

Mosaic



A Syrian Kurdish woman flashes a victory sign during the June 24, 2016 funeral of fighters who died in an attack against Islamic State forces. In the background, a martyrs memorial is under construction. DELIL SOULEIMAN/AFP/Getty Images.

MONTHLY ESSAY

July 2016

The Great Arab Implosion and Its Consequences

Who or what will replace a century of failed Sunni Arab dominance? What, if anything, can the West do to help shape the future?

By Ofir Haivry

In 2007, in a seminar room in Jerusalem, a day-long session was devoted to Israeli regional strategic perspectives. I was among the participants together with several other scholars, a former Israeli interior minister, a future Israeli defense minister, and two future Israeli ambassadors to the U.S. At a certain point, the talk turned to various

scenarios for the regional future and the opportunities or dangers each of these entailed for Israel. When the possible breakup and partition of Arab states like Iraq or Syria was raised, the near-unanimous response was that this was simply too fantastic a scenario to contemplate.

Now we live that scenario. The great Sunni Arab implosion that began with the 2011 “Arab Spring” was unforeseen in its suddenness, violence, and extent. But some, both inside and outside the Arab world, had long suspected that, sooner or later, a day of reckoning would indeed arrive. (Among Westerners, the names of Bernard Lewis and David Pryce-Jones come most readily to mind.) Today, those in the West who acknowledge this great collapse for what it is will be better able to face the emerging realities. But the first and most important step is to recognize that there is no going back.

I. Creating the Modern Middle East

The current mayhem in the Middle East displays so many moving parts as to obscure basic trends and processes. Events are multiple, alliances are fragile and fissiparous, and even with a scorecard it's often impossible to tell the players or to keep them apart.

Still, efforts have been made, by participants as well as by onlookers, to make sense of the whole. One such effort, prompted by the 2003 American invasion of Iraq and the toppling of Saddam Hussein, was mounted by King Abdullah of Jordan a little over a decade ago. In the power vacuum created by the U.S. action, Abdullah discerned the potential emergence of a “Shiite Crescent,” spearheaded by a newly energized Iran and extending in a hegemonic arc from Tehran northwest through Iraq to Syria and Lebanon (the latter courtesy of Iran's proxy Hizballah), and south all the way to Bahrain. In an update just this past January, a confidant of the Saudi royal family, referring to Iran-backed fighters in Yemen on the kingdom's southern border, upgraded the Shiite crescent to a “Shiite Full Moon.”

To be sure, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and other Sunni or Sunni-related powers, alarmed not only by Shiite aggression but also, if not more so, by America's withdrawal from the region, have been taking measures to fight back. But the very term “powers” in relation to these states has become a misnomer. For if there is a single prime mover of the dizzying kaleidoscope of events we have been witnessing in the last years, it is the crumbling of a century-old Sunni Arab regional order and, no less piercingly, the entire

worldview that upheld it. In a world where Sunnis vastly outnumber Shiites, this is a crisis of epic proportions.

Understanding the causes and the extent of this collapse is critical to thinking clearly about the political landscape that will emerge from the debris and how it may or may not be influenced by the actions of outside forces. For that purpose, a little history is in order.

The modern Middle East was created when Britain and France penciled new borders to replace the defeated Ottoman empire. Superseding the centuries-old Ottoman hegemony would be the hegemony of the Sunni Arabs.

The modern Middle East was created a century ago when the Sykes-Picot agreement between Britain and France, subsequently revised and supplemented, penciled new borders to replace the defeated Ottoman empire. Behind the particular lines in the sand delineating one or another concocted political entity stood one basic assumption: superseding the centuries-old Turkish hegemony would be the hegemony of the Sunni Arabs.

This assumption was put forward most explicitly in the 1915-16 correspondence between Sharif Hussein of Mecca and Sir Henry McMahon, the British high commissioner in Egypt. As Hussein described it, Britain would recognize a new Arab nation, or in his words “an Arab Caliphate of Islam,” dominated by the Arabic-speaking Sunnis who then as now formed a regional plurality and in some areas a distinct majority. These would come to dominate all non-Arab and non-Sunni groups in the core areas of the Mesopotamia-Levant crescent and the Arabian peninsula; later on, the North African littoral would be added. That position of dominance was in turn expected to be capable of repelling any incursions by geographically adjacent non-Arab powers like the Turks, the Persians, or the Ethiopians.

After World War I, this scheme led to the drawing of borders aimed at ensuring Sunni Arab predominance everywhere except for the two small enclaves of Jewish Palestine and Christian Lebanon. The borders put the overwhelmingly Kurd areas of northern Mesopotamia under Arab rule in Syria and Iraq; the Shiite Arab majorities around the Persian Gulf under the rule of Sunni or Sunni-related dynasties in Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia; the Christians of northern Mesopotamia and the southern Nile regions under the Muslim regimes of Syria, Iraq, and Sudan. An Arab identity was thus impressed on the region, complete with a founding myth of an original Sunni Arab

“Golden Age” running from Muhammad through the early caliphs to Muslim Spain, then derailed by evil Crusaders, heretical Shiites, and devious Turks, and now triumphantly restored.

In this narrative, identities other than the Sunni Arab one were to be regarded as aberrations from the ideal of the “Arab world.” There followed campaigns to impose a unified language on the whole region, erasing the teaching and use of the Kurdish, Berber, and Aramaic tongues and to dissolve Christian, Alawite, Druze, and Shiite identities into an Arab nationalist ideal, itself a somewhat secularized version of the Sunni Arab one.

Naturally, many in the region resented the wholesale obliteration of their culture and identity. But there were also some among the minorities who embraced it with relish, seeing in the Arabized vision of history a welcome parallel to what they regarded as the successful experiments in national integration practiced in Republican France and the Soviet Union. It was not incidental, for example, that most of the main figures behind the creation of the pan-Arab nationalist Ba’ath party were not Sunnis but rather Christians, Alawites, and Druze. The identification of Arab nationalism with the Sunni Arab golden age reached the point where the Hafez Assad regime in Syria would officially declare its own Alawite sect to be a part of mainstream Islam (which it certainly is not), and the otherwise secularist regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq would inscribe the Islamic invocation “Allahu Akbar” on the national flag.

Yet all such attempts at integration and nation-building failed miserably. After centuries of rule by Turkish overlords or European imperial satraps, no real Sunni Arab political tradition or ruling class existed anywhere. Dynasties exerting quasi-autonomous rule over some areas, like the Hashemites and Saudis in Arabia or the Alouites in Morocco, essentially presided over makeshift tribal coalitions rather than actual or embryonic states. A phrase attributed to the Egyptian diplomat Tahseen Bashir (1925-2002) put the matter pithily: “Egypt is the only nation-state in the Arab world; the rest are just tribes with flags.” But even Egypt, purportedly the exception to the rule, lacked an Arab political tradition or ruling class, having been founded in 1811 by an Albanian military dynasty that surrounded itself with largely non-Arab and non-Muslim functionaries and was propped up both militarily and financially by Britain.

After centuries of rule by Turkish overlords or European imperial satraps, no real Sunni Arab political tradition or ruling class existed anywhere.

Nor was this glum political landscape offset by any notable economic, social, or cultural assets. Almost everywhere, the majority comprised poor and illiterate subsistence farmers; in the few urban centers of significant trade or manufacturing, like Aleppo, Alexandria, and Algiers, the elites were preponderantly non-Sunni or non-Arab.

All of these evident shortcomings were pointed out at the time by many of those involved in setting up the new regional order. No less than François Georges-Picot himself described the Arabs as “a myriad of tribes”; Sir Arthur Nicholson, then-head of the British Foreign Office, similarly characterized them as “a heap of scattered tribes with no cohesion or organization.” For the most part, however, such views were set aside both by infatuated Western romantics like T.E. Lawrence “of Arabia” and by great-power calculators like Picot and Nicholson themselves. The latter, ignoring or suppressing the contrary evidence of their eyes, promoted a totally unrealistic picture of the benefits that the new dispensation was bound to confer upon these societies.

This is hardly to deny the existence of certain native writers, activists, thinkers, and journalists—dissidents, we might call them today—who agitated for modernizing, Westernizing, and liberalizing their societies, and who made up what some optimistically called the Arab “Renaissance” (*al-Nahda*). But they could hardly compensate for the inherent feebleness of political structures whose perdurance depended on outside powers mainly preoccupied with carving up the region into effective zones of influence.

II. The Pan-Arab Delusion

Between the end of World War I and the end of World War II, virtually all Arab “states” were either direct colonies of or effectively controlled by some European power. After World War II, as old-style colonial power waned and Arab regimes gained effective independence, their inherent debilities emerged even more starkly, leaving them reliant for survival upon cruel political repression or massive oil revenues, often buttressed with continuing great-power support in the now-updated form of the U.S. and the USSR.

Having neglected to foster political coalitions, intermediary institutions, and the growth of civil society in the years between the great wars, these regimes, even as they publicly adopted some version of the Arab nationalist ideology and pan-Arab identity, continued to rest either upon narrow tribal or sectarian loyalties (as in the case of the royal dynasties of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, plus North Africa), upon direct army rule

(Egypt since 1952, Sudan since 1969), or upon a combination of the two (Muammar Ghaddafi's Libya, Ali Abdullah Saleh's Yemen, Hafez Assad's Syria).

Even in those few locales where centuries of Ottoman or colonial rule had bequeathed a more open and diverse society, clan domination and military repression rapidly became the rule. Wave after wave of political oppression, economic expropriation, and religious persecution—the last conducted not by frenzied Islamists but by the ostensibly secular Gamal Abdel Nasser, Ghaddafi, Saddam, and the Algerian National Liberation Front—squeezed out the most dynamic and creative communities: Jews certainly, but also Armenians, Greeks, and populations of European descent as well as many other Christian groups. The inevitable result was the further impoverishment of social, cultural, and educational capital. The remaining non-Sunni Arabs—like the Egyptian Copts, Sudanese Christians, and Iraqi Shiites—were completely downtrodden, or else transformed themselves into quasi-military sects like the Alawites in Syria, the Kurds of Iraq, and the Shiites in Yemen and southern Lebanon.

As the 20th century progressed, Arabic-speaking societies actually lost ground relative to the world's other emerging regions save only sub-Saharan Africa. By the 1980s, the dirt-poor South Koreans and Taiwanese, without any significant local political traditions or natural resources, had successfully pulled themselves into the ranks of developed and democratic nations. By the 2000s, not only China and India but also Muslim-majority societies like Indonesia and Malaysia had made substantial strides in the same direction. Meanwhile, Algeria, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, beginning from a more advanced point than most of their Asian counterparts, were squandering endless opportunities and falling woefully behind. They stumbled into the 21st century completely exhausted, as well as economically and culturally bankrupt.

For all the profuse revenues gushing into their coffers, the oil-rich Arab countries patently failed to create even a single significant industry apart from the petroleum business.

As for the oil-rich Arab countries, for all the profuse revenues gushing into their coffers, they patently failed to create even a single significant industry apart from the petroleum business (itself largely Western-built and -operated), a single educational or research institution of note, a single admirable political or social experiment. Most of the oil revenue, moreover, went to funding extravagant lives for the ruling circle, pervasively inefficient and corrupt economic structures, and a gargantuan security apparatus aimed at crushing all internal dissent. With their populations veering increasingly

between inert acceptance of the massive government bribes thrown at them and the allure of moral regeneration in the form of blood-and-fire Islamism, these regimes, too, though still financially solvent, courted bankruptcy of one kind or another.

And the grand pan-Arabic identity? Without exception, its one sustaining focal point became hatred of Israel, portrayed by regimes across the region as the tiny pebble preventing the mighty Arab machine from functioning smoothly. Everywhere, regime failure was laid at the door of the “Zionist Entity.” In the Arab narrative (dutifully adopted by many in the West as well), the Jewish nation served as the main culprit and lightning-rod for the stubborn refusal of the great Arab project to ignite.

With the end of the cold war some 25 years ago, great-power involvement in the region began to retreat. The process was sealed with the election of Barack Obama in 2008, who as much as announced explicitly that the U.S. had no further stomach for boots on the sand—and a year later committed America to withdraw its military presence from Iraq by the end of 2011. In turn, this withdrawal played a central role in precipitating the explosion of the Arab Spring and its aftermath, including the consequent attempts by peripheral powers like Iran and Turkey to have a crack at regional domination, not to mention the recent re-entry of Russia, ever on the lookout for spoils, into an arena where it once held and then lost sway.

III. After the Arab Spring

On the eve of the 2011 Arab Spring, Arab regimes could be roughly divided into two main groups. The larger group comprised the self-styled Arab “republics,” from Algeria to Yemen and from Syria to Sudan, led in every case by a dictatorial strongman (usually a former general, sometimes with his son as co-regent), formally ruling by way of a secular party and ideology but actually representing clan or tribal loyalties. After enjoying their heyday in the 1960s and 70s, all such regimes had gradually become social and economic basket cases, politically sclerotic and mired in corruption and brutality.

The second grouping was the monarchies, even more uniformly tribal in nature, their legitimacy propped up either by alleged descent from the prophet Muhammad (the kings of Morocco and Jordan) or by oil revenues sustaining a mercenary army and a massive welfare system (the Gulf sheikhdoms). In the Saudi case, these were augmented by the self-conferred title of “guardian of Islam’s two holiest cities.”

Long before 2011, widespread simmering resentment and opposition were making themselves felt among non-Arab and non-Sunni groups from the Berbers of North Africa to the Kurds in northern Mesopotamia.

Long before 2011, widespread simmering resentment and opposition were making themselves felt among non-Arab and non-Sunni groups from the Berbers of North Africa to the Kurds in northern Mesopotamia. And there was internal Arab opposition as well, to both republics and monarchies. This tended to be mainly Islamist in ideology, and was itself roughly divided between a populist version and a literalist version. In the 1980s and 90s, both would foment serious armed insurgencies in places like Syria and Algeria, though they never succeeded in toppling existing Arab governments.

The populist challenge was led by the Muslim Brotherhood, which consistently won every (partially) open election ever held in an Arabic-speaking country. Repeatedly it reached the threshold of power in Egypt, Algeria, and Jordan, only to be violently crushed by the regime. But in the early 21st century its fortunes began to turn. Hamas, a local branch of the Brotherhood, successfully wrested control of Gaza from the Palestinian Authority, and the Brotherhood also came to enjoy the strategic support of Qatar, the minuscule but fabulously wealthy oil sheikhdom intent on buying insurance from Islamist threats at home by funding Islamists abroad.

The other, seemingly minor Islamist challenge arose from groups usually identified as Salafist. These advocated an austere literalist interpretation of 7th-century Islam that made Brotherhood-style Islamism look liberal by comparison. Lacking any interest in politics and elections, the Salafists instead tend to hold a highly hierarchical view of society, placing at the top an undisputed Emir or, ideally, the all-Muslim Caliph.

Numerically small, but ruthlessly efficient in meting out violence and chaos, the Salafist current was composed of many competing groups, of which the most famous in the first decade of this century was al-Qaeda. Bereft of state sponsorship after 2001, when the U.S. toppled the Taliban regime of Afghanistan, Salafist Islamism nevertheless continued to enjoy the private support of many wealthy Arabs who regarded it as a rebooted version of the fanatical Wahhabi Islam of early Saudi Arabia (allegedly diluted by decades of power-sharing with the corrupt Saudi dynasty). In time, a virtually unknown sub-group, originally named al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Levant, would swiftly outpace its predecessor, rising to Islamist superstardom first under the brand of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and later as Islamic State or IS, period.

During the two decades preceding 2011, successive developments in Somalia, Iraq, and Sudan should have served as warning signs of the fundamental fragility of Arab states.

In Somalia, the 1991 fall of strongman Siad Barre was followed by internecine warfare that resulted in the eventual collapse of central authority, leaving the country hopelessly divided, to this day, between clans and militias.

In Iraq, the American invasion of 2003 succeeded in ousting Saddam and the Baath regime. But since nothing resembling a stable and unified Iraqi state ever existed or could be assembled to replace them, the country soon became effectively partitioned into three ethno-religious zones: Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish.

In Sudan, after a series of disastrous internal conflicts, the strongman Omar El-Bashir averted total collapse only by acquiescing in early 2011 to the spin-off of the oil-rich southern third of the country as independent, Christian-majority South Sudan. The remaining Sudanese state, although now almost wholly Muslim, barely survives after a genocidal conflict between the Arabic-speaking eastern parts of the country and the non-Arabic-speaking populations of the western regions of Darfur and Kordofan.

So powerful was the grip of the “Arab” myth on most minds that the many warning signs went unheeded. When the day of reckoning did arrive in 2011, it exploded spectacularly.

So powerful, however, was the grip of the “Arab” myth on most minds inside and outside the region that these and other signs went unheeded. When the day of reckoning did arrive in 2011, it exploded swiftly and spectacularly, as local demonstrations turned into political chaos.

At first, each regional Arab group attempted to confront the challenge on its own terms, believing it could not only weather the storm but come out on top. From Saudi Arabia to Syria, many Arab regimes, even while confronted with growing dissent at home, proved eager to fan the flames of conflicts elsewhere, including in neighboring states; soon enough, however, they reaped the whirlwind at home, with localized conflicts coalescing into a regional crisis. As one regime after another became dangerously destabilized or collapsed, a domino effect developed that would gradually finish off, forever, the whole Sunni Arab order.

The first domino to fall, with a spectacular thud, was the largest: the demise of most of the so-called Arab “republics” in which dwelled the vast majority of Arabic-speakers. In

Somalia and Iraq, as we have seen, both regime and state had disintegrated in the 1990s and 2000s. Within two years of 2011, they were joined by the collapse of regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen—in the last two cases, pulverizing the country in the process. In Syria, the Assad regime now survives only as an Alawite rump in the western third of the country thanks to massive Iranian and Russian intervention, with the rest of the state shredded by warring factions.

Only two old-style “republics” endure today: Algeria and Sudan. Neither is much more than a hollow shell, having barely outlasted the civil wars of the 1990s and 2000s at the cost of hundreds of thousands dead (and the partition of Sudan). They are now rickety barrack states, economically bankrupt, devoid of any coherent ideological justification and constantly on the brink of terminal collapse

Two further regimes on the “republican” model still stand in Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority (PA), but these have long been more semi-autonomous entities than real states, and are themselves effectively partitioned: Lebanon since the 1970s among various sects, the PA since 2007 between Hamas-ruled Gaza and the Abbas-ruled areas of the West Bank.

That leaves Tunisia and Egypt, the two places where breakdown has not led to complete state disintegration. Both are now desperately attempting to revive the old system.

Tunisia, encouraged by its small size and overall uniform population, went out on a limb with the first real attempt at Arab democracy. It has held two successive and relatively free elections—by regional standards, an enormous political success. But with corruption rampant and the economy in the doldrums, the country remains extremely unstable and permanently on the verge of renewed unrest.

Egypt went the opposite way: the army initially allowed free parliamentary and presidential elections, which ended by replacing the decrepit Mubarak regime with the Muslim Brotherhood. A military coup headed by General Sisi was then staged in 2013. Built on little more than fear and loathing of the Brotherhood, the Sisi regime is mired in contradictions and virtually bankrupt, making it precariously dependent on foreign financial backing as well as the personal appeal of its president. If (or rather, when) one of these fails, the country will swiftly plunge into renewed chaos.

In short, no Arab “republic” is now stable enough to be confident of survival for more than a couple of years.

In short, no Arab “republic” is now stable enough to be confident of survival for more than a couple of years.

The next domino is the Arab monarchies. Less identified with Arab nationalism and better positioned to appeal to the sensibilities of devout Muslims, these outlasted the first onslaught of the 2011 crisis but at the price of increased internal discord. In Morocco, the king had to concede a share in governance to the local Muslim Brotherhood, and sooner or later the two are headed for a showdown; meanwhile, a revolt led by the Polisario Front is simmering in the western Sahara, which Morocco has occupied since 1975. In Jordan, which is now flooded with Iraqi and Syrian refugees and faces growing Islamist unrest, the king endures only by virtue of massive Saudi and Western aid. Most smaller monarchies, from Kuwait to the UAE, wouldn't last a fortnight without Saudi military and political backing, and in Bahrain the regime withstands Shiite restiveness only through the direct deployment of Saudi troops.

Which brings us to Saudi Arabia itself, the linchpin and most potent of the monarchies. The Saudis, still heavily influenced by their centuries-old alliance with Wahhabi fanaticism, at first believed the regional crisis could actually work to increase their power, and therefore bankrolled Islamist insurgents in Libya, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. They soon discovered that their Islamist clients not only failed to advance but in most cases fell prey to even harder-line Islamist factions aligned with al-Qaeda or IS. The effort left the Saudis both overstretched abroad and facing turmoil at home, the latter including rebelliousness in the kingdom's Shiite-majority regions and the attraction of many Saudi Sunnis to al-Qaeda and IS. More recently, a bumbling military intervention against the Shiite Houthis in neighboring Yemen has led to increasing friction with Iran and intensified repression of the Shiite population at home.

The apparent solidity of the Arab monarchies is thus very much a façade. All are reeling from shock, even as the oil revenues on which they have traditionally relied to finance the massive bribery of their populations have been drastically depleted by the recent fall in prices.

The third domino is the populist-Islamist regimes and movements, which fully expected not only to benefit from the 2011 uprisings against the republics and monarchies but indeed to take over. At first, that certainly seemed possible. In Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, the Brotherhood won majorities or pluralities in relatively free elections; in Yemen, it formed part of the coalition replacing the Saleh regime; in Syria, Brotherhood-aligned groups led the anti-Assad insurgency. Gradually however,

problems accrued on all fronts. In Yemen the post-Saleh regime was ousted by Shiite Houthi rebels; in Syria the anti-Assad forces came to be dominated by Salafist militias; in Libya the state fractured into several pieces, with the Brotherhood-dominated government controlling only the western third around the capital of Tripoli; and in Tunisia a Brotherhood-inspired party only precariously dominated the government until being ousted in 2014. As for Egypt, the Brotherhood's glittering prize, the government led by Mohammad Morsi was toppled, as we've seen, after a scant year in power, and the ferocious repression that followed has crushed the movement, at least temporarily.

So the populist Islamists are also reeling everywhere. Their main sponsors, Turkey and Qatar, are themselves facing internal failure and are beleaguered by rising Iranian influence. Abandoning the drive to install Brotherhood regimes, they appear instead to be closing ranks with the monarchies in a last-ditch Sunni grand coalition—about which, more below.

Fourth come the Salafist Islamists, seemingly the greatest beneficiaries of the general collapse. To many Sunni Arabs, indeed, this is the only force capable of defending them from the Kurds, Shiites, and Christians who have lately risen against their erstwhile oppressors. Despite recent losses, Islamic State still straddles the deserts of eastern Syria and western Iraq, with smaller “provinces” in the Sinai desert and in central Libya; for their part, al-Qaeda-aligned Islamists head rebel-held regions in northern and southern Syria as well as eastern Yemen.

The Salafists' rise is in truth a rearguard action. Instead of bringing about the promised empire stretching from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean, they are successful only in the most homogeneous Sunni Arab zones.

But behind these local military successes, the Salafists' rise is in truth a rearguard action. Instead of bringing about the promised Sunni Arab empire stretching from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean, they are successful only in the most homogeneous Sunni Arab zones: usually, desert areas populated by tribes. By contrast, northern Syria and Iraq are now solidly controlled by anti-Islamist Kurds, southern Iraq is now a Shiite country, as is northern Yemen, and the western and southern regions of Syria are now rapidly approaching the status of, respectively, Alawite and Druze quasi-states. Even the Christians and Yazidis of northern Mesopotamia are carving out autonomous areas of their own.

Indeed, some Sunni Arab tribesmen, fearful of being overrun by Kurds and Shiites when the Islamists are ousted, are now lobbying the U.S. for aid in setting up a new Sunni Arab state that would supposedly unite western Iraq with eastern Syria and perhaps join with Jordan. Whatever one may make of such a scheme, which in effect relinquishes Sunni control over most of Mesopotamia and the Levant in favor of a homogeneous “Sunnistan” in the interior deserts, it signals the utter failure of the Salafist domino to bring deliverance to Arab Sunnis.

IV. Mapping the Future

If a Sunni Arab collapse of colossal proportions is under way, what then will replace the former regional system? In truth there are several contenders, but it will be some time before it is possible to see clearly the shape of things to come.

As mentioned early on, peripheral regional powers have been positioning themselves to enter the fray. One of them is Turkey, where the AKP party, a local version of populist Islamism, came to power in 2002. Sensing inherent Arab weakness and the power vacuum created by American (and, for a time, Russian) pullback from the region, Turkish national strategy was gradually redirected from its European orientation toward the sometimes explicitly articulated aim of replacing the Sunni Arab system with one—aptly dubbed “Neo-Ottoman”—in which Ankara would function as the new regional hegemon.

But Turkey increasingly seems to have bitten off more than it can chew. Far from successfully projecting power abroad, it is choking on the region-wide strife it has inadvertently introduced into its own home. Its populist-Islamist allies have been routed all across the Middle East, and even in nearby Syria the rebel groups it backed are in tatters while those it targeted for defeat now contemplate meting out vengeance inside Turkey proper. Meanwhile, the Kurds have established autonomous areas on Turkey’s doorstep in northern Syria and Iraq, and Kurdish unrest in southeastern Turkey itself is now dangerously close to a boiling point, bringing Ankara to the edge of civil war.

A no less and possibly more significant player is Iran, which ever since 1979, under its own Shiite brand of populist Islamism, has repositioned itself as a main contender for regional domination. Carefully cultivating downtrodden Shiite populations across the Middle East, Iran has successfully replaced their former Arab allegiances with a Shiite sectarian one. A pointed illustration of this shift is the recent report that Iran-supported Iraqi Shiite militiamen assaulting the IS-held Sunni Arab city of Fallujah had

plastered their artillery shells with the name of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, the prominent Shiite Saudi cleric executed earlier this year by the Saudi regime.

Today, the Iranian regime's tentacles are to be seen everywhere from Yemen's Houthis (who actually belong to a different Shiite sub-sect) to Sunni populist organizations like Hamas, which it assists in anti-Israeli aggression. But the main Iranian effort has been directed at establishing Shiite hegemony in Iraq and Lebanon. If successful, this, combined with a strategic alliance with Alawite-controlled Syria, would indeed create the "Shiite Crescent" across Mesopotamia and the Levant feared by Jordan's King Abdullah, driving a stake through the heart of the Arab world and establishing Tehran's undisputed dominion from the Indian Ocean to the shores of the Mediterranean.

And success is by no means impossible: Iran's military buildup, including its growing nuclear-threshold infrastructure, is today abetted by Russia—and, if opposed by the U.S. at all, only in the most desultory fashion. With the U.S. out of the great game, with Tehran's Shiite allies on the rise in Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, and with the Syrian regime its virtual puppet, Iran has seemed to many unstoppable.

With the U.S. out of the great game, with Tehran's Shiite allies on the rise in Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, and with the Syrian regime its virtual puppet, Iran has seemed to many unstoppable. But has it, too, overreached?

But is it really unstoppable—or has it, too, overreached? Iran's dominance in Syria is now threatened by Bashar Assad's deft embrace of the Russians, who have been only too happy to reciprocate. Meanwhile, direct Iranian involvement in so many of the ongoing regional conflicts has ignited an all-out Sunni backlash that could be very costly to combat. If a new administration in Washington should entertain second thoughts about abandoning the Middle East, even modest support to select anti-Iranian groups might easily ensnare Teheran and sap its already overextended resources.

One might also mention a third peripheral power, as yet far weaker than the first two. That is Christian-dominated Ethiopia, only lately emerging from the disastrous effects of decades of Communist rule. So far much less ambitious than either Turkey or Iran, Ethiopia has nevertheless gone a long way toward securing ascendance over its disintegrating Sunni neighbors of Sudan, Somalia, and tiny but strategically placed Djibouti, a formal member of the Arab League that controls the southern entrance to the Red Sea. Ethiopia's gigantic Renaissance dam now being built on the Blue Nile is

making downriver Sudan and Egypt completely dependent on upriver goodwill for the continued flow of vital waters. Egypt, formerly the regnant power in northeastern Africa, is now so weak that it cannot but bend to Ethiopian demands.

The one other significant—highly significant—power in the Middle East is Israel. As warring Arab groups concentrate on killing each other, Israel has mostly been sitting on the sidelines. Hardly anxious to expose itself needlessly to knee-jerk international condemnation for its alleged propensity to use “disproportionate” force, it engages in tactical strikes only when it identifies a clear and present danger. How long it will be able to maintain this posture without harming its strategic interests is as yet unclear.

What about the remaining Sunni powers? As hinted above, they are desperately trying to regroup by closing ranks and seeking outside assistance wherever they can find it. Saudi Arabia, the only major Arab country that is still solvent though bogged down on multiple fronts, has conceived a grand Sunni alliance. Formally declared last December, the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFIT) consists of a coalition of 30-something countries, with the poorer ones supposed to supply the manpower while the oil sheikhdoms supply the funds.

In reality, however, there remain virtually no Arab countries capable of seriously contributing to the effort. For obvious reasons, Iraq and Syria have not been invited to join; Egypt has signed up, but, with Cairo still unsuccessful even at putting down an Islamist resurgence in Sinai, its contribution is mainly symbolic; Algeria, the lone surviving old-style “republican” regime, has opted out; and the “governments” of Yemen and Libya represent at best a fragment of the nations they allegedly rule.

The Saudis have tried to compensate for the missing Arabs by recruiting non-Arab Sunni African and Asian nations as well as Turkey and Qatar, erstwhile main sponsors of Islamist populism now scrambling to stop the forces they have helped to unleash. Even a decade ago, it would have been unthinkable, from the point of view of Arab honor, for Pakistanis, Turks, and Africans to be substituting for most major Arab countries in what is essentially a last-ditch attempt to save the Arab world from self-immolation. Even the fact that the coalition was created under a Sunni rather than an Arab banner acknowledges the crumbling of Arab identity.

Even a decade ago, it would have been unthinkable for Pakistanis, Turks, and Africans to be substituting for most major Arab countries in what is essentially a last-ditch attempt to save the Arab world from self-immolation.

And it should be clear by now that IMAFT's chances of success are pretty much non-existent. Billed as a Sunni version of NATO, it is nothing more than a ramshackle parody, with nothing like either the resources or the resolve needed to create a common strategy or common action. Nor, ultimately, is anyone on the Sunni periphery of Africa and Asia willing to commit the manpower necessary to join the wars of the Arabs.

And war is what it would all come down to: war against Iran and its Shiite proxies around the region, against Russian intervention and Kurdish separatism, against Islamist and tribal groups ripping apart even wholly Sunni areas; war in Iraq and Syria, in Yemen and Libya, in Somalia and Sudan, and, perhaps sooner than later, war also in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon.

To fight and die in such godforsaken battlefields, only to prop up hopeless regimes like the house of Saud in Riyadh and the military clique in Cairo? Not an alluring prospect. Ironically, the only pan-Islamic Sunnis ready to serve the Sunni cause, regardless of odds, are the most resolute enemies of the existing Sunni regimes: that is, the militant Islamist groups like al-Qaeda and IS whose international recruits, from as far away as Paris, Chechnya, and China's Muslim west, are killing and being killed in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen.

V. Options

Iraq, Syria, and Yemen have been partitioned, and Lebanon has long been de-facto partitioned. Libya will be partitioned if it is lucky, or, if not, it will follow Somalia into chaos. Saudi Arabia could be next, and so could Algeria.

To repeat: what will replace the old order? An Iranian hegemony is possible, but obviously unsafe and highly undesirable. A revamped Sunni Arab dominance is unlikely, as it would need to be established by a gigantic bloodbath and would be even more unstable than an Iranian order. Some kind of Islamist dominance is even less likely and even less desirable. Overflowing chaos for generations is a distinct possibility. But it does not have to be inevitable.

Curiously enough, within all the regional chaos and desuetude, another reality, largely ignored, is already emerging and reshaping the Middle East, redrawing the regional power balances and eventually the maps. This is the rise of newly armed, self-governing nations and tribes.

Within all the regional chaos, another reality is already emerging: the rise of newly armed, self-governing nations and tribes.

Whatever dominant powers, if any, emerge out of the current regional turbulence, they will have to deal with a de-facto Kurdistan possessing the largest undefeated armed force between Jerusalem and Tehran; with an Alawite-dominated western Syria unwilling to risk any reunion with the Sunni-dominated eastern provinces; with a consolidated Shiite southern Iraq; with an increasingly autonomous Druzistan in southern Syria; with a Yemen redivided into de-facto northern Shiite and southern Sunni countries; with Libya's historical provinces of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania recreating their old division; with the possibility, as suggested above, of the Sunni tribes of western Syria and eastern Iraq coalescing into a desert Sunnistan with or without IS. Not to mention similar developments clearly brewing in Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Lebanon, and Jordan, as well as among the Berbers of Algeria and of course the Kurds of Turkey and Iran.

And what would all this entail for Western interests and for the regional policy of the U.S. (should it wish to have an active one)? There is no point in dreaming any longer of a grand deal with Iran, or of rebooting the good old days with Turkey, let alone resuscitating an Arab hegemony led by Egypt and the Saudis. As with the huge, decades-long effort by Great Britain to prop up the Ottoman empire, finally blasted in World War I, so with the increasingly forlorn effort by the U.S. to save the Sunni Arab regional order from collapsing, now finally revealed as a road to nowhere. One might as well attempt to restore the Balkans to the Habsburg empire or the Ottoman fold, or to resuscitate Yugoslavia.

With artificial regimes and borders gone, people in the region seek protection and solidarity in the old identities that have survived the Arab reverie: their nation, their religion, their tribe. These are the only building blocks upon which a new and stable system can be founded. The process will be long, complex, and fraught with difficulty, but it offers a prospect of strategic as well as moral coherence. A region redrawn along lines of actual self-definition would give voice to the communities on the ground that will become invested in its success and work for its stability.

For Western observers and policy makers, the principle should be to look with appropriately cautious favor on significant groupings that possess their own voice and some degree of self-government, while ensuring that in the event of their political defeat, they will not be exterminated—which is far more than any of the Arab world's

political systems ever offered anyone. Some of these groupings will evolve into robust independent nations, others into weak federal states or new tribal confederations. Some, cherishing the opportunity, will build thriving and prosperous democracies, and perhaps even become natural allies of the West and Israel. Others will undoubtedly, yet again, waste their opportunities, devolving into another round of petty and corrupt tribal entities—though with the advantage to themselves of ethnic and religious cohesiveness and to outsiders of being too small to entertain dreams of internal or external genocide. In the Middle East, again, not such a bad outcome.

Might there also be, one day, a new regional alliance truly similar to NATO or ASEAN in which, with the blessing and support of the U.S., Israel would be joined by all existing or newly independent entities willing to commit themselves to democracy and free markets, serving as a cornerstone for regional stability and prosperity? A shaky prospect at the moment, to say the least, and, assuming it even gets off the ground, a shaky enterprise to hold together. But so was NATO to begin with, until eventually the dividends of democracy and capitalism paid off.

Explore: [Arab Spring](#) [Iran](#) [Iraq](#) [Middle East](#) [Politics & Current Affairs](#) [Syria](#)

About the Author

Ofir Haivry, an Israeli historian and political theorist, is vice-president of the Herzl Institute in Jerusalem and the author of *John Selden and the Western Political Tradition* (Cambridge). He served as chairman of the Public Advisory Committee for Examining Israel's Approach regarding Worldwide Communities with Affinity to the Jewish People, appointed by Israel's ministry of Diaspora affairs.

[More From Ofir Haivry](#)