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Arriving at Singularity

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The Middle East has changed; it faces a period of abiding unpredictability

“**T**he one thing the Americans had to get right was not to conflate the defeat of the jihadists with the defeat of Sunnis in the public mind.”

I wrote that line a year ago. It was premised on what the jihadists had been projecting about themselves: that they were protectors of Sunnis, namely in Iraq and Syria, and more generally, that they were the redeemers of Sunnidom. That the jihadist enterprise would bring back a sense of dignity and purpose to the heirs of a once great civilization, since brought low

by the connivance of turncoats with malignant foreign agendas. It is a compelling argument, replete with floridly-argued reasoning and symbolism. It also stands on firm footing, for it plays up existing narratives of victimhood and conspiracy. The jihadists suggested a shortcut through historical progression with the promise of reversing it. Inspired by the past, they offered a blueprint for what the future would look like, while audaciously making the case that peoples once great deserved to be great again. They were visionaries making great sacrifices on behalf of Muslims everywhere, facing down colossal odds, and lifted up by divine grace. Theirs was a revolution with a strategy as grand as the stakes: the resurrection of the caliphate. In 2014, they came close to their goal. Many enemies mobilized against them. But any setbacks were temporary and explained away as the Divine testing the purity and resolve of His devotees. The ultimate victory would arrive in phases as Sunnis came back, in bigger and bigger numbers, to what the jihadists were offering. There was no other way. The danger to Sunnidom was existential. Either Sunnis would muster the civilizational wherewithal to take control of their destinies, or their progeny would be subjugated by their oppressors—the armies of Christendom, the Jews, local potentates, the Shias, etc.



[N. Kazimi, Civil War 3, 2014, 36" x 48"]

The grand narrative underwriting the grand strategy of the jihadists went unmatched by the coalition of local and international forces confronting the Islamic State.

That one thing—convincing the larger body of Middle Eastern Sunnis that the collapse of the jihadist ‘caliphate’ is not a measure of their own collective ineffectualness—has been botched. The bungling began during the Obama years, but the beginning of the Trump presidency held the promise that a good enough, and a fast enough, remedy could be attempted in the final stretch of the current phase of the jihadist challenge, epitomized by the ability of the Islamic State to control a major Middle Eastern city for the last three years. That promise, though, has been squandered. You would have missed it had you blinked. It was lost when Trump’s inaugural overseas trip instead of offering a sense of purpose to Sunni populations resulted in some meek measures concerning terror financing and the establishment of a propaganda center.

Optics matter. Timing matters. The narratives we weave, matter. By every metric, if the aim was to convey a sense of Sunni empowerment, then very little was achieved over the last few weeks. We can find no solace in believing that it is still early in the administration’s term; that better policies shall be arrived at with time and experience. There were already ten years on the clock, and the opportunity, showing up as unexpectedly as Trump’s election, will prove fleeting. There are no do-overs. Those living through the events that portend tragedies seldom understand that what they are witnessing amounts to a last chance. I don’t know what the ramifications will be; the broken Sunni communities in Iraq are too exhausted and are consequently unlikely to host more turmoil. I’m not sure the same can be said about Syria, and certainly there’s ample dry powder strewn about elsewhere in the region—as one observer put it to me recently—for mischief to catch fire. The little math we can do demonstrates that it has become exceedingly difficult to plot out what comes next. Accepting this realization should compel us to think anew about the region.

Or we can cross our fingers and hope that the vision on offer by the jihadists had few takers because it was fundamentally implausible in the eyes of their target audience. Maybe regular Sunnis are not that worked up about their place in the world. Maybe sectarianism is not that potent of a motivator. Maybe most people just want to get on with their lives. After all, if the jihadist message was so compelling, how come the larger region did not catch fire? Why didn’t the millions who ended up under jihadist rule fight to the last man, woman and child in defense of ‘their’ caliphate?

I do not have plausible answers to these questions. I just know that the jihadists are rational strategists. I could see how the message they crafted for the Middle East was resonant and powerful. The jihadist vision was left for dead a few times before, but came back. Each time bigger. So why didn’t it tip the scales into permanence this time? Maybe it was too bold,

too quick, too shocking. But what if the next time around the conditions are different, and while the jihadist message remains unchanged, the receptivity of their audiences and their willingness to act changes? Have the forces arrayed against the jihadists a grand strategy of their own that matches the magnitude of jihadist ambition? Absolutely not. I envy those who can live with such odds, who can insouciantly shrug at such uncertainty.

With the liberation of Mosul a few days ago it is time to take stock of where things stand: the opportunities missed, the defects in methodology, the lay of the land. We can expect a widening bifurcation between two camps engaged in a debate about the region's future. One is likely to call the challenge posed by jihadism largely over. The opposing camp will argue that it is far from over. I count myself in the latter. The impasse forming between the temptation to over-celebrate and the temptation to over-agonize will devolve into ecumenical squabbling, with a dose of ad hominem sniping. Lost in the din is the lamentable fact that we have arrived at this point bereft of a good-enough plan, and we are proceeding forth without much of one, never mind a strategy. It will be difficult to rise above the noise, to reflect, and to accurately understand what we are seeing. Harder still is quantifying what 'far from over' may actually entail. I am here to argue that it is too late for 'good-enough plans' that can keep uncertainty manageable. Even if by some miracle a grand strategy is adopted by world and regional powers, I see little use for it. The unprecedented levels of uncertainty before us will prove too unwieldy. The die is cast. The approaches responsible for getting us to this point must be identified clearly. Their redundancies within the debate should be settled. It is amazing what a few weeks can portend on the timelines of history. Such a portentous stretch of time had just passed us by. And even if I fail at describing what the implications of that are, I sense, in my gut, that they are terrifying. If there is to be a way to fix this, then it must be civilizational in scope and ambition. Middle Easterners need to fundamentally re-engineer their societies, economies and cultures. America can help to guide the process, and to tip the scales when necessary. Anything short of that is too uncertain of an outcome from this point on. The two camps of the debate must answer for just how much uncertainty they are willing to live with.

Trump's style, had it been coupled with an actual strategy, could have garnered significant dividends. It could have made up for lost time, and previously wasted opportunities. The signs were very promising in the days leading up to his meeting with President Erdogan on May 16, a meeting that was to be followed by the trip to Saudi Arabia. I believed that the ducks had lined up: Trump would get the Turks and the Saudis, the pretenders to regional Sunni leadership nowadays, to do the heavy lifting in Syria through direct military intervention against the Islamic State. To my mind, better the Turks and Saudis, as well as the Jordanians, Emiratis, and Egyptians in tow, being directly embroiled in the Syrian war—a war already regionalized and internationalized by the Iranians and the Russians—than continuing an open-ended, leverage-obsessed war by proxy, as Syria had been witnessing for the last six years. If the

collective balls of these regional powers are on the line, so to speak, with their own soldiers, legitimacy and national prestige at stake, then they would be far more interested in a quick, reasonable settlement to the conflict. Such a widening or rather a focusing of a high-stakes geostrategic competition would also serve to quickly disabuse the Iranians and the Asads of the notion that this war could end with an unambiguous victory for their side.

Having the Turks and Saudis delivering the *coup de grace* to the Islamic State places a Sunni face among the vanquishers of the jihadists. It was not the most elegant or the grandest of strategies, but at least it is one. It also had a good-enough chance of accomplishing its goals. There are no other candidates—such as local Arab Sunnis in Syria who are not merely a paler shade of jihadist, like the ones the U.S. had been trying to vet and stand-up for years—that may be readied to play that role within the time frame remaining for mopping up the Euphrates Valley of the last overt remnants of the Islamic State's control, certainly not now with the Iranians and their proxies making a dash for it. The strategy had the added benefit of not overly-deploying U.S. troops into that warzone, leaving them exposed as ready targets to whoever wants to make a geopolitical point.

The hegemon that is an America led by Donald Trump need not be popular overseas in order to be transformative in foreign policy. Regular Middle Easterners may not like Trump, but they are intrigued by his story, as much of the world is, and they are paying attention. My conversations around the region may not be generally indicative, but they do indicate possibility. When discussing Trump, I picked up on an impression that many of my Iraqi interlocutors, for example, understand Trump as a *naghal* ('bastard')—not to be mean that he was born out of wedlock, but rather that he is a brawler, and a devious hustler. In their minds, Trump would become the alpha among a pack of brawling, devious hustlers trying to control the region, and that he would come out swinging on his first debut. He may be a polarizing figure, but with polarization comes clarity, and what the region needs most is a measure of clarity, for a convincing dénouement to regain control of a narrative that had gone way off script. If only he would leverage that persona as part of a plan. If only the crafters of policy around him could lay out a plot befitting such a protagonist. Sadly, they lacked the depth to take measure of the arena and the audience within in, to understand the man taking the stage, to understand his moment, and to match him with an epochal role enacted to the tune of a symphonic score. The Trump show was rushed to stage without an overture for a would-be doctrine. A grand strategy had not been prepared.

Trump took his showmanship and exuberance to the Middle East and one could sense the palpable intensity of a starting thrust; there were optimistic expectations that an energized America would re-assert its primacy after Obama had let it lapse. This was to be a grand spectacle, months in the making. It aimed big. I [anticipated it weeks before](#) it was announced. Back in March, I asked: "Can [Trump] succeed in reshuffling the deck and dealing out a new

hand?" I watched the lead-up. I was excited. I, like many, truly believed that this was the moment at which we could rein in the darker trajectories of the region. Dozens of Muslim leaders were to gather. Hushed talk of an 'Islamic NATO' taking the fight to the jihadists gained currency. But then, in the last ten day stretch before Trump was to travel, anxiety and reservation seeped in among policy planners, and an ambitious plan for Syria was scaled back drastically. We were then left with the worst possible outcome: the American-led camp losing its nerve, while the Iranians and the Russians were watching.

The Riyadh summit yielded some communiques concerning terror financing and a photo-op with a glowing orb. Plans to bring together an Islamic fighting force were spoken of, but it wouldn't be operational for at least another year. A later dividend manifested itself as a rebuke of Qatar. These are slim pickings. One does not take the greatest global show (the Trump show) on the road, lining up all these opening acts for it, with the Saudis spending lavishly on choreography, and then ending up with these under-achievements, falling short of the ambition to resolve the Syrian civil war, and to provide the kind of feel-good optics showcasing the mobilization of Sunni powers in a significant manner to destroy a rogue Sunni caliphate.

This wasn't merely an opportunity missed: after all, how many times will Trump get to make a grand entrance into the region? The curtains have fallen. The time for roping in a few 'credible' Sunni faces, even if it was for the benefit of the cameras and only to propagate a narrative of significant Sunni enrolment against the caliphate, was already running out. Trump claims to be flexible when it comes to foreign policy, and he may yet order erratic course corrections if realities don't match the expectations projected by his advisors. But will there be time for that? I don't see it. It is my sense that time, energy and opportunity were squandered, and such profligacy is irreversible. If all those gathered leaders in Riyadh—a unique setting by any measure—did not have the wherewithal to think quickly and boldly on Syria at this time, given what we know about the trends that are shaping up as this phase comes to a close, namely that this phase may end with the bitter after taste of continuing Sunni resentment at their lot in the world, then that in and of itself is an indicator that all other aspects and attempted fixes will get fumbled. Worse still, in Sunni eyes, this phase may end with the Iranians howling and snickering as they claim victory. This story began with the Iranians watching the Trump presidency with trepidation. One could hear them shaking in their boots from a distance at the political gossip mills of Baghdad and Najaf, which provide listening posts into the deepest labyrinths of the Iranian power structure. Two months ago, the Iranians were at a loss to explain what Trump represented, assuming the worst for their prospects in the shadow of his tenure. The Iranians must now be amused by how things panned out. Therein lies another strategic slip-up: the larger plan for the Middle East—an important facet of which would be to rollback what is seen as Iranian expansionism—can only succeed if the Iranians are terrified of a U.S. president. The bluff was exposed.

History, as written by the jihadists, will likely record that the caliphate, in its second incarnation (the first being the Islamic State in Iraq circa 2006-2010), was defeated by Kurds, Shias and Alawites, under the guidance of ‘Crusading’ Western powers, as well as a Russian state seeking to resurrect the glory of Orthodox Christianity. Sure, there are other things happening in the Middle East besides sectarian and ethnic tensions, but even those who remind us of that (constantly) must admit that the jihadists managed to go a long way by firing up the fuel that such tensions provide. The jihadists will make the case that Sunnis, and especially Sunni regimes, watched the battle transpire from the sidelines, a further exhibition of their vacuity and irrelevance. It has become exceedingly difficult to foresee what such a bitter after-taste, for many young Sunnis in the region, will lead to. Even worse, the larger war, involving Syrians opposed to dictatorship, may dawdle into what would be perceived (and heralded by some) as a victory for Bashar al-Asad. How is that going to sit with audiences near and far across the region? It will probably be absorbed in the same manner as the statement made by CENTCOM spokesman Col. Ryan Dillon on June 24, that “if [the Asad coalition] want to fight ISIS in Abu Kamal and they have the capacity to do so, then that would be welcomed.” To many it meant the end of the opportunity whereby someone other than Asad, such as the Turks and the Saudis, would assume control over the territories freed from the jihadists, so that eventually a balance is arrived at, and all the players must concede something through negotiation, beginning with Asad conceding his power. These words uttered by Dillon are likely to provide kindling for the next fires in the region.

The same can be said about the White House statement on Syria’s potential use of chemical weapons again, warning of dire consequences: if future use would warrant a strongly-worded response, wouldn’t past use warrant an equal measure of punishment? What purpose does the warning have if many will interpret it, correctly, to mean “Don’t make us look bad and ineffective, or else we won’t let you proceed to Deir Azzor”? Again, optics matter. Timing matters. The narratives we weave, matter. But excuses will be made by policy makers (or rather, policy excusers) as to why the hand was played in this manner. Ultimately, these near misses will be spun by talking heads as a good thing, as if no much more could be accomplished given how the cards were dealt. We will be told that meandering into a stalemate, or even the prospect of places like Deir Azzour reverting back under Asad’s rule, aren’t so bad as outcomes, considering. The news cycle may move on. The cameras and media tents will be packed away. Foreign policy op-eds will play up another geostrategic challenge. Few will lament why a super power failed at adopting and following a grand strategy for the region. Who has the time for such a level of reflection when one flare-up follows another?

A year ago, I described my worries as such:

“This is what I worry about: I worry that some young Sunnis around the region, fed as they have been on sectarian and revolutionary narratives, may sense remorse, a few years down the line, when they see that the caliphate has been defeated while they stood back, idle and helpless. Some young Shias and Kurds may understand the victory to be their own, one that they must keep safe by beating down on Sunnis. Numbers wise, this sentiment may end up representing the minority view on either side. The question becomes, how big of a minority will it be, and can it gather the critical mass to do something about it, especially if they fan out into ideological spaces not filled by alternatives? Small, determined groups of people holding the minority view have successfully altered the course of history many times in the past. If there isn’t a big idea to hold them over, to give meaning to the victory, something that speaks to their better angels, then a wider turn towards radicalization among this Middle Eastern generation may ensue. Those cross currents of meta-narratives may carry them over towards revolution, time and time again. Left without an idea to anchor them, an idea such as *madaniyya* or whatever they may want to call it, they will lift up, with larger numbers, more caliphal ventures, more revanchist schemes.” [[Managing the Fire Pit](#), June 23, 2016]

A similar moment to wrest control of the narrative from the jihadists was missed in 2008, when the chance to defeat a ‘caliphate’ presented itself. Back then, the challenge was to name it as such and to defeat it as an idea, an idea ensconced within the ‘Islamic State in Iraq’. But strategic planners in Washington and elsewhere were content with describing it as a victory delivered against a terrorist organization. That was a mistake. The error is compounded because there is still a reluctance to understand that it was a mistake. I sincerely believe that had we ‘sold’ that victory as one levelled against an idea, then the jihadists would not have made a comeback in 2013-2014. Some other entity may have ridden the wave of Sunni resentment, since that anger sprang from other reasons. But it ended up with the Zarqawists taking the lead because they could offer a clear-eyed blueprint for the future, which sustained their fighters during the hard years of 2009-2013, and seemed enchanting to the broken Sunni populations they claimed to liberate. The neo-caliphate arrived at Mosul’s doorstep, untarnished by doubts, unblemished with the splatter of past defeat. Defeating the caliphate now does not have the same effect; the jihadists have already demonstrated viability. They will make the case that what was missing from their formula was wider Sunni participation. We do not have a counter to that message.

Not learning from past errors is bad enough, but we have now entered a whole new phase where the past matters less and less, and the future forebodes too much uncertainty. We have arrived at singularity. The Islamic State, in this last stretch of its second phase, which bad as it was, has not been taken as seriously as a contest warranting world-wide civilizational mobilization, *is* that singularity. The jihadists are proceeding along a grand strategy of their own, while their adversaries, even though they had three years to prepare, failed to arrive at one. Both the corresponding quantities of jihadist resolve, and our collective irresoluteness in confronting it, have fused together, in these past few weeks, to create an immensely terrifying and gigantic world historical event: unprecedented levels of uncertainty.

A singularity in this sense is both the culmination of all the maladies of the Middle East, and an autonomous creation. Now that it has come into being, it projects an intensity, a dense mass, with a gravitational pull of its own. The singularity posed by the Islamic State and the woefully inadequate global response is no longer a function of previously discernable trends of the Middle East, it rather shapes the destiny of everything within its gravitational field. Consequently, it is no longer useful to dwell upon the evolutionary stages that led to the Islamic State. Whether its contributing factors or ‘root causes’ such as a lack of good governance, sectarianism, millenarianism, economic woes, youth glut or ecological transformations, or even the normalization of ‘starter’ ideologies like the politicized Islam of the Muslim Brethren—all this does not really matter anymore since the monster has already come into being, and it can self-replicate. What usefulness is there in pointing a finger at Qasim Soleimani’s lust for war? Something should have been done about it twelve years ago, or even six years ago. Remove him from the picture now and the singularity will stand irrespective. Even bringing the Islamic State to the brink of defeat in Iraq and pummeling its remaining territories in Syria is no longer a guarantor that the monster has been slain.

The jihadist singularity has created a black hole of uncertainty. Understanding singularities is extremely difficult. A singularity cannot be modeled along logical, reductionist contours or game-play algorithms. Actuarial ‘science’ does us no good because much of the old data is now immaterial if not suspect. Any understanding of the phenomenon would necessarily lean into the intuitive, limbic senses—a gut feeling. Informed as it must by experientialist wisdom to tease out dissonant patterns within chaotic systems, it is akin to the neck tingle a grizzled soldier feels when walking into an ambush, before the bullets begin flying. The skill set necessary for comprehending its immensity cannot be trained or imparted through institutional learning. The jihadists have been in a state of constant war for decades. They can be both logical and instinctive in formulating strategies. This gives them an important advantage. The jihadists may have an intuitive and non-linear appreciation for why they would embark on a course of action that would seem illogical or foolish to us. For example, why did Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi imagine that he could ignite jihad in Iraq? Couldn’t he understand

that the demographics of a Shia-Kurdish majority made that endeavor implausible? Did he not witness the futility of confronting America's full military might in Afghanistan? We can retroactively judge that he saw opportunity where many did not. And as the uncertainty expands we can judge that the enemy is far ahead in understanding its utility. Chaos and anarchy are their comfort zones. I don't know whether the jihadists succeed in constructing another caliphate, but in demonstrating that it was somewhat doable in this phase, by showcasing a 'proof of concept' of actual governance, by raising their caliphal banner across vital territories, and that they only failed (or so they will claim) because not enough Muslims answered the caliph's call, and trying to do this over and over again as one expects them to, then the tremendous beast they have summoned would have succeeded in widening the margin of unpredictability, one that is so overpowering as to resemble a singularity amassing into a black hole. The region is in the grip of this powerful force; what bits and pieces survive the journey through this black hole is anybody's guess. The novelty of the Trump spectacle came in like an asteroid with its own gravitational pull, not as potent as that of the jihadists' but still strong enough to disrupt emerging dynamics had it set bold actions in motion, had it seemed as if it were working within a plan. However, it passed across Middle Eastern skies without much to show for it.

What is so unique about this situation is that the unpredictability before us is greater than any confluence of 'great events' witnessed by the Middle East since the late eighteenth century. Sure, one tends to over-emphasize the uniqueness of one's experiences. Also true: it is difficult to ascertain how past periods of uncertainty *felt*, since from our vantage point on the timescale we cannot un-see what came next. But in recalling the events of the last quarter of millennium: the Ottoman realm contracting; Persia recovering sovereignty; the Wahhabi revolution; the intrusion, and in some cases the welcoming of Western modernity, by commerce, invasion, or intellectual pollination, in a few instances resulting in the bloodletting against, and among, Levantine minorities in the mid-nineteenth century, in other instances inspiring the massacres of janissaries and Mamelukes; the First World War playing out across the map bringing about the end of the Ottomans and the birthing of a dozen or so new 'nations' while destroying the Armenians; the Balfour Declaration; the blossoming of cosmopolitanism; Turkish disengagement from the region while turning westwards; a second world war, and the birth of Israel occasioning a Palestinian *Nakba*; the surge of anti-colonialism, nationalism and re-setting the 'old' order by way of military coups; France and Britain receding; America and the Soviet Union ascendant; proxy wars through the PLO and the Lebanese Civil War; the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War; the Kuwait War, and dual containment; the crap shoot since the September 11, 2001 attacks veering into the Iraq War; the Zarqawi exception; the Iranian, Arab and Turkish Springs; the return of Turkey; the return of Russia, and bringing us up to the fall of Mosul—I am hard pressed to imagine at what

point during the last two hundred and fifty years did the future look so undiscernible as it does today? It's a big claim, I know, saying that the last two centuries led up to, and into, the Islamic State of the Zaqawists. But negating this claim depends on what comes next. And there's the rub: who knows?

The margin of unpredictability in the Middle East is too wide to warrant the complacent, short-fix policies prescribed by Western and regional planners. In retrospect, we can see that they were deluded into thinking that there was no need for an overarching narrative or strategy based on the assumption that the situation, though dire, was manageable. The first thing policy makers, especially Western ones, needed to discard, and they should have done this years ago, is the idea that this unpredictability is somehow containable: when there's so much of it then such a call simply cannot be made. Besides, it seems that the aftershocks emanating from the region, whether felt through acts of terror or refugee flows, are having important political and economic ramifications elsewhere in the world, putting the lie to the illusion of containment. The other delusion they needed to discard is the notion that something else, other than the Islamic State, will emerge. Again, this is to misread what we have witnessed: the perfection of the monster. Its clay has been kneaded from the amassing dust of one ruined testament after another, a pestilential wind of disillusionment and fury breathed into the malevolent spirit animating the vessel. No other entity comes close to embodying the civilizational psychosis and the perverse intellectual dotage accumulated over centuries in that part of the world. The third delusion is that this is all somehow basic, that the enterprise of the Islamic State is no more than an aimless, Hobbesian thrill ride for nihilistic, maladjusted thugs. Obama professorially opined a few years ago that the fracas of the Middle East was mere tribalism run amok. He was mistaken. The Islamic State represents an imperial vision harnessing the energies of tribalism, much in the same way the early Muslims did, or so the jihadists believe. This is no case of Tutsis versus Hutus, or the prospect of a few Serbian or Bosnian villages changing hands; Zaqawi coldly calculated that igniting sectarian warfare would bring him closer to statehood. As that vision collapses in places like Mosul, it would be understandably tempting to ridicule and dismiss the whole experience as one giant act of foolishness on the part of the jihadists. It would be possible to do so had our optics, our timing and our narrative been as good as that of the jihadists. But they are not. One should remember that the Zaqawists managed to do all this within the span of fourteen years; at times having to relaunch from a hard stop. Greek tragedies would be a suitable complement to history books when considering cases as these: complacency when the odds are so uncertain is the ultimate folly.

But complacency abounds. The Trump visit exhibits a lack of seriousness by both international and regional players as to what all of us face. They seem to be dealing with an unfortunate incident in a string of many. They certainly are not planning contingencies that

are existential in nature. Those tasked with fixing the problem believe that all it takes is a little rubbing alcohol and bandages. They presumed that they could stitch together and patch up these aggregating wounds. There is a reason for that. It is called Realism. The Realist methodology for managing the Middle East has been in play for decades, and a reckoning of its many failures is upon us. Realism serves to hide the immensity of the stress on the system, which is why it seems that the foreign policy establishment is so blasé about the stakes of arriving at singularity, and the black hole forming. It explains why rather than focus on the festering wound of Syria, the conversation is consumed by the sideshow of Saudi Arabia's tiff with Qatar.

The hullabaloo over Qatar reveals a parochial frivolity. It is sophistic and provincial. What does Qatar matter if the task at hand is to go big and bold in Syria? If Qatar marks an all-consuming crisis for the Gulf states, then I don't know whether their mental and psychological circuitry can even handle a challenge as complex as that posed by Iran, never mind an existential challenge such as the next phase of jihadism. For some inexplicable reason some of those engaged in the stand-off still think that shutting down Aljazeera might cripple the monster. A decade and a half ago this would have been a reasonable undertaking, or at least weighing on the Qataris to tone down their station's toxic sectarian and anti-American innuendo, but even then as a mere half-measure. Now, it is simply frivolous and revealing—revealing, to me at least, that these folks are unserious. Part of the problem is a closely-held assumption in Washington that its regional allies and international partners know what they are doing, that existential challenges would stir matching gumption to meet these threats head-on. This is mirrored by an equally erroneous notion assumed by those allies and partners that the Americans know what they are doing too. Another mistake is to project onto the Iranians and the other enemies of this American alliance the idea that they are proceeding by rational thinking. A further error is to assume that jihadists are irrational. All these flawed assumptions leave us with a scene of bumbling actors, tripping over each other on the world stage.

The cherry atop the silly cake was Trump's tweet that his visit and the jostling of Qatar that ensued marks "the beginning of the end to the horror of terrorism." How did his campaign talk of establishing safe zones in Syria get replaced with the goal of putting the kibosh on Qatar's misbehavior? How did the words "Don't forget, without us, the Gulf states won't exist," turn into America taking sides in an intra-GCC kerfuffle? "They've got nothing but money," so he would make them pay for the safe zones, Trump promised. Then he forgot to ask. Trump did ask for 350 billion in arms purchases over ten years, but he forgot to verify whether the Saudis were good for it. The U.S. Corps of Engineers is deploying two dozen contracting officers to Iraq so that they can dole out money for rebuilding Anbar Province, money that the Saudis are supposed to pony up too. Except no one has firmly gotten them to sign onto it. Then there's

Syria. As one friend put it flippantly, “It will take a trillion dollars to bring Syria’s economy and infrastructure back to the piece of shit it was before all this happened.” Again, Saudi money is supposed to be a panacea to all that’s needed, except, like most magic tonics, it is unrealistic. Or did we forget why the Saudis feel compelled nowadays to reform their system? Their ‘traditional’ system of authority was premised on buying their way out of any gravitational pull luring them into the unknown. They need to phase out that tendency because they can’t afford the price tags anymore. Still, it is odd that a U.S. administration focused on putting an end “to the horror of terrorism” would prioritize the allocation of Saudi funds towards job creation in Pittsburg rather than in Aleppo. Instead the game plan seems to be one of using Saudi money to make U.S. bombs that can be dropped on places like Aleppo.

Peak frivolity was reached, in my eyes, when a Saudi newspaper columnist tweeted that Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt should build a military base in Salwa, on the Qatari-Saudi border to confront the Turkish base in Qatar (Muhammad Aal al-Sheikh, June 23). There is a fire raging in Syria, and this Saudi intellectual wants to marshal a coalition of militaries against Qatar. Certainly, this is not a man who sees what I see: that the Islamic State does have a fighting chance at overthrowing the House of Saud. I realize that very few people would make this assessment, hence Aal al-Sheikh should not be faulted. However, when we talk about unpredictability in the Middle East, we are talking to a large extent about the relative stability of the House of Saud.

A few weeks ago, we were waiting for the Saudis to take the lead. From this point on, we need to consider what things will look like, inside Saudi Arabia, with the House of Saud no longer in the lead. Which is a difficult conversation to have, since Saudi cash looms large, whether in the Arabic language media, or within the grand strategy discourse in Western capitals, distorting clarity and encouraging a minuet of policy dissembling. And yes, I am aware that the imminent demise of the Saudis has been breathlessly and erroneously foretold for decades, yet they are still there. I am also aware that the House of Saud is one of the world’s oldest enduring bloodlines still in authority. But things do change, and they do so suddenly. Who is to say that this time around, predicting big changes in Saudi isn’t accurate, given that so much unpredictability abounds?

There are two competing jihadist models for revolutionary change in Saudi Arabia: the Islamic State envisions an underclass insurgency clearing a path for the caliphate’s soldiery, while al-Qaeda seems to be working towards a coup from within elite Saudi circles. Note the deference by which the latter’s Hamza bin Laden speaks of Saudi religious networks that remained unmoved by the call to jihad. It would not be unreasonable to propose that a strategic-minded, and relatively flexible Al-Qaeda would be able to live with a member of the House of Saud continuing in the role of a figurehead sultan of Nejd and the Peninsula as part of its bid to control the country. Both jihadist organizations, however, must be mindful of the

failed insurgency of 2003-07 in Saudi Arabia, as well as the dearth of jihadist activity within the kingdom in recent years despite the repeated pleas to Saudi youth from various jihadist luminaries imploring them to rise up against the royals, and then rebuking them for failing to do so. Yet the Zarqawists and their competing ideological cousins the Bin Ladenists persist in constructing and prioritizing the use of narratives that seem specifically directed towards sparking revolution within Saudi Arabia. Either they know something we don't know, or can't gauge, or they are being delusional and wasting valuable reserves of effort and time. Jihadists don't strike me as particularly delusional. Some of the delusions they held previously—such as thinking they could wage jihad in Iraq and gain a city the size of Mosul—were, to the surprise of many, realized. They can intuit opportunity in ways we cannot. It is more apt to describe them as adventurers and gamblers, and they continue to like their odds in Saudi. Irrespective of whether their luck will turn or not, having two competing models for revolution put in play by determined and resourceful actors is too much stress on Saudi Arabia's system as it is. Jihadists understand that taking Saudi Arabia means that their cause crosses the Rubicon into permanence and inoculates them against defeat. They may believe that their chances are uniquely auspicious in Saudi Arabia since they are basically unsuspending the revolution of Sunni revivalism and triumphalism that brought the House of Saud to power in the first place. The time may come, soon enough, when such revolutionary brushwood would catch fire and assuage the torpor of Sunni impotence, shaking off the remorse some across the region may have over not supporting the caliphate in its previous phases.

There are other stress points at play. A couple of observers have noted to me that they see a discernable trend in Saudi Arabia: the emergence of a Saudi nation. In their telling, Saudi Arabia, in the past, was a state underwritten by alliances forged among prominent bloodlines—a family concern. Now there seem to be a noticeable number of young Saudis who believe they have a stake in the Saudi enterprise. This is not necessarily a good thing for the House of Saud, even though such empowered Saudi 'nationalists' may provide the kind of crutch the royals need to move beyond the traditionalist forces they had leaned on for decades. This, however, is new territory, and neither the firmness of the crutch, nor the ground to be traversed are sure things. It could very well turn out that young, Western-educated Saudis—impressive by any standard, not just Saudi ones—can constitute the critical mass necessary to carry through reform, leading to a viable and functioning nation-state dynamic. This is what Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman is going for, but that would make him a gambling man too, just like the jihadists. Either he knows something we don't, or we can add this gambit of his to the instability column. The problem is, Bin Salman proving unlucky would go a long way towards securing the fortunes of one of the two jihadist models.

Poor Bin Salman! He is now expected, both by Western planners and by his own people, to transform Saudi Arabia, confront Iran, and reform Islam. He's partly at fault, for believing that

he can pull it off. It truly is a magnificent gamble for one so untested (not counting Yemen over the last two and half years, or more recently Qatar). Washington is placing a hefty bet on him. But why would seasoned policy makers expect a reasonable margin of return? Is it because the young prince can recite his country's 2013 GDP numbers? Are expectations of Saudi leadership so low that such 'feats' would command admiration from American strategists? Nevertheless, they need to ask themselves: would someone with such incredible burdens to bear go off and pick a fight with Qatar at this time? Is it really the right timing to jump the succession queue? Is it wise to put Bin Nayif under house arrest? I am sure someone will make the case that Bin Salman needed to get his cousin and those naysaying Qataris out of the way so that he can embark on his grand vision to lead Sunnidom, eventually taking the fight to Syria. It would be a reasonable argument to make, had we no sense that time is of the essence.



Here is why I am unsold on Bin Salman's prospects: we have been told that an 'Islamic NATO', an army of 34,000 soldiers, drawn from 39 Muslim majority countries, and led by Pakistan's former chief of army staff General Raheel Sharif, has been tasked with combating terrorism in all its forms. Sharif was pictured in Riyadh sharing the same table with Bin Salman

and Jared Kushner at one of the feasts, signifying how pivotal he was to the whole effort. But the force would only be operational by the spring of 2018. Is this what they intended for Syria? Who are they kidding? Do they think that Deir Azzour would just be left for them to take as their accolade in a year's time? Haven't the Saudis, and bin Salman specifically, been [laying the foundations for this Islamic alliance](#), mounting large scale joint exercises towards that goal, for a year and a half now? Yet we are told they won't be ready for another year?

How often will Saudi Arabia talk big and fall short before enduring a backlash? If Saudi sees itself as the bulwark of Sunnidom, then its disappointing performance will be the measure of Sunnidom's weaknesses. It serves to focus blame and recrimination. That is exactly the rhetorical trap that the Islamic State wants to ensnare the Saudis in, and then, once it becomes established that Sunnidom is weak because the Saudis are feckless, the jihadists will ask young Sunnis across the realm, "So what are you going to do about it?" This is not new. This sort of bellicose 'just-you-wait-and-see' Saudi act of huffing and puffing was on display over a decade ago in an Op-Ed authored by Nawaf Obaid: '[Stepping into Iraq](#)', *Washington Post*, November 29, 2006. Obaid was making the case that Saudi Arabia "the de-facto leader of the world's Sunni community" would wade into Iraq if the Americans lose their nerve. He writes that if the U.S. plans to hurriedly leave Iraq, then "one of the first consequences will be massive Saudi intervention to stop Iranian-backed Shiite militias from butchering Iraqi Sunnis." The Saudis would arm Sunni militias officered by ex-Ba'athists, while artificially collapsing the price of oil to deny Iran funds. Obaid reveals that domestic pressure to do something, by associations such as tribal confederations, which extend across the Iraqi-Saudi borders, are intense, adding cryptically, "[t]hey are supported by a new generation of Saudi royals in strategic government positions who are eager to see the kingdom play a more muscular role in the region." He concludes his essay by foretelling how the Saudis would eventually respond to the challenges of Bahrain, Yemen, Syria and to a lesser extent, Lebanon:

"In this case, remaining on the sidelines would be unacceptable to Saudi Arabia. To turn a blind eye to the massacre of Iraqi Sunnis would be to abandon the principles upon which the kingdom was founded. It would undermine Saudi Arabia's credibility in the Sunni world and would be a capitulation to Iran's militarist actions in the region. To be sure, Saudi engagement in Iraq carries great risks — it could spark a regional war. So be it: The consequences of inaction are far worse."

The threatening tone was too much for the Bush administration. Obaid had to resign from his post as advisor to Prince Turki al-Faisal, then serving as the Saudi Arabian ambassador to Washington. This Op-Ed was also cited as one of the reasons that al-Faisal resigned from his

posting a few months later too. Remembering this incident begs the question: if the Saudis had such sentiments germinating over a decade ago in their internal discourse, one that was made even more compelling during the Obama years and the 'spilling of Sunni blood' in Syria, then how is it that they are sorely unprepared for the moment of action when it came within reach, right at the point of Trump's arrival in Riyadh? If Bin Salman really does believe that there's no talking sense with the Iranians because they are enraptured by the expectation of the Mahdi's imminent arrival, as he maintained during a TV interview in early May, then how does he justify the leadenness of his dawdling pace? Does he not understand that Trump can arrive in Riyadh on his first foreign presidential trip only once? Do the Saudis think they can replicate the spectacle of hosting fifty-plus Muslim sovereigns to meet the American president on an annual basis? This was the shot, and they did not take it.

In that same TV interview, Bin Salman's 'reading' of Iran culminates with a threat that Riyadh will pre-empt Iranian bad behavior by taking the war to Iran's own soil. Talk about a sense of grandeur! Again, one has to wonder whether this threat, made so publicly, was warranted or wise because, in the complex math of the region, that threat was upended not by the Iranians, but rather by the Islamic State, whose alleged operatives managed to pull off two symbolic acts of war against the Iranian parliament, as well as Khomeini's shrine on June 7. In a way, the jihadist message there was not only directed against Iran (or al-Qaeda HQ, which the IS accuses of being soft on Iran), but rather a rebuke to Bin Salman too: "we can deliver on threats, in ways you wouldn't dare to." His cousin, Prince Turki, the former ambassador, was mostly recently seen in Paris attending (and one would assume financing) an Iranian opposition conference lorded over by the Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK). That the Saudi leadership deems this thoroughly-discredited organization to be a threat to Tehran, one that they think they can wield against it, also speaks to the weak performance of Saudi gameplay. Anyone disputing that should ride down the stretch of asphalt linking Qasr Shirin to Kermanshah, marked at various points with the mangled tanks and vehicles that the MEK had used on their failed foray into Iran (Operation 'Eternal Light') towards the end of the Iraq-Iran War. The Iranian regime leaves these vestiges in place to remind their people that the MEK was supported by Saddam Hussein against their own nation. And it works. That the Saudis do not understand that about their geostrategic rival is not reassuring. So let me posit the question again: does the prospect of Bin Salman wrestling with the combined challenges of jihadists on the one hand, and Iran on the other, resemble the challenges faced by Saudi Arabia in the decades since its founding as a modern state? Is this business as usual, no different from those times when the Saudi royals faced down the Ikhwan, Nasser, Juhaiman al-'Uteibi, Khomeini, the internal Sahwa outcry over hosting coalition forces for the Kuwait campaign, Bin Laden's call for their overthrow and most recently economic distress? Or are the present stresses on

the Saudi system unprecedented in nature and the young team tasked with managing them is too much of an unknown quantity?

I question whether policy makers in Washington can judge Bin Salman's prospects with the requisite clarity, namely because the atmospherics of the American capital have changed. Somewhere along the line, the hallowed majesty of America's awesome power and wealth was clouded when the rituals and hierarchies of diplomacy were debased: the specter of foreign emissaries standing humbly, hat in hand, at the threshold of the Oval Office was replaced with the all-too casual camaraderie of a hobnobbing internationalized elite that put foreigners and Americans on an equal footing. Admission and rank was no longer earned by the relative strength of nations and societies, but could be purchased. Money usually reaches into power; that is the way of the world. But a line is drawn, in the halls of a great power, when that money is foreign. It should be especially suspect when wealth is artificial, when it does not reflect national merit and accomplishment but rather an accident of geography as Gulf oil wealth is, notwithstanding that there is little else shared in terms of values and beliefs. These changes could have started with the two-decade long tenure of Prince Bandar bin Sultan in the role of Saudi ambassador, chummy as he was with the Bush family, as some argue, or later with the lavish soirees thrown by the Kuwaiti and Yemeni ambassadors in the early 2000s, or the concurring influx of Gulf monies into the think tank industry and academia during that time. But as the Obaid episode showed, back then there was still a sense of dignity in the George W. Bush administration that would not tolerate such a tone from the Saudis, quickly putting them in their place by pushing out the ambassador. Contrast that to the situation these days, to [the breezy familiarity by which the Emirati ambassador corresponds](#) with Washington's foreign policy doyens, as evidenced by hacked e-mails. Something isn't right with this picture. It seems the problem has gotten worse, which could explain why the GCC-Qatar rift has taken on a larger proportion in Washington than it should have. However amiable the ambassador is personally, it shouldn't be forgotten that he represents a supplicating country trying to remain in the good graces of a mega-power. Cheeky banter along the lines of "close the base" in return for an Emirati-owned hotel not hosting a conference should be understood against the backdrop that Middle Easterners, generally speaking, are mindful of such hierarchies, and that this sort of familiarity is strategically contemptuous. It distorts the true size of the Emirates, or Saudi Arabia for that matter, when lined up with the awesome power of America. And when the distortion works, it is reflected back to Bin Salman or the Emirati ambassador as an outsized reverence and appreciation, serving to foster a delusion of a greatness of one's own, after all, "if the United States thinks we merit such respect, then we must be good for it." One does not do the UAE any favors by calling them 'Little Sparta,' for what happens when they go into battle only to find that their dory spears were made of rubber?

Does this mean that the lack of clarity, and the ensuing misreading of regional dynamics, has become a congenital defect of the Middle Eastern conversation in Washington? How then is one supposed to explain that key elements of the conversation are failing to match the signals of change emanating from the region? A long standing Realist argument, made in the United States since the 1950s, has held that Saudi Arabia's stability rests on the pillars of tradition, going so far as to fetishize such traditions (note the relish by which the American delegation partook in the sword dance). The tradition argument brushed away some of the less savory aspects of Saudi rule, meaning to say "but that is how they like it over there." Yet Saudi Arabia is no longer following tradition, for isn't that the whole point of Bin Salman's Vision 2030? Shouldn't we understand this endeavor as a signal that the Saudi royals themselves sense that this time is different and more troubling than their previous challenges, warranting fundamental changes to the traditional order? Maybe what is needed is a corollary change as to how Washington discusses the kingdom. But we know that is unlikely.

Last year I wrote:

"We should all truly wish that Prince Muhammad bin Salman knows what he is doing with his radical plans to overhaul Saudi Arabia. Let's hope that radical change ushered in by that young prince there does not whet the appetite of the radicals within his peer group."

It does not bode well if Syria was to be the target for resolute action, yet Bin Salman missed and instead hit Qatar, as well as his cousin. Another Realist argument has it that stability shall derive when young authoritarians enact reforms through steady economic and social liberalization. That kind of makes sense. Except they had used this prediction previously when lauding Jamal Mubarak, Saif al-Qadafi, and Bashar al-Asad.

As with Bin Salman, so too did Washington misread that other pretender to the leadership of Sunnidom: Recep Tayyip Erdogan. And as a result the opportunity to simultaneously engage and defuse Erdogan's ambitions was fumbled. Everything was good to go. Everything had lined up. Erdogan had [been fuming and threatening](#)—before and after the referendum on expanding presidential powers held on April 16—that his armed forces will embark on big campaigns in Syria. Erdogan's bluster had set up the perfect scene for the perfect 'ask' during his meeting with Trump. It was scheduled a month after the referendum so that Erdogan could get his house in order to fulfill an earlier pledge to get the armed services of Turkey ready to intervene directly against the jihadists in Raqqa. All Trump had to do during their face-to-face was to say "go ahead and do it by the end of June, and we will support you, but you need to follow our advice on how to deal with the Kurds, and to follow our lead towards whatever eventual settlement all parties arrive at." I believe Erdogan would have acquiesced. He had been

uncharacteristically sober and mellow in response to the leaks pre-empting his visit. Those leaks, made to several U.S. media outlets, suggested that the US would work with the YPG to capture Raqqa in variance to Turkish wishes, and the reasons cited seemed purposely put out there to embarrass Erdogan and Turkey. The leaks were designed to get Erdogan to overreact and pout. Yet he didn't. Erdogan did not take the bait, and said publicly that he will wait to see how things stand when he meets the president, and that he may actually sway him towards a policy that better places Turkey within America's strategic calculus. Erdogan thought he would find a sympathetic figure in Trump, one he could negotiate with, man to man. He may even have been heartened when Trump was one of the few world leaders calling to congratulate him on squeaking out a 'Yes' victory during the referendum, assigning him extended powers and tenure.

Trump should have seen the opportunity for what it was: a longtime US ally petitioning to do the heavy lifting that America was loath to do, in return for better bilateral relations. And in the process the personal touch of an American president could have gone a long way towards ameliorating the impulses of a regional authoritarian. There were lots of easy wins for the taking. But Trump was distracted during his meeting by the implications of the Comey memo. Trump has his excuse. But what about the other seasoned hands in the room? Why couldn't they see the opportunity that had shaped quite nicely for the U.S.? It could have been turned into a twofer a few days later when the congregants in Riyadh would have been expected to submit an equivalent tribute to that of the Turks, in return for American benevolence and attention. Again, there seems to be an issue with clarity or rather lack thereof, but it isn't a Trump failing.

All Trump had to do was exercise his style and reinforce the narrative associated with his extraordinary rise, that here is a U.S. president who is willing to break with the past, willing to be confrontational, willing to re-engage with the Middle East, and most critically, willing to go for decisive, unequivocal victories against whoever may challenge America's primacy. The remaining arrangements, the nuts-and-bolts of the agenda, should have been the purview of those who understood what an opening such a style, and such a narrative, would create in the Middle Eastern impasse.

Those by Trump's side cannot claim a blind spot: all the signs were there a few months ago. There seemed to be momentum. Especially after the missile strike at the Syrian airbase in Sha'yrat. Trump had brilliantly (accidentally?) framed the narrative as one of "beautiful babies" being murdered for no reason, gaining the high ground. Two days later even Muqtada al-Sadr, emboldened by what seemed like the winds turning against Qasim Suleimani's strategy, [chimed in with the suggestion that Asad should resign](#). Things seemed to be moving within the context of a grand plan. The second order effects of that quick, brash order to retaliate against the chemical strike of Khan Sheikhoun, should have been pushed further, by

Trump's aides, to encourage the Turks and Saudis for an ambitious outlay of power projection, one that both had earlier pledged to, along a schedule that suited America's vision. They would fight the jihadists in Syria, change the balance of forces on the ground, and by demonstrating the resolve to act boldly, they would create an opening whereby a negotiated compromise would lead to Asad's ouster. Why didn't these steps proceed along a logical progression towards a coherent strategy?

I think it has much to do with confusion among planners about who should be in the lead: America or its regional allies? The Realist inclination is that the allies should storm the beaches after being launched from American-driven transports. I tend to agree with that in the case of Syria. The opportunity for doing that was within reach, except no one actually put together an invasion plan. America, already looking for a way to wind down its responsibilities, had overestimated the capability of its regional partners to carry the load, to disastrous effect.

Current dynamics tell us interesting things about power projection. One can adorn a soldiery with the shiniest of trappings and the deadliest of weapons. A state may have the means to sustain logistics lines for extended periods of time. But what use is that if a nation cannot craft a narrative that may compel fighting-age men to die for it? Whither power-projection if not many youths draw-up their bodies from the trenches and run up to take that yonder hill? Iranian Revolutionary Guardsmen have already been fighting for six years. The IRGC has already demonstrated power projection by shuttling its own men, as well as pan-regional Shias, to fight when commanded; to take a hill that may hold no discernable value to the individual soldier, but one that the high-ups have deemed important enough to battle for as part of a wider, complex geopolitical war. They constructed a sectarian narrative that has spurred their men on, fleshing it out with mythologies of martyrdom that harken back to their revolutionary and 'just war' ethos of the Iraq-Iran War. The jihadists have also demonstrated their ability to muster a narrative, that when coupled with looted arms and greased by contraband means of financing, can go a long way. So much so that dozens of their fighters are signing up for suicide missions every month. With all their adornments and gadgetry, with foreign advisors managing their deployments and logistics, can the same be said about the Saudis and the Emiratis when it comes to this critical element of power projection that they, in contrast to the Iranians, or even the jihadists, have yet to demonstrate? Sadly, one narrative that may induce young Saudis to sacrifice may sound like another round of sectarian score-settling such as that of the Islamic State's.

The Saudis and Emiratis were Johnny-come-latelys to the Yemen war, which arguably began with the first round of the Houthi insurgency in 2004. It shouldn't have been that difficult for the Saudis and Emiratis to pushback against the Houthis and General Salih's men in 2015, given that the forces they were facing had been at war for a long time, and lacked air cover. The Yemen War is rightly called a quagmire. Naturally, there should be lessons learned.

Yemen should have served as a primer for how the United States should navigate the challenges it would likely face when steering a Sunni coalition campaign in Syria. But it is difficult to have that conversation with all the cheerleading going on, as if showing a modicum of grit in Yemen is the be-all and end-all of the geostrategic tasks expected from America's allies in the region. For example, there is a consistent theme of analysts lauding the performance of Emirati soldiers on that front, reflecting a starting point of exceedingly low expectations. The measure of power projection cannot be limited to propping up an administration in Aden, or establishing a network of bases and ports in the Horn of Africa and the northwestern expanse of the Indian Ocean. Keeping sea lanes free from Somali pirates is mercantile housekeeping, not power projection. The irony, of course, is that the Emiratis, the latter-day incarnation of most of the Trucial States, came into being after the British had tamed, with fire and gold, the pirates calling what is now the United Arab Emirates home, some two hundred years ago. But that is not what made Britain a power. That was an afterthought in its imperial exertion. The Emiratis should be mindful of such formulas, lest hubris goes to their heads, but can they be blamed when some call them Little Sparta, or when the decorated warriors of past and present global powers obsequiously offer their services? The Emiratis are entering a confrontation with, or at least are making noises against, a power that rises from a land, Persia, whose fighters crossed the known world 2,500 years ago to arrive at the actual Sparta. They can't afford to have blinkers on.

Inverse to the Emirates-Iran case, Saudi Arabia is eighty times the size of Qatar by population. In terms of theoretical power projection, it should easily swat the Qataris away. But the Saudis seem frenzied and frazzled by this crisis that they have picked with their diminutive neighbor. The Qatari royals can only equal their Saudi rivals in terms of their ability to spend money. Is that all that it takes to get the Saudis worried? To rival them? What does it say about their own confidence in their ability to project power?

Thus, this is where American policy makers arranging Trump's visit made their biggest mistake: they assumed that the Saudis and others can think big and lead boldly. They just can't. The task of articulating a grand strategy, from which all narratives emanate, is America's alone.

American guidance and backing is the determining factor when it comes to power projection by actors such the Saudis and the Emiratis. They needed to be told what to do. This most basic of formulas should have awakened Trump's aides that it is up to them to set the parameters and timelines by which the Saudis and Emiratis, and even the Turks to some extent, should demonstrate usefulness as allies to the United States, not the other way around. This was their chance to articulate a grand strategy and the roles assigned to allies within it. Because, as we have seen, opportunities, once so promising, can be squandered. America needed the help of Sunni allies to construct a narrative of victory against the jihadists; it needs

Sunni faces, convincingly stained with war paint and caked with mud and cordite, to stand by it at the 'Mission Accomplished' ceremony. Not as tokens, but as partners, such is the narrative that must be stood up. The situation, as the jihadists are rapidly losing territory, does not merit either dithering or delay. That the regional Sunnis did not understand that they needed to hustle and act quickly is no excuse for Washington's strategists to recriminate against them and point fingers. It was up to the Trump team to envision the timeline and the deliverables, of which the president's visit was to be but one station.

Regrettably, the meager outcomes of the visit revealed many cards to Iran, too many for comfort. There was no apex to the crescendo. It was merely a spectacle, a show that ultimately belied a muddled policy, devoid of a grand vision. As if one bought a new dress and new shoes, did one's hair and nails, put on make-up, took a selfie and hashtagged it '#GoingToTheBigBall', and then never went to the ball. When does one think an opportunity of similar magnitude can ever arise to psych out the Iranians again? This round, which could have been the critical and final one, goes to the Iranians by default. Which is a shame, because I believe that had the Riyadh summit culminated in a clear vision for what happens to the remaining rump of Islamic State territory in Syria, then an order would have come down to Qasim Suleimani from the upper echelons of Iran's national security 'brain' to cease and desist from any plan that may result in a direct confrontation with the militaries of Turkey, Saudi and others, backed as they would be with American guidance and logistics. Things turned out differently. Suleimani won, almost effortlessly.

Around April 18 or 19, right after the Turkish referendum, Suleimani and his enablers decided to hurriedly seal access points from the north and the south to the patches of the Euphrates Valley still under IS control. They aimed to do that by extending the Syrian regime's writ towards the Iraqi border, while simultaneously extending the reach of PMUs from the Iraqi side to match and interface with the Syrian forces. I believe this was decided upon because the Iranians were reading the tea leaves, and like me, thought that there was indeed a grand regional strategy for a Syrian endgame, one which they needed to counter, carefully and incrementally, in order to earn more bargaining chips. I also believe that the Iranians, watching Erdogan's visit and the Riyadh summit, concluded, as I did, that there is no grand vision being worked towards, and that instead of positioning themselves for bartering and compromises, they can go for all-out victory. The April plan was modified to include Suleimani's own vision for a preferred end-game. They may think victory is within their reach. The much hackneyed interpretation of Suleimani's alleged tactical quest for a land route from Iran to Hezbollah is analytical hokey, as I have maintained elsewhere, probably originating with Suleimani's own disinformation as to his aims. However, if doing so drives home the message that he has won in regional and Western eyes, and the opportunity presents itself so liberally, why wouldn't he go for it? A vindicated Suleimani will be emboldened to expand his

brand of militant adventurism. His seniors in Tehran will sign off on them since events seem to have validated his approach. Will it manifest itself in Baghdad, Manama or Qatif? We can also add this to the uncertainty column.

The Russians too were ready to sign off on an aggressive counter campaign right after their analysts had poured over the Trump-Erdogan meeting to conclude that America does not have a workable plan. Coming a day after the meeting, the Russians signaled on May 17 their intent to empower the Syria regime to break the siege of Deir Azzour and establish sovereignty on the Syrian-Iraqi border.

The Trump visit succeeded in energizing the Iranians and Russians to go for the kill in Syria. Again, lest we forget, that was the exact opposite of what was desired or required.

* * *

There's a popular Arabic proverb whose provenance begins as 9th century analytical quip: "...after the ruining of Basra." It suggests that victory declared is sometimes no victory at all. The Zanj rebellion against the Abbasids, described by chroniclers as a slave revolt, but more likely a confluence of many dispossessed souls finding refuge from authority in the dense reed thickets of Iraq's marshes, was a small affair at first. The expeditionary force sent to tame it was distracted by another minor rebellion breaking out in Iran, and was consequently rerouted away from the marshes into the Zagros highlands. The runaway slaves, wayward gypsies, and brigands of all castes, gathered more recruits to their anti-establishmentarian cause during this time, enough to sack and destroy Basra, then one of the empire's most prosperous cities, with such comprehensiveness that the place never recovered until the twentieth century. The chroniclers speak of tens of thousands massacred, women taken as concubines, irrigation channels forever disrupted. When the caliph's army finally came back from its Iranian diversion, and successfully stamped out the Zanj, there was little euphoria in Baghdad for what was lost on the winding road to victory was a prize as splendid and precious as Basra. Historians of that period still differ as to the magnitude and consequences of the Zanj Rebellion on the Abbasid Empire, with counted as an uncontested global power only a few decades earlier. I tend to agree that losing a city like Basra due to ineptitude and complacency foretells the fall of empires. As such the Zanj Rebellion was a singularity, and there is more than one likeness it shares with the Islamic State today.

The battlefield strategy, as previewed by Secretary Mattis to Congress and to be revealed fully in mid-July, is being described as annihilation of the jihadists, a more ambitious undertaking than the previous policy of containment and degradation. Yet conditions will

never be as opportune as those of 2007-2009, when a convergence of factors contributed to the last time the jihadists were thoroughly defeated in Iraq. Back then, the United States was willing to field up to 150,000 troops, and it had a wider margin of flexibility in choosing local allies, such as Sunni Arab tribesmen, despite the apprehensions of the Iraqi government. The public relations campaign hailed a cult of warrior-scholars, awarding them the honors of orchestrating the victorious 'Surge' campaign and launching dozens of careers. At the same time it masked a critical component of the victory which was the fratricidal bloodletting between the Zarqawists and other tenacious Salafist organizations that categorically refused to kowtow to the newly formed Islamic State of Iraq, probably on the grounds that they saw it for what it was, a proto-caliphate, too audacious of an ideological endeavor. None of these factors are obtainable now, so why assume that this time around annihilation is possible? Why even suggest such terminology when the jihadist countermove becomes as simple as showing signs of life through acts of mayhem here and there? Furthermore, a policy premised on the myths of the Surge as a roadmap towards securing the peace may prove frustrating and disappointing. Conditions on the ground are not fungible across Iraq and Syria, and even within Iraq they have changed dramatically since 2008. The problem is compounded when the lessons of 2008 may need reevaluation in policy circles, which hasn't happened so far. Furthermore, if the policy is to look a lot like the Surge, then is there time for it to gel together in order to make a difference in the critically important sector of Deir Azzour?

Unfortunately, there are more hard questions that have not been answered fully in the intervening three years since the jihadists made their dramatic comeback. Let me suggest that they went unanswered because the hard intellectual work of crafting a grand strategy was never attempted.

It was never a given that the Islamic State would be the primary beneficiary of Sunni Arab resentment towards Maliki's practices and rhetoric. Why did they succeed? Where were the Ba'athists and other Salafists? Where were the tribal remnants of the Awakening? Surely ISIS could not have picked them all off? Where was the Jaish al-Asha'ir (the Tribal Army), or the Military Council of Fallouja, or even the Jaish al-'Izzeh wel Karameh (Army of Rectitude and Dignity), names that were bandied about three years ago? Where were those news reports concerning a rivalry between Al-Qaeda operatives and ISIS fighters in places like Fallouja and Mosul coming from? Running through the slew of the many tales—some intriguing, some outlandish—as to why Mosul fell, many of which have not been explored by analysts, one cannot be faulted for finding that the one provided by the Islamic State on its first anniversary stands as the most credible: it was unexpected, and Mosul fell not to a jihadist offensive, but by a shove. All it took was 400-500 fighters, augmented by another 300 when it seemed that Mosul was indeed in the process of falling. Why is it still unclear what transpired after much has been written about this seismic event over the course of three years?

ISIS was in the public eye before that. The world had already been reminded of its menace when it took over Fallouja a full six months ahead of Mosul. By April 2014, there were [already dozens of American military officers](#) (deployed as US embassy 'liaises' to Iraqi bases nearer to the front) coordinating fixed-wing aircraft and drone strikes against ISIS convoys and encampments in the desert. So it wasn't as if the jihadists were not under any pressure, casually roaming around. The problems of the Iraqi military—corruption, 'ghost soldiers', abuses of local populations—were recognized at the time, as were the political flash-points stemming mainly from Maliki's heavy-handedness. Hence, the jihadist danger, and the weakness of the Iraqi military were reasonably evident before Mosul. Yet these signals did not warrant the requisite seriousness by regional and international actors, specifically by the Obama administration. What is galling is that even after Mosul fell, echoes of that lack of seriousness carried over: look at how Iraq has gone about its ten month campaign to recapture Mosul.

Three years after Mosul, we must contend with this fact: in the last few weeks of the Mosul battle, in the last stretch encompassing the Old City and a few northern districts, Iraqi intelligence reports estimated a residual jihadist force of 300 fighters. They also estimated that there were 175,000 civilians still trapped on the other side of the line, under persistent and imminent threat of death as their homes provided the backdrop to a ferocious urban battle. These numbers suggest that for every single jihadist, there are an estimated 100 fighting-age men among the civilian population. Somehow, the anti-IS forces were unable to compel these civilians to mount an insurrection. The fear of retribution by the jihadists is a powerful barrier to overcome, but how does this fear measure against the fact that death came knocking anyway with mortars landing on their roofs? There are also one hundred Iraqi soldiers in theater to every jihadist at this stage. This can't stand. These numbers speak of an unsustainable situation. Ten months of a campaign netted around 2000 jihadist dead or captured in the environs of Mosul, and another 1300 dead or captured within the city itself. This is too much mayhem, too steep a price that a few thousand jihadists could bring about. What happens when a future jihadist army arrives with 50,000 fighters? What numbers, both in terms of soldiers and materiel, would be required to push them back? How are we supposed to answer these questions when the conversation is rife with poor analysis, lazily reaching for generic explanations, even when something important happens? Like the too-easy turnaround on Fallouja a year ago, which probably switched hands due to a deal with the jihadists, who evacuated it rather than fight. Few have asked why this happened, even though it struck me as consequential event at the time. The list of critical, unanswered questions grows, and it haunts us as we try to imagine what comes next.

Mosul was supposed to be the big moment in turning the page on the jihadist venture. Three years ago Mosul fell to a mood, auspicious for the jihadists, troubling for the rest of us.

We won it back by exhausting it, rather than by incentive. If one counts the fifteen most important, strategic and symbolic metropolises of the Middle East, Mosul would be on the same list as Istanbul, Cairo and Isfahan. When the jihadists gained it, it was an epochal moment; they showed the seriousness of their vision by plucking so grand a prize. Here we are, retaking it, and what do we have to show for it? What is the vision proffered to the people of Mosul as to what life and governance will look like after the Islamic State? Remember optics, timing and messaging? Who was thinking along those lines with the requisite clarity and seriousness?

Certainly not the Iraqi government, the body foremost responsible for handling that task. I was one of the hopeful ones, believing that an event as solemn as losing Mosul would enervate Baghdad's political process, that the political and strategic conversation in Baghdad, arguably the freest and most creative in the region, would be a resource, an ideas laboratory. I knew it was a long shot, but surely pressure would be applied to the political class to come up with something, especially since it is in the interest of the international coalition arrayed against the jihadists. Or so I mistakenly thought. Alas, we have an executive in Baghdad who could tolerably navigate, say, the realm of challenges facing a country the size of Kuwait, but is wholly inadequate when matched against what Iraq is facing. Case in point: the Mosul campaign began when Iraqi politics made sure that the cabinet would be missing a Minister of Defense and a Minister of Finance. In addition, the ousted Minister of Defense was an officer from Mosul who was just gathering national recognition and popularity as an anti-corruption enforcer. Talk about optics, missed and inflicted. So why was the international anti-jihadist coalition unable to coax a vision and a narrative out of Iraqi politicians commensurate with an inimitable event such as the liberation of Mosul?

It may be unfair to single out Bret McGurk, but his case is telling, for, in whatever telling of the tale, he was perceived to be Maliki's enabler during the effort to unseat the latter in the early summer of 2012. Two years later as Mosul was falling partly due to Maliki's miscalculations and sectarian chauvinism, who thought it would be wise to promote McGurk to serve as Gen. John Allen's deputy? Was it ever considered by the Obama administration how confusing and infuriating such an appointment would be for the Iraqi politicians who tried to enact a no-confidence vote against Maliki? And when McGurk was promoted yet again as Allen's replacement, were those considerations revisited? Again, this points to a certain lack of seriousness, a complacency that carried over from before Mosul into the response to Mosul. McGurk is still at his job, and his big show scheduled for mid-July is a conference for a united Sunni leadership to be held in Baghdad, brokered in part by the Saudis and the Turks. That's really great, except we needed it two years ago.

In this case, the better-late-than-never approach is not much of a consolation, nor is it even useful, because singularities create their unique sense of space and time. History was reset, nay

erased, by the willful destruction of antiquities. There was more to it than symbolism and shock. It went beyond the destruction of idolatrous Buddhas somehow intertwined with Shia Hazara identity of the Bamian Valley. It was a manifestation of singularity. It was meant to convey the idea that Islamic State is more of an immediate reality to the destiny of the Middle East than the Nergal Gate of Mosul, or even the iconic minaret whose epithet the city was known by for centuries. The jihadists get to rewrite the history of Assyria, even the period of medieval Islam, in ways that cannot be undone. They do this because monuments speak to the confidence of nations. When a structure lasts for centuries, when the name of its erector carries through the fog of memory, this stands as an inspiration for young men and women to strive for great things, to escape the clutch of mortality. It stands in reserve, as capital, cajoling nations towards greatness. The jihadists smashed that confidence, ensuring that only their ideas would convey a sense of rebirth and rejuvenation. Sure, replicas of the lost antiquities can be commissioned, but they will serve as a reminder of the impermanence of the past when the transformative jihadist storm came calling. Now match this contest of vision and will against what McGurk is trying to achieve with his belated conference.

In tallying up the ways the handling of Iraq was botched since Mosul fell by both Iraqis and Americans, consider too the curveball of the Kurdish referendum on independence, to be held on September 25. The Kurdish leaders who showed up to the meeting to set the date had no idea that this time it would indeed result in it. A referendum had been on the agenda, but it had also been on the agenda of previous meetings. Most of them had been briefed that the Barzanis did not get much buy-in for the idea from Washington, most recently during Masroor Barzani's visit. In fact, they got an indifferent shrug, and a half-hearted 'no'. The Kurds may have interpreted that as a good enough of a signal, that getting the ball rolling on independence would create a new reality, one the Americans may end up embracing after having first rejected it. Their interpretation misses a realization that the haggardness they encountered had more to do with a systemic reordering of American international priorities, a process at once erratic and rife with contradictions and quick reversals, premised upon divining the whims and biases of a president who is trying to figure it out for himself. There are grand oeuvres humming in his head, but the motifs within them have yet to be marshaled into a movement. The Kurds may think that they can ride one such motif towards independence while the memory of their usefulness in beating back the jihadists is still fresh. They may also sense that this moment of singularity and this level of unpredictability, this moment of strategic incoherence, may lead to a Kurdish state.

Many arguments can be made as to why this is the last thing the Middle East needs. I would suggest that one of the more salient of these is that talk of Kurdish independence is coming just as the people of Mosul emerge from the jihadist darkness. Not only did we fail to give them an optimistic vision for the future, but the first thing they will see, as they stand blinking

in the light, is the prospect that, once the Kurds are gone, they would become even a smaller minority relative to Shias within what remains of Iraq. In fact, soon after the Kurds leave, one can imagine Iraqi politics being consumed with Shia chauvinist talking points that there is no longer a reason to carry Mosul and Ramadi since the very idea of Iraq is dead, and that those Sunni populations there should go their own way as the Kurds did. Such talking points will garner votes. This could be Maliki's comeback. Then there is the prospect of Kurdish independence just as the Kurds (and really, that is how the SDF is perceived) are entering Raqqa. Again, the optics of what the future holds for the Arab Sunnis of Iraq and Syria are not 'encouraging', which is the exact opposite of what is desired as we prepare to declare victory over the caliphate.

All the happy talk now in circulation in Washington about how Arab tribesmen in Raqqa province are acclimating to subjection by the PYD-YPG, the dominating political-military vehicle of Syria's Kurds, seems to be an exercise in the willful evasion of all-too visible incongruities. The YPG is not simply an expression of national Kurdish aspirations, ameliorating away from full-blown independence for Syria's Kurds towards the compromise of a federalist autonomy. The hard-as-nails revolutionaries of the PKK, the parent organization acting through the YPG, seek to build a 'new society'. Their revolution is as audacious and ambitious as that of the jihadists. The happy-talkers are attempting to frame the challenge for America's role within the confines of 'nation-building' in dusty towns such as Tabqa—a steep ask as it is with this administration. I would have thought that the YPG trying to undo societal traditions among Kurds, Turks and Arabs would be a more serious and pressing challenge, something that should have made the Americans think twice about their alliance of convenience—what they describe as 'temporary'—with this group. Does anyone think that the grizzled cadres of the PKK, upon hearing that the U.S. may abandon them at one point down the road, would respond with yielding acquiescence? If anything, America's utilitarianism confirms all that they believe to be true of capitalistic powers. The PKK folks are using this phase in preparation for what comes next: more revolution. They can't help themselves, after all, they *are* revolutionaries. The jihadists figured this dynamic out early on, and chose to situate the Islamic State as the YPG's foil. The jihadists would be the shield of Kurdish, Turkish and Arab traditionalism. That is one reason why they went all out in Kobani. They wanted a monopoly in confronting the PKK's vision for societal engineering. The long-term consequences of these tensions are difficult to judge, but they certainly do not speak of an expected normalization of the revolutionary norms the YPG is imposing on Raqqa's Arabs, or even on traditionalist elements of Kurdish society for that matter, however much McGurk would like it to be so. Like Mosul, Raqqa is to fall to exhaustion, not vision.

While the Kurds are in a hurry, believing that it is the time to grab as much as they can from the bales of historic possibility, the Israelis are behaving as if they have all the time in the

world, thinking the frenzy around is yet one more instance of a region in distress, in a moment of redefinition. They may think that such creative rearrangements can actually be good for Israel. Wouldn't an independent Kurdistan be more likely to be part of a regional Israeli-led axis than keeping the states of Iraq and Syria intact? All the Israelis have to do for the time being is to tamp down Trump's enthusiasm, for he seems itching to apply his #LetsMakePeace! hashtag (first deployed on May 11, the day he met both Russia's Lavrov and FM of Ukraine's Klinkin) as soon as possible to the Arab-Israeli peace process. The Israelis have been served well by the 'Palestinians started it first' hedge in deflecting previous U.S. attempts at peace making. The Israelis are reflexively doing so again. But are they mistaken in assuming that the basics of the region are unchangeable, and the fires aglow over the horizon can eventually bring good tidings of an Israel-friendly archipelago of freshly minted breakaway states?

Israel's ambassador in Washington tried to ward off a giggling fit when Trump, while making small talk with the Israeli president, volunteered how nice it was to arrive in Israel after having been in the Middle East. The universal gasp of fact-checkers was almost audible as they reached for their smart phones to quickly set the record straight on Twitter. Yet for decades the Israelis have smugly projected that their country isn't really in the Middle East, since geography is a far lesser determinant of reality than mindset. And Israel's mindset is definitely un-Middle Eastern, or so they tell themselves. Technological advances have protected Israel from that geographical reality for a while, but technology has the habit of being cyclical, and evening out in stretches. At first it is an advantage, but it then democratizes, and others catch up. Development grinds down until the next wave of technological leaps arrives, making Israel quite vulnerable during that period of technological purgatory. That doesn't seem to be the case now. But will it become evident over a decade's time? Can the Israelis actually speak with such assuredness what with so much unpredictability ahead? 'Ha-kol b'seder, habibi.' What one gets instead is that the Israelis are telling the rest of the world to relax, that there is no particular urgency to millions of upturned lives a few dozen miles out from the Golan Heights, while casually imagining the great break-up of the Fertile Crescent, and the many friends Israel will have among those atomizing tribes, if only the IRGC can be tethered down.

A part of the Israeli national security body had been imagining just that prospect since the 1970s, even working towards it in places like Lebanon. It hasn't earned Israel much security. A case can be made that it gave them Hezbollah. This sort of thinking strikes me as particularly lazy and indulgent. Somehow the Jews, of all people, who have seen a number of singularities during their 5,000-plus year story, have forgotten how events work up towards tragedies. How is it that they cannot see that potent ideas, such as resurrecting the caliphate, can reset historical progression in the same way Zionism did?

I am reminded of a situation from my pre-pubescent childhood, living the intense life of a budding stamp collector. The Stamp Club in Amman would meet every Friday, occupying a

post office on its day off in the Lweibdeh neighborhood. This was a serious gathering, not child's play. The average age was 60-something, and all the luminaries of the Jordanian stamp collecting scene were there, together with a smattering of Iraqis and sometimes a Lebanese or a Syrian, bartering, selling, buying and trading in an atmosphere of obsessive, quiet determination. I remember myself having a constant film of nervous perspiration on my body, as I avidly covet a block of eight with a running overprint error here, or a first day cover with the signature of King Hussein on it there. The atmosphere provided good training for a life in business, for most transactions involved thinking along the lines of a long game. I am not sure why, but in that environment, and even at that age, I registered who was a Christian, who was a Circassian, and that other fellow was a Palestinian, and over there sits the son of the head of the Ba'ath Party. I was even mindful of his tribal affiliation. That old guy in the corner used to be an officer in the Mukhabarat, and so on and on. Such categorizations, that is, 'reading the room' was probably another tool that I may have instinctively found useful in the long game to dominate a market; such identities were useful as they provided vulnerabilities. For example, expressing fascination with a stamp designed for the state of Armenia in the early part of the twentieth century (but never used), it being the pride and joy of an Armenian member, because such admiration may get him to sell a mint set of Faysal the First to me that he would otherwise not part with. Stamp fever, like many obsessions, can make one do unscrupulous things.

I assume there had to be a palpable tension in the room for the spectrum of diversity to register with me in the first place. Although I don't recollect how I would come to know certain pieces of information, but it could have happened when someone would have leaned over to me to malign, in a whispered voice, so-and-so, the such-and-such, who had cheated him on a trade, or stolen something, or had been responsible for whatever hurt was festering at the time within the chest of my interlocutor. Yet it was a manageable tension, even genteel. Until it wasn't.

I don't know what particular trade set off Ahmed, a middle-aged East Bank Muslim Jordanian lawyer, against Francis, the West Bank Christian octogenarian. It could have been percolating for years. Trading with Francis (in this case, pronounced Frensees), was an exasperating ordeal, for he played the long game well. He was a character, an institution unto himself within the little world of the Stamp Club. Almost everyone, myself included, had ongoing, years-long negotiations running with him for particular trades. But the muffled babble of the club was punctured one Friday when Ahmed, while shouting and frothing at Francis over some stamp-related vexation, threatened that every Christian church in Jordan would be burnt down. Francis looked down, frightened. All the members of the club had looked up. None said a word. I felt that I should have done so, but why speak up when all are silent. Ahmed kept shouting some other things that I can't recollect, while another member

softly guided him outside to cool off. Ahmed's threat hung over the club, and something changed. Francis was wounded, and that changed the dynamic of how to deal with him. The fact that he was Christian emboldened a certain predatory bearing within the Muslims during later trades. His cowering in response was heartbreaking. Francis was no longer Francis.

Will it take a mundane dispute such as two farmers arguing over irrigation rights, or a messy divorce, to set off a 'burn every church' moment in Raqqa a year or two from now, for example? Given the tensions that relying on the YPG entail, this eventuality should be an easy call to make, one that could have been averted had there been a grander strategy at play, one that does not carelessly add to the piles of dry gunpowder already lying about. If that moment comes, will we casually mutter to no one in particular, "...after the ruining of Mosul"?

Mosul was not merely an important Middle Eastern city. It and its environs boasted one of the most diverse populations remaining in the region, teaming with Syriac, Chaldean, Armenian and Assyrian Christians, Twelver Turkomans, Shabaks, Yezidis and a variety of Sufi orders, clans and tribes. When the jihadists took control of the destinies of these communities, many ascribed the ensuing brutality to primordial, nihilistic tendencies among low-class jihadist thugs hungering after wealth and sex. There was more going on. The manner by which the Islamic State treated the minorities revealed fundamental methodologies in its strategy. It should have informed us as to the scope of jihadist determination.

"It seemed forever, until it wasn't." When change comes, everything can change, including the past. How well can the past be known if one has misunderstood the importance of the events that one has lived through? Clearly, what those events seemingly portended was missed, otherwise how would one be so surprised when change came? Not everyone misses the 'signs' but such Cassandras are often relegated to the fringe. As such, the diversity of the Stamp Club was a positive, endearing aspect, until it wasn't. The parts of the Middle East that survived the upheavals of the last few years look stable. Until they aren't.

There was something visceral, and ancient, about the wail that Nadia Murad let out as she walked towards her ruined home, in the village of Kojo which had been liberated by the Popular Mobilization Units a few days earlier. Murad, a Yezidi woman, had been a slave under the Islamic State. She survived and went on to tell the world of the tragedy that had befallen her people. But even for her, returning to her former home seemed to be the moment when she fully realized what had happened. Watching a video of the scene, one may be bothered by the intrusiveness of the cameramen, swarming as they were around Murad while she ambled over the debris of a collapsed roof, leaning down to pick up the torn pieces of a photograph. Another woman, presumably her sister, was pounding a closet with her hands, seemingly imploring a piece of furniture to bear witness to a previous life, now lost. The most accurate numbers have it that 6,417 Yezidis such as Murad fell under the sway of the jihadists. Some escaped. Some were 'purchased' and 'manumitted' (many bought and freed by the sheikhs of

the Shammar tribe). Some were liberated. Many were killed, or died while escaping their tormenters, their remains found and accounted for. There are still 3,027 missing. I remember, during one of the election rounds, it became clear to me that Iraq boasted far more Yezidis than previously thought. Suddenly, one could project a population of upwards of 300,000 rather than 90,000—the pre-2003 estimate. It was an uplifting thought, that the Yezidis, after all that happened to them, were still around, and were a formidable electoral bloc that could sway the politics of Mosul province, including the destinies of their neighbors, many of whom were former tormentors.

Many Yezidi women let out wails such as Nadia's over the centuries, there just weren't any cameras around to capture them. But this time feels different. I was standing barefoot on the rain dabbled cobblestones of the Lalish shrine, on a morning last December, trying to bring my freezing toes as close as reasonably possible to the log burning in the shrine's inner courtyard. While huddled by the side of the guide who was to show me the inside of the place, I registered a flash of fear on the faces of the young Yezidi men and women, trying to warm themselves too, when the guide told them that I was a Muslim. He must have seen it too, since I could make out in my rudimentary Kurdish that he added that I am just a nominal Muslim, and there's nothing to be worried about. Earlier, a minibus had arrived packed with a number of families. The guide made inquiries, looked at the driver with a little hesitation, then turned to me to say, "this is a mix of Yezidis, Muslims and Christians, who are all friends, coming to visit the shrine," as if to say to me, and to reassure himself that everything, after the nightmare his people had gone through, will be fine. These flashes of fear and hesitation, followed by artificial reassurances speak to something that had broken inside them. I was watching it on display at their holiest of holies, on their own turf. A turf they have safeguarded for centuries, losing it at times when their enemies grew too many, but always rebuilding it anew. Later, when his guard was a little down, and when he felt the trust growing between us, the hurt and anxiety, simmering just behind the façade of "everything will be back to normal once again," bubbled up. Over the next few centuries Yezidism is likelier to survive in Hamburg than in Sheikhan, the nearest town to the shrine, he told me. The prospect of minorities mass migrating to the West after a spate of pogroms and upheavals is nothing new, but at one point, their populations cannot be self-sustaining in their original home, and a story centuries in the making comes to a close in its native land.



The inner courtyard at Lalish

Recently, I was re-reading Gertrude Bell's, *The Desert and the Sown*, an account of her early twentieth century travels in Ottoman lands that today would be parts of Israel, Jordan, Syria,

Lebanon and Turkey. I was struck by one scene, as Bell was traveling from Homs to Crac des Chevaliers, by tagging along with an armed escort transporting two Ismaili deserters to a prison further up the journey. Poked about his faith by one of the travelers, the Ismaili asked whether Bell had heard of the Agha Khan. She responded that not only had she heard of him, but had met him too. The prisoner grasped her stirrup, imploring her to affirm his fervor for a man he deemed of divine guidance, “Is he not a great king?” Bell’s retelling of the incident reminded me of a similar scene I had experienced myself a decade ago, in Salamiyeh, an Ismaili bastion of lore, repopulated by Ismailis banished from their mountain keeps further west along the Mediterranean highlands in the last couple of centuries. I was chatting with an acquaintance, a sixty-something leftist secular intellectual, who had been born into an Ismaili family. He owned a small store in the town, selling and renting books, stationary and operating a copy machine. Joining us was an Ismaili schoolteacher who works in the districts further east whose demographics are changing as more Sunni Arab Bedouins settle the lands. We were discussing the sectarian tensions that these changes were stirring (this was years before the civil war) and what the regime was doing to confront the rise of Sunni religiosity in the surrounding area, including proselytization efforts aimed at converting Ismailis. It turned out that the regime wasn’t doing much, seeing that it found my friend the leftist intellectual to be a far greater threat than the Salafists (he would periodically be hauled into prison during the years I knew him). At one point a weathered old man, who looked as if he were well into his nineties, entered the tiny store, and motioned that he seeks to duplicate some photographs he was carrying. They were photos of the current Agha Khan. The old man had wrapped them in cloth, which he unfolded with the deference reserved for a holy relic. The intellectual obliged the old man and treated the pictures with equal respect. But then a puzzled look descended upon the old man’s face as he saw that the copier was not reproducing the colors of the photographs. He was just staring at the copies, not saying a thing, trying not to betray his anguish as to why the copies didn’t come out as the originals. The store owner realized what just happened and tenderly explained to him that this machine can’t do what he wants it to do, and that he must go to the town photographer to take pictures of the photos and then develop them. I cannot envision a similar moment—this sincere veneration for the Agha Khan—reoccurring anywhere in the Middle East a hundred years from now. In fact, it would be surprising to think that this scene, one that I had witnessed, and Bell had witnessed too, and had gone on for centuries prior, would be replicated in Salamiyeh in thirty years. The trend lines suggest fewer Ismailis, more Salafis.

A few decades ago Ismaili officers in the Syrian Army had the gall to try to mount a coup. Generally speaking, minorities throughout most of the twentieth century felt as if they were rooted in these lands and that their relevance was not measured by their numbers, but rather by their resilience and tenacity. Having survived drastic odds, they still made it to a century of

hitherto unimaginable opportunity to reinvent identities and to recapture a purpose. They were infused with much confidence during those heady days. I think of what they were feeling, and what is happening now, and I am chillingly reminded of a line from the movie *Schindler's List* (1993): "But this storm is different. This is not the Romans. This storm is the SS." This storm, this singularity, is the 'IS'.

Last month Arabic media and Washington's think tanks revisited the fifty year anniversary of the Six Day War, alternatively called the June War. Much has been said ever since that event of an 'awakening', a sobering among Arabs, having had so much of their nationalistic bravado defeated by 'wretched' Jews. What strikes me is that many of them were Jews who had thought earlier in their childhoods that they were about to embark on exciting, confident new lives and hopeful paths as citizens of Egypt, Iraq and Syria. Baghdadis, Aleppines and Alexandrines turned Israeli, fighting other Baghdadis, Aleppines and Alexandrines. All this happened within a generation. The Jewish neighbor, classmate, or business partner had turned into the dangerous Jew, one who necessitated maximalist eradication. It was this earlier perception of a minority that the jihadists expanded to other minorities. Their 'final solution' was to be different from previous ways of subjugating minorities in the Middle East. As bad as it got sometimes, even Ibn Taymiyya, the thirteenth century Islamic scholar from whom Salafists and jihadists draw inspiration, drew the line at the wholesale extermination of Twelver Shias, Christians and Jews. He was writing at a time when Islamdom was besieged by Mongols and Crusaders, so he was no 'softie' enthused by diversity. But he narrowed the path towards Islamic regeneration to merely wiping out Alawites and the Druze and issuing a reprieve to the laypersons of other sects and religions. The Zaraqawists went further. In order to resurrect empire, even the laypeople of minorities shall be brought to heel or be annihilated, in the same way the artifacts and monuments of past glories were levelled. There can only be room for a unitary vision, and they wanted to demonstrate that they would go to every length to attain it.

In February 2015, twenty one Coptic Christians were murdered by the Islamic State on a beach in Libya. The jihadists said it was "revenge for Kamillia". This was a continuation of a campaign that began in Baghdad, on October 31, 2010, when Islamic State of Iraq fighters were commanded to take Christian hostages at the 'Our Lady of Salvation' church upon the orders of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. They were to exchange these hostages for "Kamillia and Wafa". The standoff between the jihadists and the Iraqi security forces ended in tragedy when the latter stormed the church, which resulted in dozens of fatalities. Kamillia Shehata and Wafa Constantine were two Coptic Christian women in Egypt who had converted to Islam at varying instances, or so the story goes. According to a widely believed narratives in Egypt and across the Middle East, they were abducted back by the Coptic Church, tortured and forced to renounce their conversion. Gossip had it that one of them was killed because she refused to

do so. The jihadists were using this story to demonstrate that they will not allow any slight, however small, to stand, especially coming from a Middle Eastern minority, even after many years had passed. This was in keeping with their claim to be the defenders of Muslim, specifically Sunni, honor.

The jihadist approach to the Copts was a rehash of their response to the murder of Du'a Khalil Aswad in April 2007. Du'a had eloped from her Yezidi town near Mosul with a Muslim lover, and converted. She was brought back by her kin and horrifyingly stoned to death. Footage of the crime found its way to the internet. By August of that year, over one thousand Yezidis were murdered in retribution by jihadists and other Salafists. Even back then the jihadists understood the utility of picking upon a 'dangerous' minority, one whose very presence poses an existential threat to Sunnism, or so the jihadists could claim, and then applying maximalist eradication as a counter to such a threat. Whereas the jihadists could make an easy case that present day Shias and Alawites are an existential threat to Sunnis in Iraq and Syria, it would be a stretch to say the same about Yezidis or even Egyptian Copts—most recently in February, they warned the Copts of the town of 'Arish in northern Sinai to leave or else. But that disconnect does not matter to the jihadists. They seek to ignite whatever fuel they can find, even the anger that Ahmad, the stamp collecting engineer, harbored against Francis. If Ahmad has a grandson who shares his opinions on church burnings, that boy is already primed and is a few steps away from turning jihadist. Getting him there is what jihadists are seeking to do. Such is the scope of their ambition.

"Boo-hoo-hoo. So what if the Middle East went through many tribulations? Haven't other locales around the world gotten it just as bad? Sadder tales can be told of India's partition. The mystery and innocence of folk reverence is eroding across the modernizing, hyper-connected world; the Ismailis were going to change regardless of creeping Salafism. Why would a middle class family in Connecticut care if the region empties of its Jews and Yezidis? How does that pay the mortgage? Why would a perennially troubled part of the world get more attention than China, or Latin America, or Russia, places that can actually interfere with how prosperous middle class America gets? As long as the oil and shipping lines are secure, and Israel is telling us to take it easy, what's the big fuss anyway? Keep the terrorists over there, and let them burn themselves out."

These are compelling points for Western audiences fatigued by the Middle East. Trump expressed something along these lines during the campaign. Essentially, he had cribbed them from Obama's 'doctrine', which in turn was channeling what Realists have long said about the region.

The Realists look at the driving ban on Saudi women, shrug and utter, "culture." They stretched the argument to explain away why jihadists had brought back sex slavery into the twenty first century. This did not warrant mobilizing societal and civilizational outrage as the

abolitionist movements of the nineteenth century had done, the Realists reasoned. This can be handled by an air campaign; ‘release the drones’. The Realists looked at what the jihadists were doing and told themselves that they can’t do much about tribal war spoils, even if that involved women and girls. Obama was thinking along those terms. He misunderstood that slavery in this case was being applied strategically. The jihadists were normalizing the dormant precepts of a world religion, because if empire was to be resurrected, Muslims needed to shed any queasiness that global liberalism may have introduced into their scruples as to what is acceptable. The ‘End of History’ comes to mean something very different. It is the inverse of the success of the liberal world order. Describing the goals of the European Union as an attempt “to transcend sovereignty and traditional power politics, establishing a transnational rule of law” in a post-historical world now apply equally as well to caliphal pretensions of the Islamic State, though not its record of victories—yet.

The jihadists were playing a higher minded game than the Realists. Their ambitions mandated it. The Realist tolerance for dysfunction in the Middle East, treating it as a cultural handicap, explains the lack of seriousness and clarity manifested by Western policy circles. It lulls them into thinking that they can leave the likes of Bin Salman to keep a lid on things, even though it should be patently clear that the leadership required to bring order back to the region can only come from Washington.

It is a curious cycle how the failures of foreign policy Realism looped back and paved the way for Trump. The Realists assured the American public that all was well, that the September 11 attacks were something of a fluke, and that save for a few neoconservative blunders that followed, everything will be brought back into place. Yet somehow, the fire was not contained, the failures could not be papered over, and a population that the elite thought was not paying attention decided to send Donald Trump to the White House. How elegant of a comeuppance!

Trump broke away from his primary rivals in the immediate aftermath of the San Bernardino shootings. Trump’s incendiary remarks struck a chord with a part of the electorate. Especially since it was in such stark contrast to Obama’s detached stance on the event. It was that segment of the voting market that turned him into an anti-establishmentarian candidate who could potentially make it all the way. What was a relatively minor terrorist event inspired by events in the Middle East, ended upturning many ‘givens’ in a structured and stable society as that of America’s. Sure, the system must have broken down along the way to allow it to be vulnerable to such outside triggers. But however way it came about, jihadism became one of the litmus tests for the credibility of the elite, whose foreign policy ‘deep state’ bureaucracy is policed by the ‘Praetorian Guards’ of Realism.

I am always struck by how few people realize that the Trump presidency became realizable only after San Bernardino, when he was willing to speak in terms too stark for his Republican primary competitors to match. There were no Russian hackers then. No Wikileaks dumps.

Trump broke away ahead of the pack because a Muslim couple had been inspired by the visions of a native of Samarra, compelling them to shoot at their co-workers. One of the key duties the establishment was delegated to do, to keep America safe, had been fumbled. Then downplayed. Enter the master pugilist, Donald Trump, with his incendiary catch phrases and tweets. The Realist establishment had misjudged whether the wayward sparks of the faraway fires of the Middle East would pose an existential threat to their own ‘credibility’. Trump was the vehicle of a reckoning.

The breakdown of rational predictability undergirds the demise of trust in institutions. Getting the Middle East that wrong took its toll. Elites may think that the ‘deplorables’ in Hicksville don’t follow world events that closely, but they do so when a loved one is deployed in Baquba. And a soldier that served there will keep following events, wondering whether his service, whether his country’s costly power projection, had left a mark on the trajectory of history. The Middle East is not an abstract set of dueling IR game theories for them. The Middle East is a measure by which they discern whether the elite knows what it is doing. Guess what happens when the news cycles keeps running with bombings in Baquba?

If for no other reason, this is why seriousness and clarity were in order, as a means of self-preservation of America’s own Old Order. But how did Realism fumble things so badly? How did its high priests allow the Middle East to become an outsized threat to the international liberal order that they have worked assiduously to build, with all the wealth and security that it afforded them? How is it that in the year 2017 elites are worried that their own liberal bastions deep into Western territory, are under siege by a reawakening of Western illiberalism? The answer partly resides in the illiberalism inherent within Realism.

Liberalism assumes itself to be a valid construct for all of humanity. However, when its applicability for some is questioned, it should be questioned for all. The Realists made the case that liberalism is inapplicable to Middle Easterners, Eurasians or the Chinese, for example. In doing so, they ceded some of the idea’s totality and indirectly undermined its comprehensive applicability to the West. There was something intrinsically misaligned between particular cultures and liberalism—‘Islamic Exceptionalism’, for instance—or so the Realists argued. Yet if liberalism were to be culturally-specific rather than species-specific, then a regressive case can be made (and is now being made) that argues for the exceptionalism of Hungarian culture, or American culture, or Poland’s.

When Middle Eastern liberals called in for reinforcements as they stormed the barricades of the region’s decrepit Old Order during the various Iranian, Arab and Turkish Springs, Western liberalism hesitated, prevaricated, and ultimately decided to stand down. Many Western liberals and Realists retroactively made the case that the venture was doomed from the beginning. Other Realists would have argued that tinkering with the Old Order—starting with

the Iraq War—had awakened sleeping ‘unknowable’ demons. Yet, they have never answered for why that Old Order gave us the attacks of September 11, 2001, way before the Iraq War.

President Bush, a liberal Idealist (arguably), could not muster the civilizational leverage to give liberalism a fighting chance in Iraq. Backtracking on that goal began early as the first signs of pushback both internally and externally. It manifested itself in an indigenous and jihadist insurgency that was enabled by regional powers and second-guessing what to do about it back in Washington. Liberalism lacked the tenacity required to wade through a knife fight, or maybe it faltered because it didn’t believe too deeply in the global writ of its mission. President Obama, a Realist (arguably), decided not to do much in Syria, early on, because of Iraq. ‘Assume control of the situation and replace the disorder with what?’ He must have thought. Certainly not liberalism. Certainly not ‘over there’.

This is lazy thinking. I am sure it can be called other things, but its starting point is intellectual indolence. The cultural incompatibility argument neglects some salient facts, such as that liberalism—and its half-sister, cosmopolitanism—had a head start among some Middle Easterners when parts of the West still had slavery and Jews were routinely pogrom-ed. Boris Johnson’s paternal great-grandfather was an Ottoman liberal (...it’s Boris bin Stanley bin Osman Kemal ‘Johnny’ bin Ali Kemal Bey for all you genealogically-curious folks). Middle Eastern liberalism and its proponents were not thwarted back then by ‘Islamic Exceptionalism’. What killed them off were the local variations of newly imported Western illiberalism in the mid-twentieth century. Islamism later moved in to fill voids vacated when those illiberal ideas lost their luster. Fast forward to our current era we find that both half-hearted liberalism and hardheaded Realism failed to ‘fix’ either Iraq or Syria. The results of that failure—resurgent jihadism and population displacement—now froth at the shores of the West. How fitting it is that the Brexit proponents and Trump have drawn some (much?) of their appeal from a populist fear in America and Europe of that creeping foam.

Liberalism is all or nothing. It is either suitable for all mankind, or it should be questioned, as the Western illiberals do, nowadays. Traditional Western leftism, so averse to the idea of power projection in the pursuit of resources and at the expense of weaker peoples, has been subsumed under the rubric Realism by the ‘New Left’, which subcontracted its foreign policy to the Realists. Instead of caring too much for the meek, they have enthusiastically adopted the credo of caring too little if vital interests are not at stake. To temper the moral contradiction inherent within the marriage of Leftism and Realism, the New Left promotes largely symbolic gestures of compassion such as taking in refugees. However, if Realism looks away from global war zones in which the West has no stake, war zones continuing to export refugees in large numbers, the taught balance becomes untenable. It reaches such a proportion that it stirs a nativism within Western cultures rejecting the advent of wave upon wave of refugees. The ideological inbreeding amongst Realist and ‘members only’ liberal clans gave

expression to this recessive illiberal gene. Realism is at its core a manifestation of anti-intellectualism, which explains why its utilitarian promiscuity can carry over to become the foreign policy of the 'New Right', aligning seamlessly with the latter's notion of cultural superiority.

Assigning blame for 9/11 or the failure of the Arab Spring or the emergence of Trump on the Realists is unlikely to be met with consensus any time soon. But can we at least agree that Realism, as applied to the Middle East, was and is not a reliable pathway to a grand strategy? The challenges posed by that region tell us that Realism is not a school of thought; it is a school of management. It is mechanical, tactical, reactive. It cannot articulate strategy because it merely follows and readjusts to events. As such, there is no accountability. If all one is predicting is varying levels of messiness, and all one gets (or begets) is messiness, then who's to blame? Therefore it suits careerists within bureaucracies well: there is no risk involved in attempting to prescribe bold, fundamental recommendations for the prevention of instability, and when, consequently, instability becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, looping back into itself, the average bureaucrat can claim clairvoyance.

The decisions taken by the crafters of America's policy towards the region in the year spanning December 2010 (the first rumblings of the Arab Spring) and December 2011 (the departure of the last U.S. troops from Iraq) were disastrous. Yet how can these decisions be held to account if the overall Realist line, that messiness was inevitable because there is no way of fixing things, can be brandished unchallenged? Another fallback defense of Realism has it that it is far more jadedly appreciative of the human condition, that it has shed the Pollyannaish delusions of better outcomes as man is essentially beast to man, and all that matters is competition. This Hobbesian outlook sits awkwardly with that other ware that Realism attempts to peddle, globalism, and the promise of cooperation and positive interconnectedness it brings to a liberal world order. Save for a few irredeemable zones on the global map, other nations can prosper together through trade and avert negative competition through diplomacy and dialogue. But it becomes difficult to sell Western societies land deeds to this Potemkin village if vehicles continue to mow down pedestrians on the waterfront in Nice or on Westminster Bridge. The last rhetorical stand of American Realism is that it had always counselled isolationism, that America assures safety from global mayhem by virtue of its distant shores and the lack of aggressive competitors within its hemisphere. But retreating away from distant fires no longer ensures peace. While Realists throw their hands up when confronted with the darker aspects of human nature, the jihadists seek to harness these characteristics towards a plan of action. And when jihadist ambition seeps across frontiers and borders, then the whole edifice of stability shudders. Such is the scale of Realist failure.

Shaming and naming the architects of Realism is futile at this stage. But let us deny them the conceit of branding the act of deflecting and delaying resolution as a doctrine resulting

from thought, erudition and reflection. They do not deserve the accolades of intellectualism. A half-measure followed by another does not amount to intellectual coherence. One would expect a little more self-awareness from the self-described devotees of Thucydides who disproportionately populate the upper echelons of America's national security apparatus. If their notion of 'grand strategy' is arrived at by ignoring data that doesn't fit it, ascribing incongruences to the ambiguity of cultural 'otherness', and by retreating from adversity, then it should be called by something other than strategy.

What happens in the region is not a side show annoyingly intruding upon the highly meditative task of what to do about China or Russia, as the Realists would like to think. The high priests of Realism have become a burden on the debate. They are a drag on power projection, for they have failed to construct a narrative warranting trust in institutions, and the sacrifices necessary to safeguard order. Their very presence incites popular hostility towards an elite that tried to tell voters "move along, there's nothing to see here" when events emanating from Middle East loomed large on the world stage in 2001, 2011 and 2014. They have failed to provide answers. They have failed to fix things. They have failed at grand strategy, the prerogative and responsibility of great powers. The region, the threats of jihadism, have become kitchen table issues for American and European families. The mayhem is not carried to them only by the nightly news, they can hear it outside their doors. It is of little value to tell them that they are more likely to die from a bolt of lightning. They can tell the difference between a random act of god and an act of a failing body politic. And the show is about to become more arresting. Or not. We just don't know. And why don't we know? Because Realism is lazy, unserious, befuddled.

* * *

The crafters of policy in places like Washington, London, Riyadh, Cairo, Baghdad, Tehran and Ankara had three years to come up with a grand strategy. If we presume that a general sense of Sunni alienation was one of the causes of jihadism, there is no discernable strategy to address it. As such, we are far away from what can be qualified as a jihadist defeat. But why should we assign such importance to Sunni resentment in the first place, some may ask? After all, they brought it on themselves. If the image of the smoldering ruins of their once storied cities, such as Aleppo and Mosul, is not enough to rouse them to action and sobriety, then that is their problem, their failing, their lot. If the Saudis are indeed facing an existential situation of regional imbalances, and yet they cannot find it within themselves to forcefully move into

an arena such as Syria, then what can others do to save them? Better to wait it out, to let the upheaval—if that is indeed what is in the offing—take its course.

Isn't unfair to indict the wider body of Realism by its failures in the Middle East when the place is so unyielding, so irrational for a grand strategy to take hold, as Realists argue? They say that strategy is an illusion when confronted with the levels of randomness and complexity that the region presents. The Realists add that it is near-impossible to articulate coherence or communicate a narrative because the cultures over there are too hostile to take the West at its word. The peoples of the region are cognitively predisposed to misread any grand strategy as one that is out to get them, so why even try? Furthermore, messaging cannot move in tandem with actions because the terrain can surprise planners with unexpected friction given how much uncertainty abounds, thus undermining one's best-laid plans. They are being clever by half. They conveniently neglect to address the 'knowables' in the situation: that in the last three years we should have been mindful of optics when it came to Sunnis, for example. And that realization should have been prioritized so as to induce the necessity of a strategy because the last time it went unaddressed it gave us the Islamic State circa 2014. When pushed into a corner, the Realists will point at the finger at liberal internationalists (on the Left) and neoconservatives (on the Right), claiming that Realism cannot do much because the mess that those other schools of policy have wrought. Thus, the Realists are the victims in all of this, cleaning up after others. Again, this is a convenient fallacy. The last smudgy fingerprints of liberal internationalism still evident on the lands of the former Ottoman Empire and Persia can be spotted in Bosnia, and on Bill Clinton's Arab-Israeli peace process. The neoconservatives had their hands on the throttle for a few months in the lead-up to the Iraq War, but their irrelevance began with Paul Bremer's appointment as the Coalition Provisional Authority's head two months after it. The Realists have been effectively in charge of America's Middle East policy for decades and seem to be so in the new Trump administration. One need to look no further than the career and influence of Brent Scowcroft, the Realist princeling who inherited Kissinger's crown in the post-Cold War era. "I love that guy" gushed Obama. The current National Security Advisor went seeking his counsel and wisdom when first given the nod for the job. Obama's critical decision to refrain from tipping the scales in Syria early on its uprising, when the promise of a positive transition from Asad rule was possible, and before conditions soured to the point whereby jihadism could take root, was purely Scowcroftian in its reasoning. Its knee-jerk aversion to thinking creatively and boldly also informs the restraint that ended up hobbling the potential of Trump's visit.

Realists justify their method of managing the region because of its inherent uncertainty. But at one point, the uncertainty assumes a proportion so immense that both exponentially expands and coalesces into a singularity *because* of that method. They refuse to acknowledge that their formula had led us here. We have meandered into this mess because we lacked a

grander strategy that incorporates the exercise of warfare with a vision for an enduring peace. Realists forget that the images of destruction in Aleppo and Mosul look very much like the leveling of Najaf and Karbala following Saddam Hussein's response to the 1991 Shia Uprising, which came about to a large degree because the rebels believed that America had a grand strategy following the tyrant's invasion of Kuwait. They took America's president at his word when he said that the world would support their cause. George H.W. Bush chose not to follow through. That too was a Scowcroftian decision; he was the national security advisor then. That bitter memory compels the forces that Suleimani can muster today, a quarter of a century after the calamity. The Shias have not forgotten. They still act upon that memory to the detriment of stability in the region. It explains to a degree the irrationality of their rejection of America's words when it came back as their liberator. So why assume that the present images of urban collapse will be passed over and forgotten by the region's Sunnis? Supposing that the situation will henceforth remain static is an unreasonable bet, especially if we proceed as we seem to be without a plan. Saudi Arabia is the gem of the Realists: in their eyes, the kingdom is a safe harbor for the twin objectives of safeguarding energy flows and preventing the coalescence of regional mobilization against Israel. As long as it stands, the validity of their 'plan' stands too. This too is an unreasonable bet as we have seen. Is the possibility that the jihadists would inherit Mecca together with all the hardware the West is selling to the Saudis really that remote? The Realists poo-pooed several projections in the recent past that at first seemed remote but were later realized. What are the implications of carelessly taking them at their word now? Is theirs a good enough playbook in managing a global liberal order?

The Middle East has been a primary geopolitical concern for the last two centuries. There were interests at stake meriting such a standing. Even if we suppose that such interests have grown less relevant, whether due to technological leaps or the devaluation of once-important motivators such as the right to unimpeded Christian worship in Jerusalem, for example, the Middle East is demonstrating, by being an incubator for radicalism, that it can disrupt Realist prescriptions for other parts of the globe. Thus, failing to stabilize it is a measure of a failing management model. A deeper analysis should be asking whether failure here is an indicator of a failing elsewhere. For example, did the Realists see Russia's projection of power into Crimea, and then into Syria, coming?

Will we be describing the past in terms of a lesser and larger caliphate? I don't know, and it doesn't count as easy-to-dismiss Cassandra-ism—the rhetorical tool that Realists employ to disparage dissent—if no certainty of doom and gloom can be proclaimed. I am not harping on about a darker dystopia to come. I am suggesting that we are at strategic inflection point where unpredictability on a grand scale should prove humbling. It should tether our aspirations, and we should recognize how problematic that is in looping around into a cycle of perpetual instability and radicalization.

The conversation should not loiter in place, yammering endlessly about a confluence of factors or a gathering storm. This is no longer about a 'changing' Middle East: the region has already changed. It is irreversible. It is not containable. Look at the Turks. Just a decade ago they may have looked around the region and muttered that, despite their challenges, "At least, we're not Arabs. We are not like them." (...sort of like the elite's contempt towards 'deplorables') A decade ago they were a democratic-leaning, rapidly industrializing country that was exorcising its old ghosts and getting ready for European Union ascension. Look at them now. Others, such as Israel or nations further out west, should beware like-minded hubris. No structure, however durable, can withstand heat of such intensity emanating from nearby fires.

We can comfort ourselves by repeating the mantra that the appeal of such forms of radicalism are limited to the tiniest of minority opinions, but in reality, there is just no way of knowing. The usefulness of rational predictability is proving to be of limited value. Instead of wishful thinking, minds should be put together to plot out contingencies, allocation of resources, potential short-term and long-term alliances (even with entities that haven't been created yet), and the medium by which as-yet-to-be-announced adversaries would emerge and proliferate. Irrationality has demonstrated itself to be a powerful player in Middle Eastern news cycles and should be accorded the attention it deserves. Otherwise, the whole conversation, as it stands in the public domain, as it sidesteps controversy, and as it serves the purposes of 'I-told-you-so' fig leafing, especially by former Obama administration hands, is ultimately an exercise in futility, one of limited and all too meager returns. After all, Obama's Realists are still trying to convince us that their Iran deal was a savvy one, but coming as it did at the peak of the jihadist challenge in 2015, it ended up demonstrating America's acquiescence to Shia power and acknowledgement of Sunni irrelevance, as much of the Middle East saw it. That wasn't helpful, and the Realists will never admit it.

The probability of extreme, uncontrollable turbulence is too high, and it does not warrant a toleration of the generic, click-all-the-boxes 'memos' pervading the conversation about the Middle East, especially in Washington. America's foreign policy elite gets to set the emphasis and the priorities. The rest of the world, including both allies and adversaries, take their respective cues from their own interpretations of the conversation unfolding in Washington. America is not merely a participant in the conversation, with its president donning translation headphones and nodding along while the kings, emirs and sheikhs gathered in Riyadh prattle on about what they think should be done. America should be the host and arbiter of the conversation should this conversation need to go big and bold, because local and regional actors in the Middle East are simply not up to the task.

But what can be done, what would a conversation accomplish, when this elite's perspicuity is in decline, when its very sagacity, after so many failings, is questioned? What use is a

conversation when the window for action has closed? I maintain that the elite's failure to understand the Islamic State in terms as stark as that of a singularity, and what comes next is as frightening as a black hole, is a measure of its small-thinking obsolescence. Its failure to comprehend that the Trump visit constituted a last chance is further evidence of that. And if it is obsolete, why have a conversation at all? Suppose that stark recommendations for how deep the fix needs to go are suggested. In the present atmosphere, especially on tabooed topics such as Saudi Arabia, such insights would be relegated to the fringes, inoculated as it is by the distorting influence of largesse doled out to the very same gate-keeping Realist elite. Would this situation change if there is another shock to the system, such as another major country in the Middle East succumbing to chaos, or a large attack in a Western city? And whether at that time there will be the resourcefulness and dexterity required to try out unconventional approaches? One has to stop here and ask how is it that a mighty and vibrant power can find itself in such a situation? How is one supposed to process John McCain's diagnosis that Putin is more dangerous than the jihadists? Sure, Russian aspirations on the world stage should concern the Senator, but is Putin really a singularity on par, or even more frightening than the Islamic State? And this is coming from someone who knows the issues and has followed the region closely.

Almost a hundred years have passed since the beginning of the age of oil. There's a nice symmetry to all of this: a century since Sykes-Picot; a century since the British entered Baghdad; half a century since the 1967 War—the Arabs, in as much as there is such a shared sense of destiny, had fifty years to fix things since that debacle. They didn't. These numbers mark distances, spanning the memories of generations. Mosul was liberated on the third anniversary of its occupation by the Islamic State. The British ruled Iraq by direct mandate for three years too. Iraqis to this day use the English words 'bottle' and 'glass' to describe these particular vessels of fluids, even though there are perfectly adequate Arabic, Persian, and Turkish words for them in circulation prior to the advent of the British. Three years left a hundred year mark. It stands to reason that the memory of the caliphate, attempted, will linger. The videos of the Islamic State will live on online. Jihadist videos from fourteen years ago can still be tracked down. Young people will keep figuring out ways to re-watch them, despite the best efforts to erase the digital content. How will they process those images? Will they mutter to themselves "never again" meaning that they will never again tolerate the horrors inflicted by the jihadists on communities such as the Yezidis, or will "never again" mean that they won't allow another 'revolutionary' opportunity to pass without signing on?

By succumbing to one of the least bad and least uncertain options, relying on the Turks and Saudis to engage the fight directly on the Syrian battlefield, even though both are deeply flawed actors, we were hoping to buy some time, to earn some lag, following Trump's foray into the fire pit. Maybe that would have bought us a decade of relative clarity, waiting as we

must for an emergent and hopefully benevolent force to address the deeper fissures of the region. Had the Trump visit been consummated in a grander plan, then would that have perchance collapsed the incipient black hole, for a while at least? It wasn't to be. We are in that space when we can sense that another shoe should be dropping, yet we have little idea what it may look like or sound like or even entail. We have misjudged the meaning and magnitude of past events, eroding our confidence in reading what we see unfolding before us now. Policy palliatives seeking to firm up the remaining pillars of order in the region must contend with the gravitational pull of the singularity. We may differ on the measure of their sturdiness. I sense that they are too wobbly as it is, and I wouldn't build upon them.

Against the backdrop of this uncertainty we should build a policy Ark, one that would carry all the bits and pieces that may prove to be useful on the other side of the black hole, when we will need to build anew. It is akin to a salvage operation. To salvage all the ideas that we know are useful but whose time has yet to come because the policy atmosphere lacks the seriousness and clarity to nurture and empower them. We may not know what the future will look like, but we—those of us who care, who get upset when tragedy befalls a woman such as Nadia Murad, for example—should identify the tools necessary for a systemic reconstruction of cultures, persons and landscapes. This approach requires a new way of thinking about the region; deeper, bolder and more creative. It would entail, for example, tactical and timely revisions of Islam, done in a smart way and in tandem with how the jihadists deploy the religion to their ends. We need to gather vestiges and memorials from the age of cosmopolitanism, not to indulge in nostalgia, but as proof that it was once doable in Middle Eastern lands, with Middle Eastern letters and spoken in Middle Eastern tongues. Another 'salvageable' piece would be the ideas of locally-defined federalism and confederalism as a means to manage the various ill-fitting pieces. New ideological 'brands' such as *madaniyya* may carry over. How this all works together later is for a later cast of rebuilders to figure out.

But it all starts with a clear realization that the Middle East has changed in fundamental, irreversible ways, with the Islamic State being the singularity that shows how deep those changes go. In a sense, we would be confronting uncertainty by thinking like the jihadists do. They took what they needed from Islamic civilization to build their vessel and stitch together its pitch-black sails, to launch it when the gale winds of resentment turned optimal. What does it matter to them if we pedantically argue that they had misunderstood the Quran or the historical function of the caliphate? All that concerns them is whether their version of Islam makes it through the black hole that their grand strategy had created. We know so little about what follows, not even knowing how long it will last. The few of us who think this way, Americans, Middle Easterners and others around the world, who are concerned by this singularity, who exist on the fringes of the conversation, or feel unable to speak out too loudly

within the temples of foreign policy, dominated as they are by the high priests of Realism, should begin a discreet conversation away from the dominating convocation. We should build that Ark. Its contents may yet prove crucial in constructing a grand strategy when the time comes.

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