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# Values Disintegrate Civil Society Coalition in Syria

*On Friday, 5 February 2016, a group of Syrian civil society organisations issued a statement; MPC Journal got a copy of it, announcing their withdrawal from the Syrian Civil Coalition “Tamas”. The withdrawal owes to reasons related to the coalition’s management, its procedural rules and lack of transparency.*

The Syrian Civil Coalition “Tamas” was founded in Beirut in May 2014 after several meetings of representatives of more than 50 Syrian civil society organizations and dozens of independent activists. The foundation of “Tamas” aimed at creating a solid nucleus of a civil society through promoting the role of these organizations in shaping the future of a Syrian government.

The goal is to build a government based on the principles of good governance stressing the need to preserve the Syrian social fabric. The coalition is also aimed at creating opportunities for all allied organisations through the exchange of experiences, participation and equitable distribution of grants.

According to the statement issued by ten civil society organisations, which had participated in the coalition “Tamas”: “Some did not realize our understanding of the coalition as a part of a cumulative cultural building that needs believers in teamwork and cooperative behaviour to be activated. It is not possible to establish a coalition based on the moods and individual control of a person or group of persons, who surpass the ‘administration’ and ‘procedural rules’ turning ‘Tamas’ into a private company.”

The statement also referred to the coalition’s failure to address the issues they faced when organising the second year’s conference such as having to postpone the conference and the absence of dozens of invitees.

The biggest issue was the lack of financial transparency, which has been systematically ignored. The statement accused the coalition of not addressing issues related to “financial files” and the adoption and implementation of new projects.

The statement also pointed out that the proposed representation of civil society organisations in **Geneva 3** was an important reason to bring the exploitation of “Tamas” by specific people to the surface again. Persons in “Tamas”, according to the statement, have repeatedly been violating the procedural rules of the coalition.

Previous to this statement, three members of the governing body of the coalition, including the Vice President of the Commission and a number of independent members resigned from “Tamas”.

The retreating organisations are: “Bergav Centre for Liberties and Media, Committees of Kurdish Spring in Syria (Komîtên Bihara Kurdî li Sûriyê), Mardin Hasaka Association, Khabour Forum, Hayat Salam

Organisation, Rocher Network for Business and Development, Dem Foundation, Hero Organisation for Women, HiFi Association and the Centre of Development

and Civil Society.”

*Translated by Hakim Khatib*

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# Rivalry Between Saudi Arabia and Iran Is Not Much About the Victim

*Tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran have been increasing recently. Although the narrative developed to describe the execution of a Saudi Shiite cleric, Nimr Al-Nimr, as a sectarian dimension of the Kingdom's policies towards Iran, Saudi Arabia's goals are not principally fuelling the Shiite-Sunni divide. The Saudi executions were partially an attempt by Saudi Arabia to sever ties with Iran and push the tensions forward. Lifting sanctions against Iran, coupled with oil prices plummeting to around \$32 per barrel remains a frightening nightmare for the Saudis.*

Following the execution of Al-Nimr, diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran trembled. Iran promised Saudi Arabia that it would pay a high price over the execution of Al-Nimr, whereas the latter described the Iranian criticism of its judicial system as “blatant interference” in its internal affairs.

Escalating very quickly, Iranian demonstrators broke into the Saudi embassy in Tehran and started fires, souring the already troubled relations between the two regional rivals. Crossing the line, [Iran compared Saudi Arabia to ISIS](#) following the executions. A website associated with Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, published a picture of a Saudi executioner (dressed in white) next to an Islamic State executioner (dressed in black) with the caption “Any differences?”, drawing attention to the fact both carry out beheadings.

## War of Words

Slamming the Saudi monarchy, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said in an [op-ed in The New York Times](#)

on 10 January that “Today, some in Riyadh not only continue to impede normalization but are determined to drag the entire region into confrontation.” Zarif accused Saudi Arabia of “active sponsorship of violent extremism” and “barbarism”, referring to the recent executions. The Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Bin Ahmed Al-Jubeir responded [with an op-ed in the New York Times](#) on 19 January accusing Iran of supporting terrorism in the region and in the world. Al-Jubeir said that Iran “opts to obscure its dangerous sectarian and expansionist policies, as well as its support for terrorism, by leveling unsubstantiated charges against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.” Al-Jubeir continued to list the atrocities attributed to Iran since the Islamic revolution in 1979, charging Iran of being “the single-most-belligerent-actor in the region”. Jubeir's comments appeared after Saudi Arabia's Foreign Ministry had published a [“sheet of facts”](#) listing all the nefarious practices of the Islamic Republic.

Khalid al-Dakhil, a Saudi political commentator based in Riyadh told Al Jazeera that: “Iran executes far more people a year than Saudi Arabia, but it does not get



the negative publicity Saudi Arabia has. This is something that must be addressed.”

## Sectarian Divide?

When considering sectarianism in Islam, we should emphasize that most Muslims are not from Saudi Arabia or from Iran. Indeed most Muslims in the world don't live in the Middle East. According to 2015 [Intercensal Population Survey](#), the population of Indonesia is around 250 million, which is more than the population of all [Middle Eastern countries](#) (around 200 million) combined. If we are to believe that the number of Muslims in the world is around 1.5 billion, this leaves the land of the two holy mosques – Saudi Arabia – and the Islamic Republic of Iran significantly outnumbered. According to the [Central Department of Statistics and Information](#) in Saudi Arabia, the annual number of pilgrims (those who take on a journey to the sacred places of Mecca and Medina) over the past ten years was between 1.5 and three million. On average, the number of pilgrims to Mecca over the past ten years is around 24 million, which is insignificant compared to the number of Muslims worldwide. The number of visitors for religious purposes is even less than the population of Yemen.

At a first glance, the tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia can be marked as sectarian but looking more profoundly, it becomes clear that it is a power struggle. The prominence of religious norms in political contexts between Saudi Arabia and Iran doesn't owe to a sectarian divide *per se*, but rather to the usefulness of religion in persuasion, legitimization, mobilisation, elimination, contestation, pacifica-

tion and justification. In other words, it is a struggle for regional dominance. According to Language Fractionalization Index, Iran, UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon are the most linguistically fractionalised countries in the region, whereas Lebanon, Kuwait, Bahrain, Iraq, and Syria are the most religiously fractionalised. Religious divisions contribute to creating political and social structures that enforce the status quo in the Middle East. In other words, fractionalisation guarantees the ruling elites to remain exactly where they are – in power.

In addition to the sectarian dimensions mentioned above, a pattern of alliance in the Middle East, in which states, monarchies and forces define their allies and enemies based on sectarian dimensions, can be traced. On one hand, such a pattern results in minorities oppressing majorities such as in Syria, Iraq, Bahrain and Yemen. On the other hand, it results in majorities oppressing minorities such as in Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Such a pattern of alliance is also exacerbated by the two regional rivals backing opposing sides in civil wars in Syria and in Yemen. In Syria, Saudi Arabia supports Sunni but hard-line elements in Syria, while Qatar and Turkey support Sunni elements allied with the Muslim Brotherhood, whereas Iran backs the Syrian regime and Hezbollah.

In Yemen, a coalition includes Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan, Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Sudan and “Pakistan” has been launching airstrikes, called “The Storm of Resolve”, against Houthi rebels claiming to defend the “legitimate Yemeni government” of Abdrabbu Mansour Hadi. Houthi rebels are a Yemeni Shiite minority in northern Yemen ac-

cused of being backed by Iran. Many Yemeni civilians including children were killed by the airstrikes similar to what we see in Syria.

Religion remains an identifying factor (not identity). A Shiite person is more likely to support Houthi rebels in Yemen, for instance, while a Sunni is more likely to support Syrian rebels.

Noam Chomsky described the latest airstrikes against Yemen as an “extreme form of terrorism”. “Yemen has been the main target of the global assassination campaign—the most extraordinary global terrorism campaign in history – it is officially aimed at, as in this last strike, people who are suspected of potentially being a danger to the United States,” Said [Chomsky on Russia Today](#) commenting on Saudi Arabia’s involvement in Yemen.

## Majority-Minority Binary

Discrimination is commonplace in the Middle East. In both, Iran and Saudi Arabia, political activists are not only taken to prison for criticizing repression, but also tortured or flogged. In case of changing power structures in Saudi Arabia or Iran, in which minorities rule the majority, there is little or no evidence that the majority will enjoy the same rights and security as the victorious minorities.

In Saudi Arabia, the majority Sunni popu-

lation oppresses Shiite minority rhetorically and constitutionally, while the Sunni royal family in Bahrain, backed by their Gulf allies, oppresses the Shiite majority. On the one hand, Shiites, who explicitly or implicitly show their faith, might face imprisonment in Saudi Arabia, according to [Human Rights Watch](#) (HRW). “Official discrimination against Shia encompasses religious practices, education, and the justice system. Government officials exclude Shia from certain public jobs and policy questions and publicly disparage their faith,” according to [2011 Report on Saudi Arabia](#). The oppression against Sunnis minority in Iran is even more staggering. Further examples can be found in Syria, in which a minority is oppressing the majority.

Saudi Arabia and Iran share, among others, two common factors: Authoritarian form of governance and concentration of power in the hands of few individuals in each country. Therefore, in an ethno-linguistically and religiously fractionalised region such as the Middle East, religion is an effective means to mobilise the masses, preserve power for the ruling elites, keep the public in check etc.

Waging wars of words, invoking sectarianism and oppressing those who don’t share political power are never about helping the victim in the Middle East, but rather about who is the aggressor.

**Hakim Khatib**

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

# The Concept of Iran and Iranian Cultural Sphere

*Iranian studies, as a university subject in Germany, elaborate the notion and the concept of the Iranian cultural sphere over the past century. In doing so, Iran and the Iranian cultural sphere are divided into old and new disciplines of Iranian studies (in German: Iranistik). There are diverse dimensions under Iranian studies such as politics, geography, culture, linguistics, myths, poetry, anthropology, mystics, ethnicity, gender, colonialism and religion. These dimensions, however, could be studied holistically or separately.*

## Transnationality: State and Citizens

Researchers use the term transnationality as an approach to single out common roots of culture, myth, migration, and language across borders. In the contemporary political system of nation states, nations with the same interests, pedigree, language, religion etc. are interconnected through many platforms, especially in the age of Internet. With these viewpoints, one can skip political-territorial borders to celebrate, for instance, the Iranian New Year's Eve "Nowruz" in the Iranian cultural sphere. Nowruz is an occasion that occurs once a year on 21 March to remind humankind of the awakening of nature.

Wishing to celebrate cultural occasions, citizens of other nation states are obliged to apply for a visa to enter the neighbouring country. So Nowruz, which literally means the new day, is celebrated in Iran, in all the neighbouring countries of Iran, and beyond. In recent years, the scholarship of Iranian studies, such as Christian Bromberger, in collaboration with Iran and other neighbouring states, developed the concept of "Nowruzistan".

## Colonialism: A Roll Back Policy of Language and Culture

In the age of modernity – even though we've learnt to speak about "Aufklärung", "Age of Enlightenment" or "Le Siècle des Lumières" – countries of the global south and east have become the hinterland. In the case of Iranian cultural sphere, the current political borders were outlined as a result of a power struggle. The outcome was divided ethnicities and the downsizing of ancient linguistic and cultural ties. Though, it shouldn't be buried in oblivion that every great civilization has its distinct features and passes through various levels of evolution. Iran as a local empire is a case in point.

How can we imagine such evolution? Many Iranian political and even cultural capital cities prior to the idea of the nation state were located in contemporary places such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan or the Caucasus. These countries represent the Iranian cultural sphere. In the long nineteenth century, according to Eric Hobsbawm, Iran lost more than 3000 Kilometres of its area due to the interven-



tion of colonial powers.

Today, many people are confused when speaking about the concept of Iran, which is immediately linked to Persian. Besides Iran, Persian is the official language of Afghanistan and Tajikistan. It is important to keep in mind that there are many ethnically Persian and Persian speakers in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, the Persian/Arabian Gulf States, India, and China. People of Persian ethnicity are called “Tajik” in the context of central Asia, which is, according to Bert Fragner, an ascription rather than a self-attribution. Before the colonial age, Iran called itself “Mamalek-e Mahruse-ye Iran”, which means “The United States of Iran”.

## Cultural Identity and Nation-State

While the term nation-state is defined by the state, the nation and the borders, it is important to put the phenomenon of borders in contemporary time under the microscope. If one is inclined to trace back borders to the first humans walked on earth, we will find out that the limits were defined by rivers, valleys, mountains or forests.

Empires such as the Persian, the Roman and the Ottoman had borders but these were not exactly well defined compared with our modern time. In contrast, borders are politically demarcated in our current age and codified in the international law. The modern individual has become the citizen and the subject of the state. Consequently, political and national borders are to be seen as a matter of fact.

Furthermore, citizens are documented in our time, which is more political than cultural. For that reason almost every single

person on earth has an “Identity Card”. At this point, the question remains of whether national identity card completes the identity of a citizen or not? Taking this into consideration, it’s a question of time until normative discourses and charged debates such as majority versus minority become at stake.

In Iran, as well as in the Iranian cultural sphere (Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, etc.), there are ethnicities, languages and religions, which have lived side by side since the very foundation of their history, maybe 2500 to 5000 years ago. A Person from the Iranian cultural sphere is usually multilingual and has – similar to a western man or woman in its very stereotype – multiple identities and tendencies.

After knowing about these facts, how does it come borders are drawn between people? Is it possible that people of the Iranian cultural sphere were not separated because of being very much different, but because of having much more in common in their time and environment?

To answer such a question, we have many preferences to choose an appropriate answer from. One of the first options to approach a response is the power of the colonial masters and the weakness of the former Iranian leaders in the long nineteenth century. In this framework, an ethnicity with its culture got the preferential right of being a nation – measures of judgement were less lying in culture and rationality.

In this transitional process a nation runs institutions, scripts, media, language, images, history, and the everyday life. In Iran, Persian became the national language, with a 1250-year history in poetry, which began in what is Tajikistan in present time. The poets in the Persian case

were more philosophers who expressed their deep thoughts in poetic lines.

In Afghanistan, Persian (Farsi-Dari) is competing with Pashto, the other national language. But, according to Senzil Nawid, Persian remains the language of cultural production (poetry, literature, newspapers), official institutions, media and the bridging language among all different ethnicities in Afghanistan. In Tajikistan, Persian regained its former position within the society and state following the independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

## Persian Language in History

The language is an appropriate indication for understanding my take on the Iranian cultural sphere. Prior to the Islamic age, Persian had – together with Greek, Sanskrit, Chinese and Latin – a history without interruption, referring to the scholarship of Brian Spooner. The Persian language went through a 13-hundred-year development, divided into three genres: Khorasan-i, Araq-i and Hend-i. The genre of Khorasan-i consists the contemporary states of Iran (eastern part), Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. The genre of Araq-i entails states like Iran (western part), Azerbaijan and Iraq. The genre of Hend-i consists of states in the subcontinent, which are divided today into Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Kashmir. These three genres have also subdivisions, which are beyond the scope of this article, but as a follower of this discourse one should know the founder of Persian poetry “Rudaki”, who hails from what we call today Tajikistan. In addition, the Persian language in the Ottoman Empire was used for cultural is-

sues and court proceedings. In the same vein, Persian was a bridging tool for military and religious affairs – all Arabic words passed to Ottoman-Turkish and later to modern Turkish have their roots in Persian.

Persian was at the advent of Islam (7th century AD) the contact and uniting language, at least, in western and central Asia in general, and in the Iranian cultural sphere, in particular. It is until now the Lingua Franca in many ways when it comes to reading historical accounts of the Turks and the Indian subcontinent, or to communicate among nationals around modern Iran.

The Iranian cultural sphere is reinterpreted from two directions: From outside, through old colonial powers and the contemporary order of nation-states, and from inside, through its diverse inhabitants. The internal relationship could be significantly severed, if the same ethnicities, who lived together before the partition of the Iranian cultural sphere, pursued the narrative of “we vs. them”, i.e. Iranians vs. Afghanistanis, Tajiks, Azerbaijanis, Uzbeks, Iraqis, Pakistanis, and so on. Misusing identity concepts and “Othering” the old ethnical, lingual and religious belongings are topics to be tackled by governments and not only the scholarship of Iranian studies.

## Conclusion

The word Iran literally stems from “ar-yanam”, then developed into “Eran” and has subsequently become Iran: Geographically, Iran starts from the eastern highlands of Afghanistan and the western parts of Pakistan, and ends up where is going to flatten in Iraq. This view, re-

minds us of nostalgia, which is not much wrong. But if we take all the languages existed before the political demarcations as an example, we will be able to detect those tongues again. We should reflect on the shared history of Persian people in Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Iran, and beyond. Why do Iranians count all the poets, poetry, literature, scientists and philosophers of the Middle Ages as Iranians without caring to share this legacy with Persians from the other states? Where is the centre of “Persianate World”? Who has the permission to call himself/herself Persian and the others outsiders?

It’s necessary to focus on the present ethnic, religious, cultural and language misconceptions of North Africa and West and Central Asia. These misconceptions caused yesterday’s, and are causing to-

day’s unrewarding conflicts. Social engineering processes, according to Karl Popper, didn’t work out for its masterminds the way it happened in the greater Muslim-majority world.

In the twentieth century Iran was the only country to rescue the Persian legacy of literature and poetry. In contrast in Afghanistan, Persian people (so-called Tajiks) and their language were oppressed due to language policies –the name of their language was changed from “Farsi” into “Dari” in the constitution of 1964. This step went against the currents and nature of their own Khorasan-i language roots. Today, Persians from other countries are reclaiming their share of Iranian and Persian legacy. As Safar Abdullah puts it: “Contemporary Iran is a part of itself”.

**Homayun Alam**

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# Locating Turkey Within Outer Space Politics

*In 2001, the Turkish National Security Council approved a decision titled “Establishing a Turkish Space Agency”, and a draft law will be submitted to the Turkish Parliament in the second half of 2016. What accounts for Turkey’s late entry to develop a major space program along with the independent capability to access space? Is Turkey on a path to address this shortcoming? If not, why?*

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The politics of outer space involve planetary defence, asteroid mining, telecommunications, satellite projects, and the observation of Earth. International Space Law offers a limited mechanism to settle disputes on international outer space in relation to military activities and the deployment of weapons. Additionally, the refusal of the US, Russia, and China to sign the Moon Treaty of 1979 was a crucial dimension in the creation of such a chaotic environment.

Despite extensive cuts in NASA’s budget after the Obama Administration and SPACE-X’s major failures in space projects, the US government’s leading role in space is still quite apparent, with its sixty four billion dollar space budget accounting for a quarter of the aggregate global space economy, which equals two hundred and sixty one billion dollars. Annually, Japan spends \$3.84 billion, China invests \$3.08 billion, and India allocates \$1.44 billion to their programs. The European Union, Russia, Israel, South Korea, South Africa, and Brazil have been able to secure second tier roles due to their ability to launch domestic satellites inde-

pendently. Africa falls behind on international space competition despite seeking to establish a regional institution with strong leadership. Nigerian petro dollars seems to be the only financial source for such a position with the assistance of Tunisia and Northern Sudan.

The Turkish Space Program started in the 1990s. Competence in aeronautics and aerospace have been developed in institutes at TAI, Aselsan and Roketsan, organically tied to the Turkish Air Naval and Land Forces, which have fostered an aerospace cluster in the province of Ankara. Turkey Space Technologies Research Institute, a civilian space agency established in 1994 that coordinates the national space policy, is responsible for conducting research in space-related areas as well as developing satellite projects. It is a federal authority under the Ministry for Science, Technology and Innovation, and has been continuing the Turkish government’s efforts to promote the autonomy of the space sector. Turkey’s space efforts are conducted in further collaboration with Turkish Ministry of National Defence, Turkish Aerospace Industries,

Aviation and Space Technologies of the Ministry of Transportation, State Planning Organization and public universities, specifically technoparks at Middle East Technical University and Bilkent University, both of which are located in Ankara as well.

Turkey possesses a small number of satellites developed by Turkish technology. Kazakhstan, China and Russia provided their soil for launching Turkish satellites such as BILSAT, GÖKTÜRK-1 and GÖKTÜRK-2. Turkish space technology is capable of providing services for agriculture, mining, smart transportation and disaster management. Turkey has now completed the first stage of space programs, consisting of technologically progressive, Earth-bound satellite projects to promote the local aerospace industry. Sending an orbiter to the Moon or Mars is still a long-term projection. Turkey should establish a new role for the upcoming Turkish Space Agency, involving countrywide branches, delegation of research work, and the creation of a space for all participants in the space industry to communicate in order to invigorate commercialization of its space industry. For Turkish national space development, industrial development and technological catch-up needs to be prioritized.

Among many countries, the Latin American example provides a realistic framework for Turkey. Brazilian aerospace industries are mainly driven by government investments with external assistance being received at various times from France, China, and Russia. Brazil aims to reduce dependence on foreign satellites for telecommunications, weather forecasting, environmental monitoring, and territorial

surveillance, including border regions. Space activities in Venezuela started in 1999, and were focused on the areas of telecommunications, earth observation and research. The Bolivarian Agency of Space Activities (ABAE) was established in 2007 in close cooperation with mid-range regional powers such as Uruguay. Argentina's space activities have been highly cooperative, involving a growing number of countries, including Italy, the USA, Denmark, Brazil, and France.

Space exploration predicts exciting developments in the next 40 years. Between 2020-2030, we will be witnessing an establishment of a permanent scientific base at the south pole of the Moon, the arrival of nuclear probes on Uranus and Neptune, human tourism on the Moon, and robotic sample return missions from comets and asteroids. Between 2030 and 2040, a permanent human presence on Mars and robotic mining missions to asteroids and the Moon are expected. Additionally, the terraforming of Mars is a major goal for the 2050s. Within this picture, the Turkish government needs to establish alliances in space politics out of the dominance of identity politics in its foreign policy. Escalation of armed conflicts in the Middle East will boost military expenditures in the near future, which might create competition in the creation of space exploration budgets. Turkey should refrain from forming outer space alliances on sectarian terms with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Northern Sudan and Nigeria. These countries might attract Turkey with their petro-dollars, yet they would not offer any concrete outcomes with an additional possible repercussion of isolating Turkey from the space race. Turkey's on-going institutional cooperation with



China under APSCO, its affinity with the European Space Agency, and its organic ties with the US military need to be rein-

forced. It should additionally pursue future collaborations with India, Brazil and South Africa.

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# Geopolitical Metamorphosis & the Middle East

*There is growing concern in the international peace community that the crisis in the Middle East if not rationally and tactfully handled by the global powers – the playing actors of the Middle East war theatre, the situation may reach at its zenith where peace would become a riddle of enigma in the region. The Middle East has been conditioned by outside forces into a powder keg that is ready to explode with the right trigger.*

*As for the West, If Saudi Arabia and Turkey send their ground troops to Syria; a wider war in the Middle East could result in redrawn borders. But for the Russians, any such remaking of the Middle Eastern borders that could serve the Anglo-American-Israeli interests would not be acceptable to Moscow.*

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## Russia-Iran Equation

So, a Russia-Iran alliance – which has de facto emerged – seems likely to be the most stable and long lasting. Although the two countries do not fully trust each other, they can find enough common ground to be partners rather than adversaries. Their strategic interests in Syria are not the same, but nor are they contradictory. Their combined military manpower –including resources from Iraq, which is now strongly influenced by Iran –and financial resources are sufficient to strengthen significantly Assad's control over the country, even if they can't completely destroy the Syrian opposition. While they might not be able to eliminate ISIS, they can reduce its influence in Syria and decrease the territory it holds.

## The Kurdistan Factor

Having been predicted years ago and previously with much western backing – although now with possible Russian-Iranian support as well – it now looks like the time has come for “Kurdistan” to take on a heightened international role – even if sub-national across Syria, Turkey and Iraq. The Iraqi Peshmerga and Syrian-based Kurdish militias have been very successful in fighting against ISIL, and this has won them international approval from all forces except Turkey, which is fearful that this sizeable minority group -- estimated to be around a quarter of the country's population – may rebel against Ankara once more for increased rights, representation, and perhaps even autonomy or independence.

It was this fear, combined with [Erdogan's catastrophic electioneering efforts](#), that led to Turkey provoking the Kurds into restarting their military operations against the state, all with the intent of sparking a preplanned offensive to cripple

that ethnic community. The resultant [Turkish Civil War](#) that followed and Erdoğan's divisive efforts to split the transnational community by [buying out their Iraqi counterparts](#) will obviously be major factors in determining the legal status of transnational "Kurdistan" in the coming future.

### The Turkey-Saudi Arabia Equation

While Ankara and Riyadh are deeply wary of acting without US consent, both are angry at what they see as US failure to take a more muscular stance against Moscow's campaign to support the regime of Bashar Al-Assad.

Turkey, according to two senior western diplomats, wants to create a buffer zone across its border "several kilometres deep" that would allow Ankara to check the [expansion of the Kurdish militias](#) in Syria that are its primary concern.

Such a move would also provide potential breathing space to moderate Syrian opposition groups further south, currently under heavy attack from Russia and Assad's forces. Turkey is thought unlikely to intervene directly without US consent. But it continues to funnel Syrian rebels through its territory onto the battleground. On 18 February 2016, several hundred fighters crossed the border close to Kurdish held areas, Syrian-based activists said.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia is concerned it is rapidly losing influence over the Syrian civil war and scope to influence any subsequent peace talks, as the leverage of its regional arch-rival, Iran, grows by the day.

### The NATO- Russia Tussle

Despite the fact that there has been an agreement between Washington and Moscow regarding their involvement in Russia, there appears every iota of doubt that this understanding may not last longer. As the Syrian government is swiftly gaining control over the terrorists who have run rampant all across the country for the past five years, NATO and the GCC are kicking their provocations into high gear. Unfortunately, if NATO is prepared to go all the way in its goal to destroy the Syrian government, the rest of the world may find itself locked in the midst of a third world war.

Such a possibility is exactly what Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev [warned about in an interview](#) with German newspaper, *Handelsblatt*. When asked about the recent announcement by Saudi Arabia that the feudal monarchy is considering sending ground troops to Syria, Medvedev responded that "the Americans and our Arab partners must consider whether or not they want a permanent war".

NATO-garrisoned Afghanistan has been successfully divided, all but in name. Animosity has been inseminated in the Levant, where a Palestinian civil war is being nurtured and divisions in Lebanon agitated. The Eastern Mediterranean has been successfully militarised by NATO.

Syria and Iran continue to be demonised by the western media, with a view to justifying a military agenda. In turn, the western media has fed, on a daily basis, incorrect and biased notions that the populations of Iraq cannot co-exist and that the conflict is not a war of occupation but a "civil war" characterised by domestic strife between Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds.

Attempts at intentionally creating animosity between the different ethno-

cultural and religious groups of the Middle East have been systematic. In fact, they are part of a carefully designed covert intelligence agenda.

Even more ominous, many Middle Eastern governments, such as that of Saudi Arabia, are assisting Washington in fomenting divisions between Middle Eastern populations. The ultimate objective is to weaken the resistance movement against foreign occupation through a “divide and conquer strategy” which serves Anglo-American and Israeli interests in the broader region.

### **The Swinging Pendulum Towards Geopolitical Polarisation**

The conflict is increasingly international, with Iran, Russia and Lebanon’s Hezbollah fighting to prop up the Al-Assad regime, while the opposition is backed by Turkey, the United States, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. ISIS and the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Al-Nusra Front are also “fighting” against Al-Assad.

“The relatively rapid internationalization of the Syrian conflict over the past few months is worsening the war,” says Elizabeth Prodromou, a visiting associate professor of conflict resolution at the Fletcher School. “Diplomacy is absolutely central to any sustainable, durable solution for the Syrian crisis,” she says.

There is also a knee-jerk, anti-US reaction inherent in Russia’s response to the Syrian conflict, especially given the sharp deterioration in Russia’s relations with the transatlantic alliance since the start of the conflict in Ukraine – in other words, whatever position the US takes, Russia will do the opposite. And from the geopolitical perspective, Russia’s involvement

in Syria is also related to Moscow’s goal of maintaining permanent access to the deep water port of Tartus in Syria, helping to consolidate Russia’s presence in the Mediterranean -

In Syria, Iran and its Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah, have propped up Bashar Al-Assad’s embattled regime. Russia, too, supports Assad by conducting airstrikes on the regime’s enemies. This combined military assistance has tipped the balance in Assad’s favour in Syria’s civil war, which is approaching its sixth year. “The perception in the Middle East is that there is a Tehran-Damascus-Moscow axis in the face of which the United States is passive,” said Ryan Crocker, who served as the US Ambassador to Iraq under the George W. Bush administration.

“That is the charitable interpretation. The less charitable interpretation is that it is actually a Tehran-Damascus-Moscow-Washington axis, and that, by our inaction, we are, in effect, accomplices.”

### **The Russian Game Changer Strategy**

Russia’s new best friends are Syria’s Kurds. Earlier this month, the “Rojava Democratic Self-Rule Administration” proclaimed itself the new government in Kurdish-held northern Syria and opened its first overseas representative office, in Moscow. Meanwhile, 200 Russian military advisers have been deployed to the Kurdish-controlled town of Qamishli, next to the Turkish border, to secure a military airport for Russian use. That gives Russia a stronghold from which to strike Isis in northeast Syria and protect its new Kurdish friends from attack by Turkey.

A wider Kurdish-Russian pact could be a

game-changer for Assad – but it also massively raises the risk of the Syrian conflict spilling over into a wider war. A deal between the Kurdish YPG militia and Damascus would deprive the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces – a coalition that

includes Arab and Assyrian groups – of some of their most effective soldiers. It would also further confuse United States policy in Syria, since the Kurds have been Washington’s closest allies in the region for years.

**Syed Qamar Afzal Rizvi**

independent ‘IR’ researcher-cum-writer based in Pakistan



# Untold Story of Kurdish Repression

*This winter, there was a war in Turkey's Kurdish south east again. The Turkish state's response to an urban rebellion that began in the autumn of 2015 was beyond all proportions. They called in the army, which moved with heavy artillery into the heart of residential quarters, not hesitating to destroy the homes of ordinary families.*

All-day curfews were imposed during which the inhabitants of the affected areas were deprived of access to water, electricity and food. The longest curfew went on for over two months, hence the strain on people was accordingly high. The curfews were ruthlessly enforced. Even a person waving a white flag trying to go to the doctor was shot, an over 70-year-old man on his way to buy bread was mercilessly murdered, and a pregnant woman who left her house only as far as the doorstep was killed in front of her two children. People began fleeing in the thousands.

## Escalation of Violence

The violence began last summer in 2015 and has gone crescendo since then. It all started when at the end of July, 32 Kurdish and Turkish leftists were killed in a suicide bombing in the small town of Suruc, to which Turkish security forces responded by tear-gassing helpers and ambulances instead of trying to save lives. Shortly after the Kurdish PKK guerrilla took up action in retaliation.

During July and August 2015, the PKK carried out offensives on army and police in the east of the country. They took over the region of Tunceli as well as whole quarters of some cities such as Silvan and Diyarbakir. In over thirty years of PKK activity, having the guerrilla patrol the streets was something completely unheard of. Even at the height of the civil

war in the 1990s they stayed mostly in the mountains.

In September the Turks launched operations to force the PKK out of the cities. They also violently repressed protests by the local population, shooting at and killing civilians, including children. In the face of growing state repression the PKK announced a cease-fire at the beginning of October. And while only local youth kept resisting, the state upped the ante.

By the end of 2015 the conflict had caused over 600 deaths according to IHD, Turkey's leading human rights organization. This number included over 120 civilians. Other organizations give different figures, in part even higher.

On December 14<sup>th</sup> 2015 the Turkish army sent 10,000 troops to close in on Cizre. At that time, Kurdish commentators spoke of "imminent mass slaughter". It was the beginning of the most intense period of government repression. In December 2015 and January 2016, people died every day, and at the beginning of February the violence only intensified, before things finally began to calm down.

## Erdoğan's Decisive Moves

While the war was at its height this winter, it has its roots in the events of the past years. There is a big irony about the fact that it is president Erdoğan who is now bringing the violence against the Kurds, even worse than it has been since

the 90s. His party's initial electoral success almost fifteen years ago was made possible in part due to Kurdish support. The AKP's religious line suited many Kurds, a lot of whom are conservative as well. For a long time Erdoğan's AKP was the only party which seriously threatened the dominance of Kurdish parties in Turkey's southeast. However, at the time much of the AKP's overtures in the direction of the Kurds were made with EU access in mind. When the EU took that carrot away, the AKP went back on the progress made much more radically than anyone could have anticipated.

Everything that is happening now is, in a way, a consequence of a bad move Erdoğan made back in 2012. Seeing that Bashar Al-Assad was facing growing protests within Syria, Erdoğan publically cancelled his support for his former ally. This decision was taken in a delusional international climate where all sorts of groups were making plans for a future Syria without Assad, and where no one seemed to foresee the extremely bloody war that was looming.

Why was Erdoğan's decision so fateful? Because from then on, by default his government began supporting the Sunni opposition in Syria. And when the strongest players in this field turned out to be extremist groups, it did not seem to bother the AKP. Over time more and more proof accumulated hinting at collaboration between the AKP government and jihadists in Syria, including ISIS.

### Between Myth and Reality

A relatively early example is from February 2014, when Turkish (*jandarma*) military police stopped an aid convoy on the

way to Syria during a routine check. When they searched the trucks they not only found food inside, but also grenade launchers, portable ground-to-air missiles, mortar shells and other weapons. The even bigger surprise was Ankara's reaction: The government ordered the trucks to depart as soon as possible. The convoy had in fact been commissioned by the AK party. As for the *jandarma* agents, they were taken to court for divulging state secrets.

There are also strong rumours about the Erdoğan clan being involved in a lucrative business of trading in ISIS oil, especially Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's son Bilal. Already in May 2014 *Cumhuriyet*, one of the biggest Turkish opposition newspapers, ran the headline "What are Bilal's ships doing on the Syrian coast?" It cannot be overstated how important it is for ISIS to be able to sell their oil. The rows of tanker trucks spotted at the Syrian-Turkish border constitute a veritable lifeline for the Islamic State. This financial aspect explains why president Erdoğan has so much interest keeping his political course, even in the face of growing terrorism in his own country.

If we look at the terrorist attacks in Turkey in 2015, we see that the larger bombings, the attacks in Diyarbakir, Suruc and Ankara, all targeted Kurdish minority activists and Turkish dissidents, the "natural enemies" of the AKP. These types of terrorist acts all look a lot like they have been authored by ISIS, even though they have never been claimed. While the indirect guilt of Erdoğan's party is undeniable, many inside Turkey even accused the AK party of direct involvement in this.

Some of last year's events seem like they could never have happened without the connivance of the secret services. The

year of 2015 saw several cases of journalists and researchers working on ISIS being assassinated on Turkish ground, most intriguingly Jacky Sutton, who was killed in a toilet cubicle at an airport in Istanbul. During the urban war of the past months many locals noticed that groups of Arabic-speaking, bearded men were fighting along with the Turkish military, participating in the attacks on the population. Radical Islamist graffiti were left on the walls of destroyed homes after battles. It wouldn't be a surprise if these spray-painted insults and curses were in Turkish. Indeed, many Islamist Turks and Kurds from Turkey also joined ISIS in Syria.

## History of Animosity

In the light of all the evidence pointing to AKP-ISIS collaboration it may seem incongruous that in the summer of 2015 the AKP government joined the international anti-jihadist alliance in Syria. While Erdoğan officially sent war planes in order to bomb ISIS, in reality he targeted the Kurdish YPG troops of Rojava, enemies of ISIS and disliked by Erdoğan not simply because they are Kurds, but also because they are closely linked to the PKK, the Turkish republic's arch-enemy. In fact the two organizations are branches of each other and share many of the same fighters.

With Rojava in northern Syria, run by the YPG, the Kurds have a large liberated area right next to Turkish Kurdistan. The ex-

istence of this new autonomous region is a matter of concern for the Turkish government, which fears that the Kurds in Turkey will want the same for themselves. Some have speculated that Turkey has been so brutal in its assaults on southeastern cities because of an intention to divide the PKK-YPG forces and draw a large part of them into Turkey, weakening Rojava's resistance against ISIS.

On the other hand, it could seem that as long as there is peace and as long as Kurdish rights are advancing in Turkish Kurdistan, the PKK could content itself with Rojava. Yet its logic still revolves around Turkey. Ismail Besikci, maybe the most famous sociologist working on the Kurds within Turkey, claims that the contemporaneous struggle of the PKK is partly motivated by receiving recognition.

There is no doubt that since the PKK took up fighting at the beginning of the '80s they have achieved enormous things for the Kurds of Turkey. Besikci argues that the war will not stop, if the PKK are not given an official status within the framework of the Turkish republic, for example by being turned into a type of police force in the east of the country.

It has to be said that with this proposal Besikci goes much further than any Kurdish politician, navigating the political minefield of Turkish politics, could ever dare to go. Were the Kurdish HDP to advance this same idea, it would amount to political suicide. It is one thing to go to the root of an issue as an academic and another to make a political demand.

**Iris Bendtsen**

**Blogger covers Turkey and the different parts of Kurdistan**

# Arab-Israel Peace

*What is the point of flogging a dead horse? The Israeli-Palestinian peace carriage has advanced not an inch in the 68 years since the founding of the state of Israel. Its horse had no life in it from the very beginning.*

## France's Bid to Lead the Process

On 16 February 2016 France formally endorsed the plan, originally outlined in December 2014 by its former foreign minister, Laurent Fabius, for [an internationally-backed summit to be held in Paris](#) in the spring of 2016, leading to Israel-Palestine peace talks in the summer. The sting in the tail of the French proposal is that if the negotiations fail, France will recognize a Palestinian state.

France's direct participation in the creation of the modern Middle East has meant that for the last hundred years it has involved itself in the politics of the region. France was, of course, one of the two principals – the other was Great Britain – responsible for dismembering the Ottoman Empire. The division of Turkish-held Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine into various French- and British-administered areas flowed directly from [the Sykes-Picot agreement](#), a secret understanding concluded during World War One, between Britain (represented by Colonel Sir Mark Sykes), and France (represented by diplomat François Georges-Picot), with the assent of Russia. The agreement's principal terms were reaffirmed by the inter-Allied San Remo Conference in 1920 and then ratified by the Council of the League of Nations in 1922.

As regards the Israeli-Palestinian situa-

tion, while consistently defending Israel's right to exist in security, France has long advocated the creation of a Palestinian state. President François Mitterand said as much in his address to the Knesset in 1982. Any possible incompatibility between these two positions, however, has never been acknowledged, but it is the flaw at the heart of France's latest proposal.

Given France's track record in the region, it is not surprising that it sees itself as a possible facilitator of an Israeli-Palestinian peace accord. Back in August 2009, when it was clear that newly-elected US President Obama was intent on relaunching peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians, French President Nicolas [Sarkozy offered to host an international conference](#) to facilitate the peace process. The event would, of course, be held in Paris. He went so far as to issue invitations to leaders from concerned countries, including Israel, Egypt, Lebanon and Syria, and of course the Palestinian Authority (PA).

In January 2010, as Obama's efforts to bring the parties to the negotiating table were inching their painful way forward, [Sarkozy repeated his offer](#). A Paris-located international conference was advocated as a positive path towards achieving peace talks.

This prescription – obsession would be too harsh a designation – persists in French thinking. [It reappeared in Decem-](#)

ber 2014, when France took the lead in drafting a Security Council resolution outlining proposals for an Israeli-Palestinian final-status deal. The formula incorporated a two-year timetable for completing negotiations and – one is tempted to remark “*ça va sans dire*” – an international peace conference to take place in Paris.

This was the first time that then French foreign minister, Laurent Fabius, waved his stick at Israel. Should the initiative fail, he announced, France would recognize a Palestinian state.

Fabius played the same tune, with minor variations, during his visit to the Middle East last June 20-22, to meet Egyptian President Fattah Al-Sisi in Cairo, PA President Mahmoud Abbas in Ramallah, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem. His aim was to sell the idea of a French-led initiative to reboot the peace process, with backing from an “international support group” formed by the EU, selected Arab nations and UN Security Council members.

It is this initiative that France has now formally endorsed. What is wrong with the French plan? For a start it removes all incentive from the Palestinians to compromise in any way at all. In fact, it is in their interest for the talks to fail. Since they are promised recognition from France – no doubt to be followed by a host of other western nations – without giving an inch of ground, why should they bother to negotiate? In short, it has failure built into it.

In any event, France ignores the undeniable fact that no Palestinian leader dare reach an accommodation with Israel for fear of the backlash from the extremists on his own side – which explains the failure of each and every attempt at a final

settlement over the past half-century. Both the PA and Hamas, the Islamist rulers of Gaza, maintain that the whole of Mandate Palestine, “from the river to the sea”, is Palestinian, and that their aim is to eliminate Israel from the Middle East altogether. For any Palestinian leader to sign an accord, which asserts Israel’s legitimate place in part of “historic Palestine” would be more than his life was worth.

From Israel’s perspective the plan is clearly based on the assumption that all the concessions have to come from Israel, and that the threat that will force them to compromise is French recognition of Palestine. What France does not define is the Palestine that it threatens to recognize. Is it confined to the West Bank and east Jerusalem, or would it include Gaza, home to over a million Palestinians? If so, there is no acknowledgement that Hamas, the *de facto* ruler of Gaza, rejects the whole concept of a two-state solution, since one of the two states would be Israel to whose destruction it is dedicated.

France turns a blind eye also to the fact that Hamas is equally determined on overthrowing the Fatah-dominated PA and taking control of the West Bank, just as they did in Gaza. Or indeed that in any future Palestinian election, Hamas would in all likelihood emerge as the winner. Either outcome would result in a security nightmare for Israel. If Hamas moves into the West Bank, then Tel Aviv, Ben Gurion airport and Israel’s major north-south road network are within easy reach of rocket attack. The reality is that strong security coordination between Israel, Jordan and any new Palestinian state would be an essential condition of any peace accord, and that would certainly call for major concessions on the Palestinians’ side.



Perhaps most fundamental of all, France takes no account of the failure of the PA to generate a desire for peace among the Palestinian man or woman in the street. Fearful of the growing influence of Hamas, and intent on outdoing it in anti-Israel rhetoric, the PA continues to promulgate hatred of Israel and to laud the “martyrs” who commit acts of terror against Israeli citizens. This is not the atmosphere in which leaders approach genuine peace negotiations.

Unfortunately France’s initiative, well-meaning as it undoubtedly is, almost guarantees continued conflict far into an impenetrable future. As it stands, the plan is misconceived, a *cordon bleu* recipe for failure.

### A New Approach Is Needed

A plethora of dates, strewn across the recent history of the Middle East, mark doomed efforts to resolve the conflict – the Madrid Conference in 1991, the Oslo Accords of 1993 and 1995, the Wye River Memorandum in 1998, the Camp David Summit in 2000, the Road Map for Peace in 2003, the Annapolis process in 2007, the Obama administration’s direct peace talks of September 2010 followed by its second, intensive effort, led by US Secretary of State John Kerry, over 2013-2014. The truth is that all were predestined to fail, even before the negotiators for each side sat down at the table.

Ignoring the smoke screen of accusations and excuses thrown up by each side on each occasion, the fundamental reason for the succession of failures is not difficult to deduce. Arab opinion as a whole resents the presence of the state of Israel in its midst. Palestinians regard Israel’s

Declaration of Independence in 1948 as a disaster, and mark it annually with their own Nakba Day (“Day of Catastrophe”). Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority (PA), leads a Fatah party whose charter states quite unequivocally that Palestine, with the boundaries that it had during the British Mandate – that is, before the existence of Israel – is an indivisible territorial unit and is the homeland of the Arab Palestinian people. Each Palestinian, it declares, must be prepared for the armed struggle and be ready to sacrifice both wealth and life to win back his homeland.

Why then, one might legitimately ask, has Abbas spent the past ten years nominally supporting the “two-state solution”, and pressing for recognition of a sovereign Palestine within the boundaries that existed on 5 June 1967 – that is, on the day before the Six-Day War? They are, in fact, also the armistice lines that marked where the Israeli and Arab armies stood on July 20, 1949, following the first Arab-Israeli war.

Given the founding beliefs of Abbas’s party, this tactic – inherited from his predecessor, Yassir Arafat – obviously represents only the first stage in a strategy ultimately designed to gain control of the whole of Mandate Palestine, an objective explicit in what he says in the Arabic media, but which he never expresses in his statements to the world.

Supporting the two-state solution is designed to swing world opinion to the Palestinian cause – and it has succeeded very well. But the naked truth is that no Palestinian leader would ever sign up to it, since to do so would be to concede that Israel has an acknowledged and legitimate place within Mandate Palestine – and that would instantly brand him a traitor.

tor to the Palestinian cause. No Palestinian leader – not Yasser Arafat, nor Mahmoud Abbas, nor anyone who might succeed Abbas – dare sign an agreement that recognizes Israel's right to exist within "historic Palestine". It would probably be more than his life was worth. From the Palestinian perspective, the insurmountable obstacle lodged within the two-state solution is that one of the states must be Israel. The innumerable peace negotiations have at least yielded one inescapable truth: short of committing *hara-kiri*, Israel could never offer enough. Its very existence is anathema.

This is why the oft-repeated cry of Israeli leaders – that only face-to-face negotiations can solve the interminable dispute – is way off the mark. Face-to-face talks have been tried to destruction. As far as reaching a negotiated peace is concerned, the PA is a busted flush.

What is needed is an Arab-wide consensus, reached with Israel, on the future geo-political configuration of what was Mandate Palestine, starting from the perhaps unpalatable, but nonetheless undeniable, presumption that Israel is here to stay.

Just suppose, for one mad moment, that Israel simply pulled out of the West Bank, abandoned its towns and smaller settlements, handed over East Jerusalem as a Palestinian capital and, hey presto, a sovereign Palestine was born. Its Fatah government would instantly be vulnerable to its greatest enemy bar none – rejectionist, extremist Hamas, the *de facto* government of Gaza, which has been at loggerheads with the PA for the past decade, and which seeks to overthrow Abbas's administration in the West Bank, just as it succeeded in doing in Gaza.

And not only Hamas, for the Islamic State

octopus, seeking to control the Middle East as a whole, has already spread its tentacles into Yemen and Libya. IS, too, would soon be infiltrating a new, weak Arab state, intent on absorbing it into its jihadist caliphate.

The Arab world is well aware that a newly-born Palestine would be in urgent need of an effective military presence and high-tech security on its borders, as indeed Jordan and Egypt both are. In serious discussion they would recognize that a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would require military cooperation across the board – just as Egypt liaises with Israel in combatting Hamas and IS in Sinai, and Jordan in combatting IS across its borders with Iraq and Syria. To create a sovereign Palestine and leave its security to its own puny forces, would be to throw the new state to the wolves.

Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has shown the way. Speaking to the UN General Assembly in September 2014 he said: "Many have long assumed that an Israeli-Palestinian peace can help facilitate a broader rapprochement between Israel and the Arab world. But these days I think it may work the other way around – namely that a broader rapprochement between Israel and the Arab world may help facilitate an Israeli-Palestinian peace."

That broader rapprochement has, in effect, been achieved, forced into blossom in the hothouse created by the growing assertiveness of Iran, following its nuclear deal, and the mayhem created in the Middle East by the rampant Islamic State. Albeit covertly, Israel collaborates on a broad range of security issues not only with Egypt and Jordan, but with Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, inter alia.

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 well take as a starting point the Arab Peace Initiative, now 14 years old, and adapt it to take account of today's realities.

One possible result of intensive, but realistically-based, negotiations might be the

creation of a new legal entity – a Confederation comprising three sovereign states: Israel, Jordan and a new-born Palestine. Such a Confederation, conceived specifically to guarantee the security of all three partners through close military and economic cooperation, could also provide the basis for the future growth and prosperity of each.

**Neville Teller**

The author of the book "The Search for Détente" (2014)

# Saudi Arabia's Future: Will Al-Saud's Partnership with Wahhabism Hold?

*Saudi Arabia may be heading into a perfect storm of economic problems, social challenges and foreign policy crises. Tumbling commodity and energy prices are forcing the Saudi government to reform, diversify, streamline and rationalise the kingdom's economy. The government is cutting subsidies, raising prices for services, searching for alternative sources of revenue, and moving towards a greater role for the private sector and women.*

Cost cutting occurs at a time that Saudi Arabia is spending effusively on efforts to counter winds of political change in the region with its stalled military intervention in Yemen, its support for anti-Bashar al Assad rebels in Syria, and massive financial injections into an increasingly troubled regime in Egypt that has yet to perform. Traditional autocratic rule in the Middle East and North Africa is being challenged like never before.

## Reform bumps into Wahhabism

Despite renewed doomsday prediction about the viability of the Saudi regime, its future however depends less on how it solves any one of these issues individually. Instead, it will be determined by how the kingdom's rulers restructure their Faustian bargain with Wahhabism, the puritan interpretation of Islam in which the Al Saud cloak themselves but which increasingly looms as a prime obstacle to resolving their problems.

Founded on an alliance between the Al Saud family and descendants of 18th century preacher Mohammed ibn Abdul Wahhab, modern Saudi Arabia adopted an interpretation of Islam that is in many respects not dissimilar from that of the self-styled Islamic State (IS), the jihadist

group that controls a chunk of Syria and Iraq. The Wahhabis' jihadist and expansionist instincts have since dulled and its strict ulama or religious scholars class, has progressively compromised to accommodate the needs of the state and its rulers.

The question arises whether clerical accommodation of Saudi Arabia's rulers will give the government sufficient leeway to tackle the multiple challenges it confronts or whether the Faustian bargain needs to be restructured to a degree that the very legitimacy of the Al Saud is called into question.

The Saudi rulers repeatedly bump into Wahhabism as they move to reform the economy, seek to differentiate Saudi Arabia from IS, repair a tarnished international image, and ensure that the kingdom is not penalised for its four-decade old global funding of intolerant, anti-pluralistic Muslim communities in a bid to counter the revolutionary appeal of Iran. Moreover, the more the Saudi establishment ulama accommodates the state, the more it sparks militant critics who accuse it of deviating from the true path of Islam.

## An Unaffordable Risk

In its attempt to differentiate itself from IS, Saudi Arabia has positioned itself as a victim of jihadist violence, taking a tough stance in confronting jihadists at home and abroad with its commitment to introduce ground troops in Syria, and painting Iran as the source of violence and instability in the Middle East. The Saudi effort has been only partially successful.

The risk the kingdom runs is becoming evident in ever greater scrutiny of Wahhabi and Salafi communities across the globe as a result of jihadist attacks like the ones in Paris in November. For example two major Dutch political parties have asked the government whether there was a legal basis for the banning of Wahhabi and Salafi groups.

If enacted, such a ban would lead to the prohibition of funding such groups and could prompt the Dutch government to ask the kingdom to remove its attaché for religious affairs from the Saudi embassy in The Hague. Over the years, other countries, including the United States, have moved to curtail inroads made by Saudi-funded religious groups. Ultimately, Saudi Arabia cannot afford to be penalised for the communities it funds and that lend the Al Saud their legitimacy. “Saudi Arabia’s strategic vision is, to put it bluntly,

whatever is best for the ruling House of Saud,” said Saudi Arabia watcher Simon Henderson.

## No Immediate Alternative

Similarly, the government will have to free itself from the social restrictions imposed by Wahhabism to rationalise the Saudi economy, bring women fully into the workforce, shift the economy’s emphasis from the public to the private sector, and diversify away from a 90 percent reliance on oil revenues.

Restructuring the economy inevitably will involve renegotiation of the Al Saud’s bargain with the Wahhabis and the kingdom’s social contract in which the population surrendered political rights for cradle-to-grave economic benefits.

With an unemployment rate of 29 percent among Saudis aged 16 to 29 who account for two thirds of the population, the government faces daunting challenges at home and abroad at a time of imposed financial austerity. Indulging puritan Islam is a luxury it increasingly cannot afford. Perhaps, the greatest challenge the Al Saud face is what alternative there is to Wahhabism that will legitimise their continued absolute rule. No immediate alternative presents itself.

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# Islamic State: Muslims' Chance for Reformation?

*Islamic State (IS), previously known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), has shown nothing but destruction, chaos and sectarianism. Through terror strategies, they rapidly spread over great parts of eastern Syria and north and central Iraq. Their new recruits came from all over the world, but mainly from Islamic countries. Arab countries had the biggest share of recruits. While IS was assembling supporters and sympathizers, Sunni Clergymen constantly called for 'material and moral' support to the Syrian rebels, and accordingly, thousands of foreign fighters flooded into Syria for Jihad. But Why Could the Rise of the Islamic State Be a Chance for a Real Reformation of Islam?*

According to a Soufan Group research in 2014 on the foreign fighters in Syria, it is estimated that the highest number of foreign fighters came from Tunisia (about 3,000), Saudi Arabia (about 2,500), Morocco (about 1,500), Russia (about 800), France (700), Turkey and the United Kingdom (about 400 each). These numbers exclude the Syrians and Iraqis who are already in IS.

The Arab leaders of IS are Al-Bagdadi (in reference to Baghdad) in Iraq and later the Caliph of the Islamic State, and Al-Golani (In reference to the occupied region of Golan Heights) in Syria as the Emir of the Islamic state in Syria. Caliph literally means the 'successor' – the ruler of the Muslim Community whereas Emir means the 'prince' – a military commander and a governor of a province.

IS seems to have a clear and strategically advised ideological path. It should not be alien to Muslims, especially the political and religious elites that these teachings still exist in Islamic books, Friday prayer preaching, and even schoolbooks.

The ideology of IS is one of various interpretations of the principle books, the Quran and the Sayings and tradition of the prophet Mohammad. The Salafi-flavored IS actually represents a valid extension of fundamentalism in Arab societies. It is more a cultural and educational matter than a religious matter. Such an apocalyptic interpretation of Islam does not seem to be acceptable to the majority of Muslims.

The Supreme Imam of Al-Azhar University and Mosque, Ahmed Al-Tayeb said that the extremist groups who murder and slaughter under the name of the Islamic State represent neither Muslims nor Al-Azhar nor the prophet Mohammad and his teachings. The hideous deeds of these extremist groups repeatedly harm and distort the real message of Islam. Furthermore, the grand Mufti of Egypt Shawqi Alam said that naming a terrorist organization such as IS an Islamic state is a huge mistake. This organization speaks and acts against humane and religious teachings and the Sharia of Islam. Indeed, the World Association of Al-Azhar Graduates de-

clared the organization as un-Islamic and part of a conspiracy against the Muslim world – IS in the Middle East, Taliban in Asia and Boko Haram in Nigeria. Media outlets in the Arab world were flooded by news, explanations, and interpretations condemning the Islamic State calling it un-Islamic. Prominent Islamic scholars from different countries all over the world condemned the actions of IS and confirmed the message that IS is not related to Islamic teachings, but on the contrary it destroys Islam.

Now if IS members are not Islamic and are not true Muslims, then what are they? All their slogans are Islamic, and all their interpretations are Islamic. Actually on their flag it is written 'there is not God but Allah and the prophet Mohammad is his messenger.' IS could be a chance for a real Islamic reformation apart from conspiracy theories and apart from excluding such a terrorist organization from the realm of Islam. Most of IS recruits have come from Muslim countries, and to a greater extent from Arab countries. They mainly rose from Islamic societies and communities and studied in the same religious books at schools and universities. They went to the same mosques and they received the same religious messages as the rest of the community. They might actually be the sons, brothers, fathers, sisters and mothers of so-called moderate Muslims.

The shocking reality of the horrible actions and ruthless brutality of IS members should bring the attention to the real problem that Islam needs reformation and revivalism. It is not a matter of defending Islam, but rather offending it. Therefore, reformation could perhaps start from elementary school beginning

with religion books for kids to the highest forms of religious education. A reformation could start at mosques and at preaching sessions at Friday prayers to enforce tolerance and build towards peace. A reformation could also start when religious institutions in the Arab world and Muslim-majority countries stop interfering in politics on one hand and when political institutions stop co-opting religious institutions for power consolidation.

The rise of IS should be a wake-up call for Muslims all over the world. Muslims calling IS un-Islamic and it does not represent Islam does not seem to be enough for it, at least, does not stop newcomers from joining IS. Moreover, IS is Islamic as much as they claim they are. Reformation of religion is due; otherwise the world risks the emergence of organizations similar to IS in the near or far future. Describing IS as un-Islamic is apologetic and serves reality with nothing. It neither prevents the emergence of another hundred IS-like extreme organizations nor improves the image of Islam and Muslims. Real reform should start from scratch and every source, as decided by Islamic scholars, should be put under scrutiny and thorough study. The shocking fact is that IS emerged from an Arabic conflicting political context and it instrumentalises Islam for political ends and should be an awakening moment for those who call for the fusion between politics and the state. Compromising politics and dogmatic religion might result in a destruction of one of these two components. Either politics dominates and destroys religion or religion dominates and destroys politics. In the case of IS, politics is dominant over religion but the prominence of the latter serves the political cause of

IS – power, legitimacy and dominance. The choice of such a version of extremism serves IS well as they have no hesitancy in committing genocide to eliminate their opponents.

It is a chance for Muslims to encourage real reform. Islamic scholars should lead such a reformation far from politics and far from the divide of what is the right Islam and what is the wrong one. There must be a framework to lay down the first bricks in this long process. Political leadership must, in return, observe the process closely. It does not seem enough for Muslims to condemn a terrorist act and simply call it un-Islamic. There must be a real change and it should start now.

**Hakim Khatib**

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

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