humorously highlights the habits of German people from the perspective of a newcomer. Through comedy and light humour, Al-Shater is trying to bridge the gap between Syrians and locals and to come a step closer to German people.

On 28 January 2015, Al-Shater aired the first episode of his video-series called "Sugar". While his videos are funny, witty and down-to-earth, Al-Shater tells stories about his personal experience and his desire to learn more about Germans.

In one of his videos, Al-Shater tells the story of an experiment he carried out at Alexander Platz in Berlin, in which he held a sign saying: “I am a Syrian refugee, I trust you, do you trust me? Hug me!”

The experiment appears to be an imitation of a video made by a Muslim Parisian YouTuber following the terrorist attacks in November 2015. At the end of the video, Al-Shater points out that in Germany it takes a little longer for people to show emotions, but if they do so, they no longer stop.

Art Knows No Borders

In 2011 at the beginning of the Syrian uprising, tragic tales against painters, singers, actors, poets, writers and other artists, most notably the torture of the cartoonist Ali Farzat who was savagely beaten by regime thugs for satirizing Syrian leadership, prompted many artists to flee their country. A great number of them arrived in Germany and other European countries. While some of them had to go through the tough asylum procedures, some others made it through art-scholarships.

In December 2015, [Syrian painter Hussam Sarah](#) opened his first caricature exhibition in the German city of Bonn, under

the title “Comics From Syria”. The exhibition included 30 paintings to tell stories about different aspects of Syria.

Through his art, [Sarah](#) said that he wants to deliver two messages to the Germans. The first one is political by inviting German people to add more pressure to end the conflict in Syria. And the second one is to show that Syrian refugees are not amateur seekers of asylum. Syrian refugees can effectively contribute to and enrich the community in which they are.

Another example is the [Syrian painter Abdul-Razzaq Shablot](#), who received a Heinrich Boell foundation scholarship for arts and came to Germany in October 2014. “As an artist, I have to paint to feel alive, and in order to do so, I had to escape Syria,” he told the *Deutsche Welle*.

Examples of contributors are numerous and might increase in the coming few years to deem the number of passive refugees insignificant. In fact, those who made it are not only trying to share their talents with their German counterparts, but also seeking to show the tragedies of war, raise awareness and promote peace.

Are there positive signs that refugees can contribute to the society, which welcomed them? Yes, there are and these were just a few examples.

Hakim Khatib

Editor-in-chief of the Mashreq Politics and Culture Journal

The Truth International Law Proclaims About the Palestinian Territories

Recently, the Israeli Supreme Court refused to reconsider a decision to demolish the unrecognized Bedouin village of Umm Al-Hiran, and ordered to evict all its residents, Adalah centre reported on Sunday. Adalah, the legal centre for Arab minority rights in Israel, reported that the Supreme Court rejected its extraordinary motion for a second hearing on the case. They requested that the court reconsider its decision to approve Israel's plan to evict the village's 1,000 Palestinian Bedouin residents, in order to build Jewish town of Hiran, and expand the Yatir Forest over its ruins.

The Court's refusal to reconsider its 5-May-2015 ruling effectively means that the eviction and demolition procedures against the village can proceed. In response to the decision, Adalah emphasized, according to Al-Ray, that "The Court, today, wrote yet another chapter – the fourth, to be precised – in the history of expulsion and displacement of the Bedouin families since 1948, despite the fact that they were moved to these villages by the Israeli military government in 1956".

What About the Netanyahu Policy?

There is no iota of doubt to say that Netanyahu's policy on the settlement issue is a reflection on political hedonism. Though the disposition of settlements is a matter for the final status negotiations, the question of where the final border will be between Israel and a Palestinian entity will likely be influenced by the distribution of these Jewish towns in Judea and Samaria (the border with Gaza was unofficially defined following Israel's withdraw-

al). Israel wants to incorporate as many settlers as possible within its borders.

Israeli Withdrawal From Gaza

On 6 June 2004, the Israeli government adopted a decision on Israel's unilateral disengagement plan from the Gaza Strip. The decision was passed by the Knesset in the Disengagement Plan Implementation Law, 5765-2005, and in August-September of 2005 Israel withdrew unilaterally from the Gaza Strip.

In January 2006, the Islamic Hamas movement won the elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council. Several rounds of confrontations between PLO activists and Hamas in the Gaza Strip ended with Hamas gaining control over the Strip in June 2007, after taking over military installations that had previously been under PLO control, followed by the execution of officers of the PLO security forces.

In response, PA leader Abu Mazen dismissed the Palestinian Unity Government. Since then, control of Arab towns in the West Bank has been in the hands of Fatah (the largest PLO faction), while Hamas controls the Gaza Strip. A number of reconciliation agreements have been de-

clared between Fatah and Hamas, but none so far has reached the point of being able to establish a united Palestinian leadership.

Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip did not contribute to peace between the parties either. The disengagement was followed by the firing of thousands of rockets from the Gaza Strip at Israel, resulting in Israel's decision to take military action in the Gaza Strip twice – first in Operation Cast Lead in 2008, followed by Operation Pillar of Defence (in the Hebrew original, "Pillar of Cloud," after Exodus 13:21) in 2012.

Backdrop to the Israeli Adopted Policy

The West Bank and Gaza were all part of British Mandate territory until 1948. In the War of Independence Egypt invaded and occupied (in violation of international law) the Gaza Strip, and Jordan – the West Bank. Egypt has not claimed title to the Gaza Strip. Jordan, on the other hand, purported to annex the West Bank in 1950, but the annexation was not recognized in international law.

Only Great Britain – subject to a reservation regarding East Jerusalem – and Pakistan recognized the annexation attempt, which was also opposed vehemently by all Arab states. In May 1950, Egypt, joined by Syria, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon, demanded the expulsion of Jordan from the Arab League on these grounds. Eventually, a compromise was reached and on 12 June 1950 the Arab League declared that Jordan was holding the territory as a "trustee".

In 1967, following the Six-Day War, the territories, which had originally been des-

ignated as part of the Jewish national home according to the Mandate document, reverted to Israeli control.

Israeli Government's Misuse of Schwebel's Indoctrination

Stephen M. Schwebel, former State Department Legal Advisor, who later headed the International Court of Justice in The Hague, notes that a country acting in self-defence may seize and occupy territory when necessary to protect itself. Schwebel also observes that a state may require, as a condition for its withdrawal, security measures designed to ensure its citizens are not menaced again from that territory. As for the Jews, Israel was in lawful control of those territories, that no other state could show better title than Israel thereto, and that these territories were not "occupied" in international law. Indeed, Israel was entitled to declare that it has applied its sovereignty thereto. In effect, because of political and other considerations, Israel applied its sovereignty only to East Jerusalem and the Old City.

This was done by the application of Israeli law, jurisdiction and administration by the government to these areas by virtue of Amendment No. 11 to the Law and Administration Ordinance, 5708-1948, which was adopted by the Knesset on 27 June 1967.

In this matter, Israel acted in the same way it did after the War of Independence, applying its jurisdiction, by virtue of the Area of Jurisdiction and Powers Ordinance, 5708-1948,⁶⁰ to all Eretz Israel territories that were held by the Israel Defence Forces (IDF), whether within or beyond the boundary lines designated for

the State of Israel by the United Nations Partition Resolution of 29 November 1947, among them large parts of the south and the Negev, as well as the Jerusalem Corridor, Acre, Nazareth, Jaffa, Lod, Ramle, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Beer Sheva and West Jerusalem.

Israel's guiding perception since its establishment, expressed in this Ordinance, was that Israel does not "annex" territories that were part of the Mandate for Palestine prior to 1948, since it does not consider itself an occupying state therein.

On the same date, 27 June 1967, Israel also enacted the Protection of Holy Places Law, 5727-1967, which assured protection of these sites from desecration and any other violation, and freedom of access for "members of the different religions to the places sacred to them or their feelings." On 30 July 1980 the Knesset enacted Basic Law: Jerusalem Capital of Israel, which stipulates that: "Jerusalem, complete and united, is the capital of Israel." Regarding the remaining areas of Yesha, the official position designates them as "disputed territories" to which Israel has a priority claim of right. Since they were not taken from any other sovereign state, The Hague Regulations 1899/1907 and the Fourth Geneva Convention do not apply to them.

However, Israel chose voluntarily to observe and abide by the humanitarian provisions of the Geneva Convention. On 13 July 1987, Israel announced its position in a letter to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), as follows: Israel maintains that in view of the sui generis status of Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip, the de jure applicability of the Fourth Convention to these areas is doubtful. Israel prefers to leave aside the legal questions of the status of these are-

as and has decided, since 1967, to act de facto in accordance with the humanitarian provisions of the Convention.

In 1967, [Theodor Meron](#), legal counsel to the Israeli Foreign Ministry stated in a legal opinion to Adi Yafeh, the Political Secretary of the Prime Minister, "My conclusion is that civilian settlement in the [administered territories](#) contravenes the explicit provisions of the Fourth Geneva Convention. The legal opinion, forwarded to [Levi Eshkol](#), was not made public at the time, and the Labour cabinet progressively sanctioned settlements anyway; this action paved the way for future settlement growth. In 2007, Judge Meron stated that: "I believe that I would have given the same opinion today".

The Hugo Grotius Doctrine of Self-Defence vs. Israeli War

The father of international law, Hogo Grotius concludes that neither persons nor states have an absolute right of self-defence.

Prime facie, the fact of the matter is that Israel waged the war of 1967 on the false notion of invoking the doctrine of pre-emption or anticipatory self-defence.

ICJ's Ruling Rejects Israeli Stance of Altering the Boundaries for Security Purposes

The Court made do with a general determination that the Fourth Geneva Convention applies to any occupied territory where there is an armed conflict between two or more contracting states. Israel and Jordan were contracting states to the Convention at the time when the armed

conflict broke out in 1967. The Court therefore concluded that the “Fourth Geneva Convention is applicable in any occupied territory in the event of an armed conflict arising between two or more High Contracting Parties. Israel and Jordan were parties to that Convention when the 1967 armed conflict broke out.

The Court accordingly finds that that Convention is applicable in the Palestinian territories which before the conflict lay to the east of the Green Line and which, during that conflict, were occupied by Israel, there being no need for any enquiry into the precise prior status of those territories” (emphasis added – TE). The Hague Regulations also apply as customary international law in occupied territories.

The Court’s conclusions are based on what the Court calls a “brief analysis” of the historical background to the status of the Occupied Palestinian Territory (paras. 70-77 of the Advisory Opinion), an analysis which is so imprecise that Judge Higgins, in her separate opinion, referred to the presentation of the facts by the Court as a “history” (in inverted commas) which, in her opinion, is “neither balanced nor satisfactory.”

According to the Court (para. 70), “[a]t the end of the First World War, a class ‘A’ Mandate for Palestine was entrusted to Great Britain . . . in the interest of the inhabitants of the territory.” The Court refers in this respect to its Advisory Opinion in the matter of the International Status of South West Africa. But this analysis is inaccurate. It will be recalled that Palestine was entrusted to Great Britain as a Mandate in the interest of the Jewish people, which at the time did not constitute a majority of the local population in the territory, a fact which distinguished this Mandate from all other mandates

granted at that time.

Legal Perceptivity Exercised by Israeli Chief Court

The [Supreme Court of Israel](#) held that the fundamental rules of international law accepted as binding by all “civilized” nations were incorporated in the domestic legal system of Israel. The Nuremberg Military Tribunal determined that the articles annexed to the [Hague IV Convention](#) of 1907 were customary law that had been recognized by all civilized nations.

In the past, the Supreme Court argued that the Geneva Convention insofar it is not supported by domestic legislations, “does not bind this Court, its enforcement being a matter for the states which are parties to the Convention.” They ruled that “Conventional international law does not become part of Israeli law through automatic incorporation, but only if it is adopted or combined with Israeli law by enactment of primary or subsidiary legislation from which it derives its force.” However, in the same decision the Court ruled that the Fourth Hague Convention rules governing belligerent occupation did apply, since those were recognized as customary international law.

The Doctrine of Belligerent Occupation & International Law

In its June-2005 ruling upholding the constitutionality of the [Gaza disengagement](#), the Court determined that “Judea and Samaria” [West Bank] and the Gaza area are lands seized during warfare, and are not part of Israel:

The Judea and Samaria areas are held by

the State of Israel in belligerent occupation. The long arm of the state in the area is the military commander. He is not the sovereign in the territory held in belligerent occupation. (See The Beit Sourik Case, p. 832)

The commander's power is granted to him by public international law regarding "belligerent occupation". The legal meaning of this view is twofold: First, Israeli law does not apply in these areas. They have not been "annexed" to Israel. Second, the legal regime, which applies in these areas, is determined by public international law regarding belligerent occupation.

In the centre of this public international law stand the Regulations Concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land, The Hague, 18 October 1907 (hereinafter – The Hague Regulations). These regulations are a reflection of customary international law. The law of belligerent occupation is also laid out in IV Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War 1949 (hereinafter – the Fourth Geneva Convention).

Jerusalem

Despite the fact that Israel has at all times been a military occupier, it has acted in Jerusalem as if it was a sovereign power. It has annexed both the modern section and the Old City, transformed its demography, physical features and historic character and taken several other measures in violation of the city's legal status, of international law and of United Nations resolutions. The succession of illegalities, which Israel has committed in Jerusalem, culminated on 30 July 1980, when Israel adopted a law proclaiming

the city as its eternal capital. This action was condemned by the Security Council resolution no. 478 on 20 August 1980.

Palestinian Position

The Palestinian position is that Jerusalem should be the capital of the State of Palestine. The Declaration of Independence adopted by the Palestine National Council in 1988 declared "the establishment of the State of Palestine in the land of Palestine with its capital at Jerusalem". In the Palestinian view, that claim necessarily involved an assertion of sovereignty over the city. The Palestinian position has received overwhelming support from the Arab and non-aligned countries. The sixth conference of heads of state (governments of non-aligned countries) affirmed a number of basic principles for a comprehensive solution of the conflict, including that "the city of Jerusalem is an integral part of occupied Palestine. It must be evacuated in its entirety and restored unconditionally to Arab sovereignty."

The Third Islamic summit conference "the Palestine and Al-Quds Al-Sharif session" held in Mecca in January 1981, stressed "the determination of the Palestinian people to maintain their eternal right to the Holy City of Al-Quds or East Jerusalem as the capital of their homeland Palestine, and the insistence of Muslim Governments and peoples alike on their eternal right to the Holy City of Al-Quds, in view of the permanent political, religious, cultural and historical importance of Al-Quds to all Muslims", and affirmed "the commitment of Islamic States to liberate Al-Quds to become the capital of the independent Palestinian State, and to

reject any situation which might infringe on the Arab right to full sovereignty over Al--Quds". This declaration was adopted in September 1982 at Fez, Morocco.

The Approach International Law Upholds

It is appropriate, therefore, to examine the legal status of Jerusalem under international law and under United Nations resolutions, and to determine whether Israel's actions have affected its status.

In this examination of the legal status of Jerusalem, it is incumbent to consider the juridical effect of three facts: The right of sovereignty of the people of Palestine over Jerusalem; the internationalization of Jerusalem by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1947, and the occupation and annexation of the city since 1948.

Not only Israel's occupation and annexation of Jerusalem lack any legal basis; they also violate international law, the resolutions of the United Nations and the rights of the Palestinians.

Israel's occupation of Jerusalem, whether in 1948 or in 1967, was an aggression and a flagrant violation of international law.

Israel's excuse that its forces occupied modern Jerusalem during the war which broke out in 1948 between Israel and Arab states is baseless because Jewish forces had seized and occupied Arab quarters of modern Jerusalem in 1948 before the end of the British mandate and before any Arab armies penetrated Palestine.

Similarly, in 1967, Israel captured the Old City in what it sought to make the world believe was a defensive war when, in fact, it was clearly an aggression on its part. But regardless of whether Israel seized

Jerusalem by way of aggression or in the course of a war, its occupation gives it no right to usurp and annex the city.

Furthermore, Israel's occupation and annexation of Jerusalem violate the resolution of the United Nations, which laid down an international regime for Jerusalem. Israel cannot validly claim any territorial and political rights or benefits by violating a resolution of the United Nations – and, in particular, the very resolution to which it owes its existence.

Finally, Israel's occupation and annexation of Jerusalem violate the sovereignty of the Palestinians. Such occupation and annexation do not, and cannot, affect or extinguish the inalienable rights of the Palestinians over Jerusalem. The sovereignty of the Palestinians is of a nature that cannot be legally lost or destroyed. As the French Constitution of 03 September 1791, pointed out: "Sovereignty is one, indivisible, inalienable and imprescriptible."

Israel has not, as a result of its occupation and annexation, acquired sovereignty over Jerusalem. Its status is that of a military occupier. The United Nations has invariably referred to Israel as "the occupying power". This description was emphasized in the last two resolutions of the Security Council, namely, resolutions no. 476 of 30 June 1980 and no. 478 of 20 August 1980. Both condemned Israel's actions in Jerusalem.

It is a settled principle of the law of nations that an occupying power does not acquire sovereignty over the occupied territory, nor does its occupation destroy or extinguish the sovereignty of the legitimate sovereign. Belligerent occupation does not result in the transfer of sovereignty in favour of the military occupier, who merely acquires a temporary right of

administration.

Findings Led by Irrefutable Academic Truth

Throughout 45 years of occupation, Israel has exploited the imbalance of power between the occupied and the occupier to create “facts on the ground”, with the intention that they would lead to the retention of settlements and their associated infrastructure. These settlements amount to the illegal annexation of territory, and fragment the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, into isolated geographical units. Coupled with the harsh restrictions on freedom of movement between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and the illegal regime of closures imposed on the latter, these policies have severely undermined the meaningful exercise of the Palestinian people’s right to self-determination by limiting the possibility of contiguous territory and the ability to freely dispose of natural resources, both of which are essential to the effective fulfilment and enjoyment of such a fundamental right. Recognised as a peremptory norm of international law, violations of the right to self-determination trigger Third State responsibility.

The international legal position that settlements breach international law—adopted by the United Nations Security Council, the European Union and many other international legal bodies, but rejected by Israel—is based on an interpre-

tation of the fourth Geneva Convention article 49, paragraph 6, which states that an occupying power “shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies.”

Violations of the convention are considered “war crimes” under international law. Israel is a party to the convention and therefore bound by it.

The Israeli claim to sovereignty over Jerusalem has no substance. It has no basis in non-binding UN General Assembly Resolution 181 since the resolution never envisaged that Jerusalem would form part of the proposed Jewish State, but a “corpus separatum” subject to an international regime. Nor can the Israeli claim that it acted in self-defence in 1948 and 1967 form the basis for a claim to title.

Notwithstanding the Israeli expediency or dilemma – if Israel withdraws toward the 1949 armistice line unilaterally, or as part of a political settlement, many settlers will face one or more options: Remain in the territories (the disengagement from Gaza suggests this may not be possible), expulsion from their homes, or voluntary resettlement in Israel (with financial compensation) – there arises no prompt and warranted “justification” for the Netanyahu government to not follow the “conscience” of international law.

And the conscience of international law upholds the verdict: Israel does not have the right of ownership of the Palestinian territories and lands that it occupied after the 1967 Israeli-Arab Six Day War.

Syed Qamar Afzal Rizvi

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The Commonwealth and Arab-Israel Reconciliation

In 2016 Commonwealth Day falls on March 14. That may not mean much to some people, but to the 53 member nations of the Commonwealth, representing some 2.2 billion people, it means a whole range of events sponsored by governments, schools, community groups and individuals, intended to promote the inclusivity of the organization. On March 14 activities the world over will aim to promote international co-operation and “Commonwealth values.” What are they, these “Commonwealth values”?

First [outlined in the 1971 Singapore Declaration](#), and later augmented in 1979 and 1989, they commit the organization to promoting [world peace](#), [democracy](#), [individual liberty](#), [environmental sustainability](#), equality in terms of race and gender, [free trade](#), and the fight against poverty, ignorance, and disease. In short, the Commonwealth is strongly in favor of motherhood and apple pie (and all credit to them for it) – a position finally encapsulated in the [“Commonwealth Charter”](#), signed by Queen Elizabeth in March 2013. So the Commonwealth is indubitably a force for good in this wicked world, but dynamic or proactive it can scarcely claim to be. Perhaps the time has come for it to adopt a somewhat bolder approach to world politics.

The Commonwealth spans the globe and has a combined population amounting to about a third of the world’s inhabitants. Most, but not all, of the member states were once part of the now defunct British Empire. What unites this diverse group of nations are the association’s values, to which all subscribe, strong shared trade links, and the fact that, regardless of their individual constitutions, all recognize the

current British sovereign as head of the organization.

It was in 1884 that Lord Rosebery, later a British prime minister, first dubbed the British Empire “a Commonwealth of Nations”, but the designation “Commonwealth” remained in the background until 1949, when India achieved independence. Although the new state became a republic, the Indian government was very keen to remain in the Commonwealth – and the Commonwealth, unwilling to lose the jewel in its crown, found no difficulty in changing the rules of the club. Henceforth membership did not have to be based on allegiance to the British crown. Commonwealth members were to be “free and equal members of the Commonwealth of Nations, freely co-operating in the pursuit of peace, liberty and progress.”

That opened the floodgates for fully independent countries from all parts of the globe to join the association. All had some historic connection to the old British Empire – until two other nations, with absolutely no such ties, applied. Once again the Commonwealth demonstrated a flexibility remarkable in bureaucracies and, by sleight of hand, [further amended the rules](#) to allow first Mozambique, and a

few years later Rwanda, to join. [Applications and expressions of interest](#) in joining the Commonwealth continue to arrive from countries like South Sudan, Sudan, Somaliland and Suriname. Others expressing interest have included Yemen, Algeria, Madagascar, Senegal, East Timor and Cambodia – to say nothing of the states of Jersey and Guernsey, and the Isle of Man, all three of them islands lying off-shore of the British Isles.

Back in 2012 the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee considered the [“Role and Future of the Commonwealth”](#), and in general welcomed the idea of the organization extending its membership – always provided a stringent selection procedure was maintained. “We welcome the fact that the Commonwealth continues to attract interest from potential new members,” [reads the final paragraph of their report](#), “and see advantages in greater diversity and an extended global reach for the Commonwealth. However it is crucial that the application process is rigorous and that any new members are appropriate additions to the Commonwealth ‘family’, closely adhering at all times to its principles and values.”

Israel and the Palestinian Authority – or a sovereign Palestine, if or when this comes to pass – would, if they applied to join the Commonwealth, certainly meet the original criterion of “historic ties with the British Empire”. So, as a matter of interest, would Jordan. In point of fact, both Israel and the Palestinians have, in the past, expressed some interest in the possibility.

It is not generally known that Israel boasts an [“Israel, Britain and the Commonwealth Association”](#) (IBCA), a body formed as far back as 1953 with the aim of

encouraging, developing and extending social, cultural and economic relations between Israel and the Commonwealth. It will be marking Commonwealth Day with a reception hosted by the Australian ambassador, Dave Sharma. And indeed Israel may quite recently have come close to applying to join. It was only in 2007 that the [Jewish Journal reported](#):

“As a former British colony, Israel is being considered for Commonwealth membership. Commonwealth officials said this week they had set up a special committee to consider membership applications by several Middle Eastern and African nations. Speaking on condition of anonymity, diplomats said those interested in applying include Israel and the Palestinian Authority, both of which exist on land ruled by a British Mandate from 1918 to 1948. An Israeli official did not deny the report, but said, “This issue is not on our agenda right now.”

Not then, perhaps, but how about right now? Traditionally the Commonwealth secretariat has restricted itself to considering applications from nations eager to enjoy the considerable benefits that come with membership – and sometimes to expelling members who have transgressed its principles. It has never seen promoting the expansion of the association as part of its role, and does nothing to foster interest in potential member nations in the idea of joining the organization.

Perhaps the time has come for a more proactive approach by the secretariat. The Israel-Palestine situation provides the Commonwealth with a golden opportunity to foster peace in one of the world’s major trouble spots. Thinking laterally, the Commonwealth could exercise a positive and powerful influence for good by issuing a clear invitation to both parties:

“As soon as you have reached some sort of deal, join us. We will welcome you into our family of nations.”

Whatever Israel’s traditional enemies might assert, there is no doubt that Israel’s core values precisely match those of the Commonwealth. The Palestinian Authority – shorn of the malign Hamas régime that dominates the Gaza strip – could make a reasonable case for aspiring to most of them.

An offer by the Commonwealth of future membership to both – and indeed also to Jordan, which certainly has a stake in maintaining the security of the region against terrorist extremists – would provide a new, and previously unconsidered, framework within which peace negotiations might be conducted, and a peaceful outcome might flourish.

An Arab-Israel peace conference, at which the Arab interest was represented by the Arab League, and which was charged with securing a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, might result in a newly conceived legal entity – a confederation of Jordan, Israel and Palestine, dedicated to close security and economic cooperation. Commonwealth membership of the three sovereign states, or of the confederation, would incorporate acceptance by a swathe of nations from every continent, the assurance of new markets and flourishing trade relations for all three parties, and membership of an association dedicated to democracy, freedom and peaceful co-existence.

Neville Teller

The author of the book “The Search for Détente” (2014)

Iranian Role Trumps Turkish Model in the Middle East?

Since 2003, Turkey has appeared as a valuable asset for global powers to invest in and as a leading actor in a region long described as sluggish towards democratic transformations. However, with the advent of the Arab Spring, things changed and the role portrayed for Turkey by the United States has been declining, especially in light of the rise of another regional power: Iran. Inter alia, of the various elements that weakened the Turkish model was Iran's mounting leverage in the Middle East and the Arab Spring, which delivered a blow to Turkey's achievements as Iran was moving slowly but steadily towards a status it carefully charted.

The Rise of the Turkish Model

Seeking a new model that could be acceptable to Arabs and was far from the images and stereotypes of the old, traditional regimes thus became a must. This idea gained more momentum after the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power with Turkey's parliamentary elections of 2002, and a new project for the democratization of the Middle East became a viable option.

The rise of the AKP was the answer. It shifted the compass in the direction of moderate Islam at a time when this concept in general and the Turkish model in particular, struck a deep chord with dissatisfied public averse to corrupt regimes. And it became a priority.

Turkey thus became a crucial element in these projects and was deemed a model for moderate Islam. The United States recognized its qualities and designated a leading role for the country for its geo-strategic location, long-time record as a western ally, extensive democratic experience and its emergence as a nation that successfully combined Islamic and west-

ern values.

These principles comprised the core of what came to be known as the Turkish model. This model underlined the background of the ruling AKP, which originated in Islamist tradition but claimed to merge that tradition with modernism and liberal democracy.

The Turkish model then splashed across media and academic platforms. It became part of Arabs' lively daily debates, and Arab thinkers and intellectuals encouraged their rulers to emulate it. Many aspects helped the model's prominence rise and flourish within Arab societies.

In addition to US efforts to propagate Turkey's status as a representative of moderate and democratic Islam, the Islamic background of its ruling elite, its economic success, balanced relations with the East and West, military might and NATO membership have all put the Turkish model on track.

However, revolts do not come knocking on the door. They sneak in, changing chartered paths and dealing blows to strategic plans. With the outbreak of Arab revolts, the stable environment (the Arab world) upon which Turkish decision-

makers built their strategies changed and became uneven. At first, most observers thought the Arab Spring would be a historic opportunity for Turkey to further endorse its status in the region. Yet things changed and Turkey's popularity has been declining with each passing year.

In subsequent polls since 2011, Middle Easterners have proved lukewarm towards Turkey's role in the region. Year by year, this tepid reaction has increasingly transformed into aversion and suspicion. Even in official circles, Turkey's relations with several Middle Eastern countries have been tainted with tension and, at times, hostility.

Iran Towards Extraordinary Status

Meanwhile, whether one likes it or not, Iran has been moving slowly but steadily towards an extraordinary status and role in the Middle East. The country began emerging from decades of isolation after the nuclear deal helped its economy and propelled it back into the world.

It started formulating this role a long time ago, and the deal was just a stepping-stone. Iran has been employing an ever-widening array of instruments to build strategic partnerships and alliances throughout the Muslim world and beyond. One of its most successful tools is soft power, which includes media, assistance and aid, and cultural ties. The country also used trade and investment to further penetrate the region. Iran Chord is a salient example: The state-owned company has emerged as the largest carmaker in the Middle East, exporting over one million vehicles in 2007.

Recently, Iran signed agreements with

Afghanistan and Tajikistan to build railroad and power lines linking Iran and the Central Asian republics, as well as China and Russia. Furthermore, Iran is politically and militarily cooperating with Russia in Syria with the aim of securing Moscow's support in numerous spheres. One of which is Iran's attempt to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a full member. Iran was accepted as an observer state, yet full membership would secure further strategic support from Russia and China.

More so, Iran's extended leverage in the region has always been demonstrated in a network of allies that has been expanding to include more members. The main logic behind this network lies in Iran's soft power and its ability to export both revolutionary values and Shiite fraternal connections.

Iran was adept enough to promote itself as a revolutionary hub and a home for all those aiming to fight foreign imperialism. The eventual result was the formation of the "axis of resistance" to counter the Arab "moderation axis" that encompasses US allies in the region.

In addition, Iran's connections with Shiite communities in Iraq, Bahrain, Yemen, Eastern Saudi Arabia and Lebanon demonstrate the success of its soft power. The number of Shiite visitors to Iran is proof of this success. According to 2013 figures, roughly four million tourists visited Iran: the majority was religious Shiite or medical tourists while some one million were regular tourists.

Iran further expanded its network beyond traditional state actors such as Syria and Iraq to include non-state actors and groups such as Hamas and Jihad in Palestine, Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen. Iran was pragmatic

enough to also establish relationships with seemingly unlikely partners such as China, Russia, Turkey, India, Nicaragua, and Algeria; and to sign scores of agreements in the fields of hydrocarbons and energy, and trade and transport.

In addition to the increasing leverage of Iranian role over the Turkish one in the Middle East , the Iranian nuclear deal has come recently to boost Iran’s potential in

the region. Intriguingly, the Iranian nuclear deal raises a third perspective in the region: Have Arabs surrendered their aspirations to play a role in their region? Although the Islamic coalition declared by Saudi Arabia seems promising, this idea has not been translated into practical steps, nor does a united Arab position seem in the offing.

Fadi Elhousseini

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Cultural Bridging in Amman – Grassroots Projects with Scarce Resources

While political conflicts have dominated almost all discourses around the region of West Asia, narratives on the region have remained ensnared by political and religious frameworks. Thus the people in West Asia remain entrapped within politically driven explanations to answer questions about peace and conflict, Islamism, authoritarianism, security, stability etc. Unfortunately, even cultural, historical, philosophical, psychological and archaeological aspects of human civilisation in this region were to a great extent framed to serve only political explanations. This has led to minimizing the complexity of the fabric of these societies.

Defying these rigid structures of categorization, local people in Jordan with very scarce resources are attempting to create, elevate and implement innovative ideas on very local levels. The aim is to raise awareness and develop new ways of thinking that might be the path forward not only for improving the lives of the people in the region but also for enhancing the cultural dialogue between the orient and the occident. The impact of such projects might still be barely noticeable on a macro-scale; yet their impact is significant on the micro-level in the Jordanian society.

Cultural space cafés, such as Naqsh [lit. Ornamentation] in the downtown Amman, are examples of such grassroots projects. Naqsh is a cultural space café founded by Yahya Abu Safi, a Palestinian refugee, 43, in 2014. The café rises on the remnants of an old house – built in 1919 and was abandoned for over 15 years– in the downtown of Amman.

With resources as scarce as hen’s teeth, Abu Safi initiated the restoration of the house in 2013. While several Jordanians volunteered to help in restoring the old house, some other Europeans and Asians

joined the efforts later on. The project of Naqsh is a product of voluntary work of Jordanians, Palestinians, Syrians, Japanese, French and Germans.

The social and cultural value of Naqsh lies in promoting cultural exchange among the locals themselves and with foreigners. “At the beginning when we were trying to restore the house, some locals used to show up and wonder about this strange idea – ‘a cultural café?’ they used to say”, Abu Safi told MPC Journal. “The idea of a cultural space café in ‘downtown Amman’ was very strange for the people then,” he added.

After the embarkation of the project, the café hosted several cultural events such as musical concerts, art exhibitions, theatre, poetry evenings and language exchange events.

“Many people started visiting our events, especially that this house is located in the middle between east Amman and west Amman,” he elucidated.

The capital of Amman is broadly divided into two dimensions of reality: West Amman is the lavishly rich, luxurious and expensive part of the city, whereas east Amman is the poor, repulsively squalid and miserable part of the city. While west

Amman is populated by the high class of the Jordanian society – managers, diplomats, high-rank governmental officials and businessmen – infrastructure and public services, well-equipped schools and medical centres, although unduly expensive, are just at every corner. On the contrary, east Amman clearly suffers from a lack of facilities, crumbling infrastructure and public services and insufficient and poorly-equipped schools and medical centres.

“While Naqsh café is located in the middle of two widely different social classes, it offers a platform for an integrative involvement from both sides” Abu Safi explained, referring to the importance of cultural bridging not only between Jordanians and foreigners residing in Jordan but also among Jordanians themselves.

“We try to offer a space to all people from all walks of life,” Abu Safi said. “Many Jordanians and people from Africa, Asia and Europe visit our events regularly,” he added.

“This is a place for everyone, who believes in peace, hope and harmony.”

Naqsh is also working on setting up a library for the neighbourhood, and organising literary reading and musical sessions for the youth. In spite of the fact that most innovative projects are concentrated in west Amman, cultural projects in the Jordanian capital have been witnessing development in recent years. The development owes to people’s increasing awareness of cultural and social platforms on the one hand, and to the increase, although fluctuating, of tourism in the country on the other.

The impact of Naqsh on the youth seems

to be positive, especially that several youngsters regularly visit the Naqsh café and use it as a space for, among other things, training and exchanging ideas. The group of Bushar [lit. popcorn] is a good example of young talents in Amman, who despite shortage of almost everything, they manage to improvise and rehearse at Naqsh café.

“Bushar is a group of 25 youngsters aimed at supporting young Arab talents. We focus on acting, singing, painting, stand-up comedy and playing music,” said Usama Nashwan, the manager of the talent group – Bushar.

The group of Bushar – which mainly consists of high school and university male students between 14 and 25 – “has a place to improve their talents and share their aspirations,” said Abduljabbar Al-Barqawi, a member of the Bushar group.

“Through our talents, we hope that we can contribute to the society by raising awareness and improving the quality of life of the Jordanian people,” Nashwan added, referring to the group’s active engagement in voluntary work. “Our goal is to build cultural bridges beyond the Jordanian borders and to show the world that we, too, have talented people,” Nashwan concluded.

Cultural exchange among people is a human aspect, which is difficult to exclusively frame as political or religious. By looking into the context of these emergent cultural projects across Jordan, we realise that the focus is neither on politics nor religion. In other words, there is much more into culture than just religion and politics.

Hakim Khatib

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Saudi Export of Wahhabism

There has long been debate about the longevity of the Saudi ruling family. My initial conclusion when I first visited Saudi Arabia exactly 40 years ago was: This can't last. I would still maintain it cannot last even if my time line has changed given that the Saudi monarchy obviously has far greater resilience than I initially gave it credit for. One major reason for the doubts about the Al-Saud's viability is obviously the Faustian bargain they made with the Wahhabis, proponents of a puritan, intolerant, discriminatory, anti-pluralistic interpretation of Islam.

It is a bargain that has produced the single largest dedicated public diplomacy campaign in history. Estimates of Saudi spending on the funding of Muslim cultural institutions across the globe and the forging of close ties to non-Wahhabi Muslim leaders and intelligence agencies in various Muslim nations that have bought into significant elements of the Wahhabi worldview range from \$75 to \$100 billion. The campaign is not simply a product of the marriage between the Al-Sauds and the Wahhabis. It is central to Saudi soft power policy and the Al-Saud's survival strategy. One reason, certainly not the only one, that the longevity of the Al Sauds is a matter of debate is the fact that the propagation of Wahhabism is having a backlash in countries across the globe. More than ever before theological or ideological similarities between Wahhabism or for that matter its theological parent, Salafism, and jihadism in general and the Islamic State in particular are under the spotlight.

The problem for the Al-Sauds is not just that their legitimacy is wholly dependent on their identification with Wahhabism. It is that the Al-Sauds since the launch of the campaign were often only nominally in control of it and that they have let a genie out of the bottle that now leads an

independent life and that can't be put back into the bottle.

Al-Sauds and the Wahhabis are nearing a crunch point, one that will not necessarily offer solutions, but in fact one that could make things worse by sparking ever more militant splits that will make themselves felt across the Muslim world and in minority Muslim communities elsewhere in multiple ways including increasing sectarian attitudes in countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

The recent shooting in the southern Philippines of a prominent Saudi Wahhabi cleric whose popularity is evident in his following of 12 million on Twitter suggests that it is not just the government but the ulema who are becoming targets. And not just ulema who are totally subservient to the Saudi government.

Sheikh Aaidh Al-Qarni is a product of the fusion between Wahhabism and the Muslim Brotherhood that produced the Sahwa, a Saudi Salafist political reform movement. While Philippine investigators are operating on the assumption that IS was responsible for the shooting, Saudi media were quick to report that Saudi authorities had warned the Philippines days earlier that Iran's Revolutionary Guards were planning an attack.

Let's take a step back to paint a framework in which the Saudi funding cam-

campaign should be viewed. For starters, one has to realise that while it all may be one pot of money the goal of the campaign differs for different parties. For the Wahhabi ulema it is about proselytisation, about the spreading of the faith. For the government it's about soft power. At times the interests of the government and the ulema coincide, and at times they diverge.

By the same token, the campaign on some levels has been an unparalleled success, on others success is questionable and one could go even a step further to argue that it risks becoming a liability for the government.

It may be hard to conceive of Wahhabism as soft power but fact of the matter is that Salafism was a movement that had only sprouted miniscule communities in the centuries preceding the rise of Mohammed Ibn Abdul Wahhab and only started to make real inroads into Muslim communities beyond the Arabian Peninsula 175 years after his death.

By the 1980s, the Saudi campaign had established Salafism as an integral part of the global community of Muslims and sparked greater religiosity in various Arab countries as well as the emergence of Islamist movements and organisations. The soft power aspect of it certainly in relation to the power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran has paid off, particularly in countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, Bangladesh and Pakistan where sectarian attitudes and attitudes towards minorities and Iran are hardening.

Wahhabism's proselytising character served the Al-Saud's purpose as they first sought to stymie Arab nationalism's appeal and later that of Iran's Islamic revolution, tectonic developments that promised to redraw the political map of the

Middle East and North Africa in ways that potentially threatened Saudi Arabia's rulers.

Both developments were revolutionary and involved the toppling of western-backed monarchs. Arab nationalism was secular and socialist in nature. The Islamic revolution in Iran was the first toppling of a US icon in the region and a moreover involved a monarch. The Islamic republic represented a form of revolutionary Islam that recognised a degree of popular sovereignty. Each in their own way posed a threat to the Al-Sauds who cloaked their legitimacy in a religious puritanism that demanded on theological grounds absolute obedience of the ruler.

Ultimately, the Saudi campaign benefited from Arab socialism's failure to deliver jobs, public goods and services and the death knell to notions of Arab unity delivered by Israel's overwhelming victory in the 1967 Middle East during which it conquered East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights and the Sinai Peninsula.

Moreover, Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser's early rupture with the non-Salafist Muslim Brotherhood led many Brothers to join the stream of migrant workers that headed for the Gulf. They brought their activism with them and took up positions in education that few Saudis were able to fill. They also helped create and staff organisations like the Muslim World League, initially founded to counter Nasser's Pan-Arab appeal. The campaign further exploited opportunities created by Nasser's successor, Anwar Al-Sadat who defined himself as "the believing president".

Sadat in contrast to Nasser allowed Muslim groups like the Brotherhood and Salafis to re-emerge and create social or-

ganisations, build mosques and found universities.

The rise of the Brotherhood in the kingdom sparked a fusion of the group's political thinking with segments of the Wahhabi and Salafi community but also accentuated stark differences between the two. Saudi establishment clergy as well as militants took the Brotherhood to task for its willingness to accept the state and operate within the framework of its constrictions. They also accused it of creating division or *fitna* among Muslims by endorsing the formation of political groups and parties and demanding loyalty to the group rather than to God, Muslims and Islam.

The Saudi campaign was bolstered by the creation of various institutions including not only the Muslim World League and its multiple subsidiaries but also Al-Haramain, another charity, and the likes of the Islamic University of Medina. In virtually all of these instances, the Saudis were the funders. The executors were others often with agendas of their own such as the Brotherhood or in the case of Al-Haramain, more militant Islamists, if not jihadists. Saudi oversight was non-existent and the *laissez faire* attitude started at the top.

In sum, the complex relationship between the Al-Sauds and Wahhabism creates policy dilemmas for the Saudi government on multiple levels, complicates its relationship with the United States and its approach towards the multiple crises in the Middle East and North Africa, including Syria, IS and Yemen. Historian Richard Bulliet argues that Saudi "King Salman faces a difficult choice. Does he do what President Obama, Hillary Clinton, and many Republican presidential hopefuls want him to do, namely, lead a Sunni

alliance against the Islamic State? Or does he continue to ignore Syria, attack Shias in Yemen, and allow his subjects to volunteer money and lives to the ISIS caliph's war against Shi'ism?

The former option risks intensifying unrest, possibly fatal unrest, in the Saudi kingdom. The latter contributes to a growing sense in the West that Saudi Arabia is insensitive to the crimes being carried out around the world in the name of Sunni Islam. Prediction: In five years' time, Saudi Arabia will either help defeat the Islamic State, or become it."

The Al-Sauds' problems are multiplied by the fact that Saudi Arabia's clergy is tying itself into knots as a result of its sell-out to the regime and its close ideological affinity to more militant strands of Islam. Saudi scholar Madawi Al-Rasheed argues that the sectarianism that underwrites the anti-Iran campaign strengthens regime stability in the immediate term because it ensures "a divided society that is incapable of developing broad, grassroots solidarities to demand political reform... The divisions are enhanced by the regime's promotion of an all-encompassing religious nationalism, anchored in Wahhabi teachings, which tend to be intolerant of religious diversity... Dissidence, therefore, centres on narrow regional, tribal and sectarian issues."

The knots are also evident in approaches towards Syria. A Saudi royal decree banning Saudis from granting moral or material aid to groups including Islamic State and Al-Qaeda's official offshoot in Syria, the Al-Nusra Front, was countered more than a year later by a statement of more than 50 clerics that called on Sunni Muslims to unite against Russia, Iran, and the regime of Bashar Al-Assad. The statement described groups fighting the Assad re-

gime as “holy warriors” in what was widely seen as an endorsement of jihadist groups.

By the same token, Saudi Arabia’s intervention in Yemen in a bid to defeat Houthi rebels, the only group to have challenged Al-Qaeda advances in the country but that also threatened to undermine the kingdom’s dominant role in Yemeni politics, has effectively turned the Saudi air force into the jihadists’ air wing

as Al-Qaeda expands its reach in the country.

Whether Bulliet is right or not in his prediction, Wahhabism is not what’s going to win Saudi Arabia lasting regional hegemony in the Middle East and North Africa. In fact, as long as Wahhabism is a dominant player in the kingdom, Saudi Arabia is even less likely to win its battle for hegemony. At the end of the day, it is a perfect storm.

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Russia and the US Battle It Out in Syria

Despite the fragile ceasefire that has brought a brief respite to the indiscriminate bombing of soldiers and civilians alike, the situation that has developed in Syria is fraught with dangers, contradictions and ironies.

In September 2014, in pursuit of restoring stability to that war-ravaged country, a US-led coalition of nations engaged in a twin-objective military effort – in itself almost a recipe for disaster. The first aim was to defeat the rampant Islamic State (IS) that had seized large swathes of the country; the second to remove President Bashar Al-Assad from power and establish democratic governance. There was one proviso: There were to be no western boots on the ground. The strength of the coalition was to be focused on providing training, logistical support and air cover for the “moderate” forces fighting IS and those opposing Assad, mainly the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

Assad, for his part, controlled the formidable Syrian army and was supported by Iran’s Revolutionary Guards, by the forces of Iran’s satrap Hezbollah, and since autumn 2015 by the full weight of a massive Russian military build-up within Syria. Although Islamic State is nominally in Russia’s sights, some estimate that less than 10 per cent of Russian air strikes have targeted IS. Russia’s powerful air support has been directed primarily against the FSA.

So Russia has been battering the FSA; the US-led coalition has been supporting them. In short, Russia and the US were at war with each other, albeit by proxy. Which side was winning? The assault on Aleppo by Russian-aided pro-

Assad forces says it all. The fight was going Russia’s way, and Assad’s grip on power was being strengthened.

Which perhaps explains the apparently inexplicable decision by President Vladimir Putin to disengage from the conflict. Putin had no desire to become bogged down in a long-drawn-out battle to regain all of Assad’s lost territory for him. His aim in intervening in the Syrian conflict was to consolidate Russia as a major player on the world stage, and to secure his naval and air bases on the Syrian coast at Tartus and Latakia.

Having achieved this, he wants the peace talks to succeed. He has never exhibited full-hearted support for Assad remaining in power, and by withdrawing at this critical moment in the Geneva peace process, he has cut the ground from under the feet of Assad’s representatives, who have been adamant in their view that Assad’s position as Syria’s president is a “red line”. By reducing Assad’s negotiating position, Putin has provided an opportunity for the peace talks to succeed.

How did the western allies allow the proxy war with Russia to develop?

In the final analysis, the support provided to the FSA by the coalition powers was simply inadequate. The training, the logistical support and the air cover, no doubt of assistance to the ground troops of the FSA, were not enough by themselves to overcome the strength of the

enemy. Assuming a genuine victory was desired, “no boots on the ground” was a faulty, if understandable, strategy.

The coalition’s effort is so obviously deficient that Saudi Arabia, a member from its foundation in September 2014, announced on 10 February 2016, that it was forming a [34-nation Islamic military coalition](#) to combat terrorism, and was ready to participate in any ground operation. Saudi military spokesman Brigadier General Ahmed [Asiri had already confirmed](#) that Saudi Arabia was ready to send ground troops to Syria to fight IS, but how the new Saudi initiative might relate to the Joint Arab Military Force, agreed by Arab League military chiefs in May 2015, is not made clear.

Why are the Saudis taking the initiative? Because, in common with other pro-western Arab states, they are alarmed at the way the US allowed Russia and Iran to lay the foundations for a Middle East that reflects their own, separate, interests.

Iran seeks regional hegemony. Greatly aided in its bid for power by the ill-advised US-led nuclear deal, it has been boosted by the lifting of western sanctions, the renewed sale of oil, and the unfreezing of \$32 billion of foreign-held assets. Now Iran’s Revolutionary Guards have used the state’s new-found wealth to pour thousands more Iraqi and Afghan mercenaries into Syria. So ironically it is the US itself that has contributed both to a racking up of the war in Syria, and to an increase in the misery imposed on the people, more and more of whom are forced to flee their homes

From its start back in 2009 the Obama administration was intent on abdicating America’s former role as power-broker in the Middle East. Instead it devised a self-defeating strategy of boosting Iran’s power and influence. The idea was that a regenerated Shia Iran would take the initiative in combatting the Sunni jihadist organizations like Al-Qaeda and Islamic State, allowing the US to adopt a much lower profile.

The strategy failed abysmally. Its main result was severely to shake the confidence of America’s erstwhile allies in the region such as Saudi Arabia and Israel, while affecting Iran’s attitudes and objectives not one jot. The leaders of Iran’s Islamic Republic despise the West and all it stands for – the US in particular, which Iran’s Supreme Leader regards as its greatest enemy. As for the nuclear deal, he lauds it as an Iranian victory over America. Iran remains determined to achieve both religious and political dominance in the Muslim majority world, and its influence over Syria’s future is a vital element in that strategy.

As for Russia, President Vladimir Putin has filled the vacuum in the Middle East left by Obama. Putin is determined to re-establish a position for Russia in world politics akin to that of the defunct USSR, and no doubt saw Syria as a convenient stepping-stone in that direction. His withdrawal has diminished Russia’s standing not one whit. It has, if anything, resulted in a chorus of admiration from many authoritative voices in government and the media for his statesmanship. It has also remitted the urgent, but unfulfilled, task of defeating Islamic State to the US.

Neville Teller

The author of the book “The Search for Détente” (2014)

Khamenei's Strategic Steps to Name Iran's Next Supreme Leader

During a meeting on March 10 with the outgoing Assembly of Experts, Supreme Leader Khamenei clearly stated that it was time for the Iranian leaders to begin thinking about the transition of Iran's top Leadership—that is, the arrival of the next Supreme Leader of Iran. He then gave advice to Iran's elite about the professional and personal attributes of his successor and laid down the policies for the Assembly of Experts to begin working in preparation for the next Supreme Leader in case of his demise or in the event he chooses to step down from his power and install the next Leader himself.

Through this critical message, Khamenei is teaching his successors and the children of the Islamic Revolution the revolutionary values and ideals that they should pursue as they prepare Iran for the incoming “new Iranian era”—the era of Iran after Khamenei.

Khamenei is clear about the professional and personal attributes the next Leader should demonstrate:

Islamic Revolutionary values: Khamenei talks about the importance of revolutionary values that the next Leader should possess and maintain in his Leadership. By using the examples of the late Ayatollahs Shaykh ‘Abbas Va‘ez Tabasi and Abolqasem Khazali Boroujerdi (former members of the Assembly of Experts), he defines what he means by “revolutionary values” and characteristics he looks for in the next Leader:

One of the First Generation of the Islamic Revolution

This means someone who was involved in the Islamic Revolution and was occupied by issues of the 1979 Revolution: An active partner or member of the Islamic

Revolution. Also possibly someone who was a pioneer or was deeply involved in the Islamic Revolution. Khamenei explains that men of this ilk were “revolutionary men” who valued Islamic revolutionary ideals, stood by them, did not waver despite pressures or changes over the years in the political atmosphere. They, thus, haven't swayed from their revolutionary beliefs and have been faithful to Khomeini's revolutionary principles. In other words, they maintained revolutionary values, protected and defended the Islamic Revolution, stood by its principles, and continued the revolutionary movement in Iran.

By using the example of these two men Khamenei is indicating that he believes it is in the best interests of Iran that the next Leader is one who has been 1) an active participant of the Islamic Revolution, 2) played a critical role in the victory of the Revolution whether he was an activist or supporter of Khomeini, and 3) fought for the Islamic government. This way such an individual shouldn't only intellectually and historically understand the values of Khomeini's movement for his envisioned Islamic government but also should have an emotional connection to

the Revolution. Why does Khamenei want this in the next Leader? Because he believes that an individual who has fought so hard for a cause will do everything in his disposal to protect that cause, so it continues to prosper and grow. Hence, he will not allow that cause—the cause for the continuation of a “true” Islamic government—to cease due to external pressures. Also that person will not subvert Iran’s mission as a result of foreign pressures and will not change the present course of Iran.

One Possesses a Basiji Spirit

A pious, vigilant, and insightful Leader who possesses the Islamic Revolution’s political orientation within him and a jihadist who struggles for the survival of the regime.

Five policies Khamenei outlines for Iran’s leadership

Muslim Unity

Khamenei calls upon Iran’s leadership to commit to Muslim unity and resist any instigated regional wars that in principle, and in his view, are purely political ethnic wars caused by America, the Zionists, and the enemies of Iran. He believes that what the US defines as religious wars are indeed ethnic and political wars with the intent to create division and discord among Muslims. Khamenei believes the US is utilizing regional instabilities to create discord and division in Iran. That means, in his view, the US is using external conflicts to create internal war among Iranians. What Khamenei is saying is that Muslim unity at this point of his Leader-

ship as he is approaching the end of his Leadership has become even more important for him because any regional instability and any discord, division or war among Muslims at any level might cause instability in Iran and lead to foreign infiltration of the Iranian society.

A strict “Neither East, Nor West” Policy

Resistance against foreign domination, especially the United States. Normally this is the foremost policy for Khamenei. In the face of threats of Daesh and other regional threats or instabilities, at this point of his Leadership, Khamenei has made Muslim unity his top foreign policy.

Resistance Economy

Economic growth can be achieved through following the policies of resistance economy. Khamenei tasks President Rouhani’s government with starting an economic headquarter that will specifically work on executing the policies of resistance economy. This is expected to primarily focus on domestic production and oil-free economy. Iran’s expedited progress must be concentrated on internal resources and power.

“We need to turn our focus to internal and domestic resources and rely on our strong domestic base. If we want to experience this true progress, we must preserve our revolutionary characteristics, our jihadi movement, our dignity, and national identity, so that we are not consumed in this dangerous global culture and economy,” says Khamenei.

Expedited Scientific Progress

Khamenei reminds Iran's leadership that they *must* become "the global command centre for scientific references".

"In order to accomplish this goal, we must strengthen our science and have expedited scientific progress. We have to pursue this seriously and with determination," Khamenei emphasises.

The missile testing in mid-March 2016 is yet another message Khamenei is sending not only to the international community but even more so to the Iranian elite: Scientific growth without any hesitation or worry about foreign powers should continue after his demise. In his view, Iran must progress!

Cultural Security

Khamenei asks the leaders to devise policies that would immunize Iran and its young people from any infiltration by "arrogant powers," especially America. He strongly believes that it is US's plan and intention to infiltrate Iran politically, economically, culturally, and socially. He warns the government that if they are not cautious, America will enter Iran through the back door. This means that the US will attempt to influence Iran's leadership by changing their minds and plans about specific policies they want to pursue domestically or internationally. Thus, the US might change Iranians' decisions and

This would then influence the Iranian people by altering their beliefs in the system, in Islam, in the Revolution and in political Islam. Consequently, Iranians will be no longer able to attend to their obligations, which might lead to developing negative views about their community, their civilization, and their country.

Khamenei insists that America wants to change the beliefs and desires of the Iranian people, and most importantly it wants to reverse Iran's "political" independence. While the sanctions are being lifted, Khamenei further warns Iranians to vigilant, especially that Iran is moving into globalization and becoming a critical partner in global affairs.

Khamenei favours continuity and repetition of critical events, which formulated the Islamic Republic and gave rise to a strong Islamic regime in Iran. Based on this background, it is likely that Khamenei might consider a rather younger than older successor – possibly between 50 and 65 years of age as opposed to someone in his 70s. This eliminates the risk of changes in Iran's Leadership, should his successor live longer.

In order to assure the survival of *vilayat-i faqih* (the Guardianship of the Jurisconsult or the office of Supreme Leadership), Khamenei may choose to elect a conservative, yet moderate successor, who has full support of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

President Rouhani seems to be a great candidate as Iran's third Supreme Leader,

Yvette Hovsepian Bearce

Author of The Political Ideology of Ayotallah Khamenei

policies, which are in the best interests of Iran.

if he plays his cards right and is able to fully implement Khamenei's economic

policies and overcome any growing tensions between him and the IRGC. Based on his relationship with the Supreme Leader during his presidency and the nation's progress in the international realm,

coupled with his moderate tone and strong support of the Iranian people, Rouhani seems to fit perfectly the qualities Khamenei is looking for in the next Leader.

Terrorist Attacks in Brussels – a Clash of What?

Recent terrorist attacks against another European capital city in less than a year continue to shake the core of world politics. It is worth to note that terrorist attacks are not only happening against European states, but also against other countries, most notably Turkey and Indonesia. Is it a clash of cultures, religions, or it is merely politics? How do we keep serving Daesh (Islamic State)?

What to Expect

The blasts are expected to generate an international response to express grief and disapproval of violence and terrorism, similar to the responses which followed the sickening tragic events against Charlie Hebdo in January 2015, and to the terrorist attacks in Paris in recent months.

It is also anticipated to hear condemnation and calls for solidarity against terrorism by a spectrum of Muslim dignitaries in and outside Europe and by world political leaders, including Arab ones.

Although some of the victims of the attacks at Brussels airport and the Metro station might be Muslims, this doesn't change the fact that Daesh-affiliated madmen call themselves Muslims as well. This is going to be one of the leading arguments for the far-right populists in Europe, who are more likely to shift the debate towards issues of failed integration, a clash of cultures, threats against European "Christian" values, the Islamisation of Europe etc. In other words, it is expected to witness a culturalisation of the discourses surrounding the crisis of terrorism in Europe and the world over.

It is also more likely that, in order to en-

force security, western states will increase their military response against Islamic State, as if it were the sole reason behind these assaults. In short, rifts in European societies due to mutual alienation and victimisation, increase of security measures, rise of far-right voices and the continuation of old, yet unsuccessful solutions of military power to combat terrorism are going to be the main guiding lines over the next few weeks, and probably months. Daesh is baiting the whole world with its random attacks, and it seems to be working.

Culturalisation of Discourses

Culturalisation of discourse means to constantly look for evidence and explanations in the culture of the penetrators. Culturalisation dominates public debate on such issues, although most recent terrorist attacks in Europe were committed by individuals born and brought up in the West.

When culturalisation of discourse is too broad to hold, religion, which is more often used interchangeably with culture, comes into play. Again discourses around Brussels attacks become islamised to address issues of Islamism, integration, con-

flicting values etc. However, the role of culture and religion cannot be marginalised, but also cannot be excessively emphasised when analysing political, economic and military power relations.

In theory, increasing people's tendency to make inferences about others' disposition, traits and characteristics on the basis of what has been observed of their actions correlates with the escalation of contentious practices. In other words, through observing the behaviour of out-group members, we tend to draw hasty conclusions about others' characteristics and to find explanations of why they behave the way they do. Yet, this is a "perceptual error" and not sophisticated enough to produce a satisfying explanation.

In practice, perceptual errors lead us to develop discourses based on people's tendency to explain behaviour of in-group members by looking at causes in the environment and context, but for the out-group members in their traits themselves. The Culturalisation of discourse, accompanied with a lack of proper knowledge, opens a space for building up generalisation and stereotyping patterns against the collective other.

"Instead of looking at ethno-national cultures and religions as identity difference-lines, there is an urgent need to understand them as politically embedded and historically changeable phenomena," explains Kira Kosnick, a professor at the institute of sociology at the Goethe University of Frankfurt.

Controversy of Denial

Injustice, corruption and chaos in the world offer a perfect environment for

producing terrorism. However, fighting terrorism starts when western and Muslim-majority countries acknowledge the fact that the problem mainly lies in religious and political governance. Every time such a criminal action happens, Muslim individuals become the first victims not only in the western world but also across the region of West Asia and North Africa such as in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. But why is it a controversy of denial and why does it serve Daesh?

On one level of denial, some Islamic clerics incite violence, and then the same clerics condemn those who carry out violent acts. On a second level of denial, Arab political leaders support freedom of speech defying terrorism and extremism in the West but they choose to do otherwise in their own countries. On a third level of denial, western countries base their relationship with states in the region of West Asia and North Africa on security, stability and economic calculations, turning a blind eye to all the violations and atrocities perpetrated by their authoritarian allies. On a fourth level of denial, while the West has an unclear position concerning protracted conflicts in the heart of the Muslim majority countries, it has built strong ties with states known to export extremism and sectarianism such as Saudi Arabia and Iran.

This controversy emerges when actors are unable or unwilling to improve people's lives in the region. Consequently, extremist groups find a fertile environment for recruitment in these structures.

Solutions in the Age of Daesh

Solutions to reform Islamic thinking necessitate the willingness of political as

well as religious leaderships to stop instrumentalising religion whenever it deems convenient.

The problem is not that some terrorists joined or learned from Daesh but rather why they were inclined to join and support Daesh, or Al-Qaeda in the first place. Radicalisation is a process that takes several years to crystallise. There is hardly evidence that people become radicalised because of a three-month visit to Daesh. But evidence suggests that many of those who join Daesh are already prepared to embrace, learn and instate such an extremist ideology.

The newcomers to Daesh or any other terrorist organisation are more likely to have developed their radical views in their home countries. It could be at schools, home, religious books, Islamic interpretations or religious sessions. Therefore, the

reasons behind a violence incitement could well be in the books held most sacred by Muslims.

We all know that attacks such as the ones in Brussels and else where in the world are not going to break the states in questions. Yet, there are consequences to these attacks. They mainly sharpen the rifts between Muslims and non-Muslims in western societies, although an overwhelming majority of Muslims in the West might be willing to engage in serious cooperation to eliminate any risks to their home countries.

Increasing alienation helps Daesh to recruit the most marginalised and distressed individuals. Against this background, Daesh offers them the illusion of being a part of a greater project in the name of god.

Hakim Khatib

Editor-in-chief of the Mashreq Politics and Culture Journal

Sufi Islam to Prevent Violent Extremism?

The current events of terrorism in France, Turkey and Belgium, and the recent wave of terrorist attacks in Lahore, Pakistan do invite some serious deliberations. Be it East or West, the veritable reality is: Fighting against terrorism remains a mammoth task. The war against violent extremism via the hard power doctrine is already under way; yet the world needs to adopt a soft power strategy to combat this radical ideology. And it is in this backdrop, that by implementing the tenants of Sufi Islam, we can expediently brave the challenges of curbing fanaticism, fundamentalism, radicalism, sectarianism and violent extremism all that harbour terrorism in the East & the West.

Sufist Interpretation of Islam

Islamic scholars and researchers unanimously agree on the fact that the tune of Sufism can cure the sick minds harbouring terrorism. Classical Sufis in the Islamic world include Rumi, [Omar Khayyam](#), Fariduddin Attar – whose stories were later used by Chaucer – and the Spaniard [Avërroes](#), the “great commentator” on Aristotle. Many of their ideas passed to Europe through contacts between the Islamic and Christian worlds in the crusader states, Norman Sicily and the Iberian Peninsula. From the outset, Sufism has been concerned with building bridges among communities whose contact can be of mutual benefit. In the West, people as diverse as [Dag Hammarskjöld](#), [St Francis of Assisi](#), [Sir Richard Burton](#), [Cervantes](#) and [Winston Churchill](#) have all been influenced by Sufism.

The Sufist interpretation of Islam is considered to be moderate as compared to the political interpretation because it doesn't focus on the state, but rather on the inner dimensions of Islam and purification of the soul. However, during the

last few decades we saw that even the seminaries claiming to follow Sufism, have started teaching the political interpretation of Islam. Hence, this political interpretation has recently been dominating for few decades.

Political Islam & the Roots of Radicalism

All Islamist terrorist organizations, which are shaping up in today's world have their foundations in this political interpretation of Islam. There is a cultural dimension of globalization, of which many Muslims are aware. They feel that the sort of values and ideas, notions of living – which are emanating from the West and beginning to penetrate their societies, influencing their youth in particular – are harmful. At least some of the more obvious aspects linked to music, dance forms and films etc. are seen as injurious to their own culture and identity.

They're also conscious of the fact that the global political system is dominated by the United States to a great extent, and some other superpowers. And somehow

there is, perhaps wittingly or unwittingly, an exclusion of Islam from global processes.

There have been two major trends: Dominant and subordinate.

The dominant trend, which is to a great extent negative means that Muslims have become very conscious of the fact of dominance, inward looking in some respects, very reactive and sometimes very aggressive. While one can understand the historical circumstances that may have given birth to some of these trends and tendencies, there appears no valid justification from an Islamic point of view, or from the point of view of the relations between cultures.

Now there is a subordinate trend, which unfortunately remains very weak at this point in time. These are Muslims who say that, in the midst of globalization, you have to reassert the essence of Islam. And that is its universalism, its inclusiveness, its accommodative attitude, its capacity to change and to adapt, while retaining the essence of faith. In other words, expressing faith as something that is truly ecumenical and universal. Now that is a trend, which has its adherents in almost every Muslim country, but it has remained on the margins.

Disarming the Bomb

We all speak of nuclear disarmament but what if someone tell us that there is a bomb stronger than the nuclear one and it is ticking away menacingly every second, and that is the bomb of human depravity. When a human being stoops to the lowest rung of her/his nature, she/he becomes more dangerous than the most dangerous animal. And when the virus of selfish con-

tumacy infects her/his being then she/he is a greater detonating device than any other known. The mystic path invites us to talk about disarming humanity of this human bomb for it is only through tackling it we can defuse all other terrorist devices. Let us remember the wise words of Jimi Hendrix who said:

“When the power of love overcomes the love of power, the world will know peace.”

Some of us may wonder what a word like terror has to do with a mystic. Mystics are generally known to be people who undertake self-surrender as a path to directly experiencing gsage

od and ultimately finding divine union.

They are imagined to be sages with long white beards, staff in hand, in flowing robes, standing atop a mountain peak, presenting the very picture of enigma against the backdrop of a remote and rarefied atmosphere. If we choose to put aside this cinematic imagery that tries to fit a mystic into a description much like that of a biblical prophet, we can hope to find him/her right here in our midst, even inside this physical frame that holds our own being.

It is about time that the Muslims all over the world unite and take a strong step against political interpretations of Islam and reform themselves. Likewise, they need to rehash and overhaul religious education system since it is the breeding ground of all terrorist organizations. In reply to this Islamist ideology, Muslims need to put forward the peaceful and tolerant interpretation of Islam. Together with the international community Muslims have to fight against this political ideology, which has caused unprecedented harm to the Muslims themselves.

Curing Disease via Orient-Occident Discourse

The prevention of extremism is not something we will achieve overnight. We have to build a strategy that reaches across generations. Security is the first duty of all governments, but hard power alone has never and will never be the whole answer. In the on-going debates over how to respond to extremist Islamism, too little attention has gone to the vast and deep repertoire of Sufi philosophy, rituals and even artistic production, which accompanied the most enlightened centuries of “Muslim civilization”.

If anything, the initial efforts on the part of mainstream Muslim theologians to respond to literalist interpretations of scripture have implicitly accepted extremists’ insistence on reducing the religious tradition to a single set of texts. Laudable and necessary as these responses are, there is something disconcerting about the Grand Mufti of Egypt rejecting extremist interpretations of Quranic verses because they do not represent “true” Islam – as if there really is only one authentic way to be ‘truly’ Muslim. The potency of Sufism may lie in its ability to remind Muslims (and non-Muslims) that, more than the literal words of a holy text, Islam has for fifteen hundred years been a lived experience, with all the cultural and intellectual variation that implies. There are 15 million Sufis worldwide, with Damascus and its Grand Umayyad Mosque as their capital. They need to be promoted at schools and mosque pulpits, given prime access to television networks worldwide.

The Needed Synergies

On one hand, a western support of a forum of intercultural debate and philosophical discourse by welcoming the tenants of free speech and multiculturalism, accompanied with preventing Islamophobia & “clash of civilizations” theory, seems a very pressing demand. On the other hand, the Muslim community in general needs to adopt a liberal outlook towards the West.

The western world needs to exorcise the evils of Samuel Huntington’s clash of civilization theory. The European Council of religious leaders (ECRL) should play an instrumental role in enhancing the scope of Sufi Islam in Europe.

There are three important modalities badly needed to be achieved. First, we cannot avoid the fact that this is about ideas based on a perversion of religion. In this battle of ideas, the only lasting solution will be one that fully understands, addresses and uproots the ideas themselves. Second, in understanding that this is a generational challenge, we need to implement reform now so that the next generation has the understanding and skills necessary for building resilience to extremist ideas.

Finally, we cannot underestimate the need to fight this problem together.

The difficult but necessary decisions this volume highlights and the policy options it presents are not unrealistic, and take into consideration the full spectrum of challenges. We must recognise what works, and where there is positive impact we must seek to replicate it.

Strategic action is needed quickly to implement solutions that are long-term and

have continuity and consensus. Terrorism has no religion. The western and eastern educational systems need be updated with the credo of “Sufi Islam” that advocates a universal preaching about humanity. Governments of the East & the West will need to work hard to build coalitions for

this work, not just within society, but also across government. The prevention of extremism is one of the greatest challenges facing this generation and the next. Unless we counter it, and urgently counter it together, we face a very difficult future as a global community.

Syed Qamar Afzal Rizvi

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Putin's Task in Syria

Since Russia has been declared officially in the Middle East, and following the extended presence of its military in all forms in Syria, speculations splashed media platforms across the globe. Observers saw in Russia's decision to enter Syria a long-term strategy, albeit the abrupt announcement of Russian President Vladimir Putin to withdraw most of the Russian forces from Syria put friends and foes alike in bewilderment.

Task Fulfilled?

Putin ordered a pull out of “the main part” of his troops in Syria and the exact words he uttered to his defence minister Sergey Shoigu were “The task presented to the defence ministry and the armed forces has been completely fulfilled.” Examining the avowed goal for Russia's operation in Syria six months ago is a stepping-stone in analysing what “task” Putin is talking about.

Fighting and destroying Daesh, after the US-led campaign proved to be an “abject failure”, was the primary goal, whereas taking a pre-emptive move to abort any efforts to export those radicals back to Russia was the secondary goal. Nonetheless, neither Daesh nor Al-Nusra were defeated and Moscow has no solid evidence that those terrorist groups lost ability to send their radicals back to Russia.

Accordingly, Putin's recent remarks refute the declared goal in the first place. This conclusion takes us to the other expected birds Russia was aiming to kill with one stone – which is the intervention in Syria.

Among the various goals Russia was aspiring from this intervention were bolstering Russia's military – and hence strategic presence – in the region, preventing the fall of Assad and balancing the mili-

tary operations on ground, dictating its political will on any future regime, neutralizing the mounting Iranian leverage on Syria and weakening Assad's rivals. Apparently, throughout the past six months Moscow was able to relatively realize most of the aforementioned goals.

Significant Strategic Presence

Russia proved to be a key player and a significant element in the Middle East equation and the Syrian issue in particular. Militarily, while much of the equipment and manpower were being loaded out, Moscow emphasized that the Russian airbase in Hemeimeem and a naval facility in the Syrian port of Tartus will continue to operate.

Russia indicated that the advanced S-400 air-defence system, three Sukhoi Su-34 combat aircraft and a Tu-154 transport plane, would stay in Syria. Experts, thus, expect that air force and naval assets will also be left behind.

After all, Moscow was able to reinforce the strategically important military base in Tartus and found a new one. Thus, Russia was able to not only secure a solid footprint in the Middle East and overcome the international isolation brought about as a result to its intervention in Ukraine, but also to extend its political sway.

The Political Solution in Syria

Russia's intervention turned the tide of war and tipped the balance of the combat operation back towards Assad. The western-backed "moderate" opposition was weakened, whereas Assad forces began to regain lands they lost before the Russian intervention.

Consequently, Russia asserted itself as the pioneer of this new political process. Brokered by Russia and the US, a ceasefire with Assad still in power was forced and diplomatic efforts stepped up to secure peace deal negotiations.

One must concede thus that Russia was able to manoeuvre itself into a position of real leverage and to include Assad and his regime in any peace talks. Meanwhile, Iran's role in these peace talks appears marginal when compared to Russia and this fulfils another unspoken goal by Moscow.

The Timing of Moscow's Announcement

Some Arabic media channels contended that differences of opinion between Putin and Assad led Putin to shortly announce the pull-out plans. Differences, according to these channels, arose from Assad's talks to re-control the entire country that may ruin any potentials for a political solution.

Some other Arabic sources suggested that Putin's decision comes in light of the mounting "Sunni" dismay from Russia's plans in backing Assad, who is Alawite-Shiite. Both arguments can be true, yet they neither answer the crucial question "why now" nor assume that Putin had

these calculations before the outset of his operation.

Perhaps the answer is a confluence of all various considerations, yet the key word is the peace talks. Russia had limited objectives in remaining long in Syria. According to Reuters, the Russian campaign has cost Russia nearly \$800 Millions. With Russia's economy under sanctions, Moscow is fully aware that it cannot afford to sustain a long-term combat operation in Syria.

Thus, the goal was to realize the strategic objectives – defeating the capacity and capability of Assad's rivals and providing him with a better position in the negotiations – in due time and then begin redeployment.

From day one, Russia was looking for an exit strategy. With Assad's improved position on the ground, a NATO intervention option no longer possible and the launching of a serious political process, Moscow seized its moment.

Russia's ally has negotiates from a position of power and in case the peace process produces tangible results, Russia alleviates itself from any future commitments. Hence, Russia's goal was operational and not to delve into a nation-building operation.

Moreover, Moscow aims to evade any conflagration with Turkey – in case the latter plans to intervene in Syria – and focus more on the Ukrainian issue. The timing of Moscow's announcement was hugely significant especially when it is in need for more allies that can back its position in Ukraine.

Russia's decision sent positive signal and was warmly welcomed by many countries, mainly Arab State. This would ultimately help Russia to repair relations with the Sunni states who criticized the Russian

intervention in Syria.

So far, imagining that Russia will abandon Syria is unrealistic and thus Moscow's decision is purely tactical and timely. After securing a foothold and loyal ally, Putin used the first opportunity to begin withdrawing his troops whose mission was deemed to be limited in scope and time. Nevertheless, the only element that has been missing and playing no role in the Russian and others' considerations is Daesh and the fight against terrorism.

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