



August 31, 2018

Stations Along the Rim

by **Nibras Kazimi**

<https://talisman-gate.com/2018/08/31/stations-along-the-rim/>

Lately, I have taken to asking fellow Middle East watchers: “How long ago was Ali Abdullah Saleh killed?” Apart from a handful of dedicated Yemen watchers, most would say something along the lines “ummm, I guess a year ago...? Sometime early last year?” It is not a trick question, but it serves to demonstrate a point about the amount of noise and dissonance emanating from the region that we study. Saleh was killed during the first week of December 2017. He had been a fixture of Middle Eastern politics since the late 1970s; in fact he was the last survivor of an atavistic regional order that spanned the 1980s and 1990s. His killing

was lost in the fog of feverish news cycles and data inundation, thus giving the impression that he had died further back in time. What is also interesting about the responses one gets is that the question rarely elicits a sense of what a sensational event it was. At best it gets a shrug.

In a series of essays authored over the last two years, I have been asking whether revolutionary ideas in the Middle East, held as they were by determined minority factions, are actually losing out to majorities seeking stabilization—these being the two general directions facing the region’s varied populations. Some who are living within regional pockets of stability, such as the Israelis, do not concern themselves with this question. As they plot out the series of events since the turbulent seventies, they may place Saleh’s violent and unexpected death on a baseline of instability, one that is more or less straight, and flat, and manageable. Revolutionaries come and go, the annals of history are worn out with such delusions. “It will all come out with the wash, ebbing into abeyance and then draining along an even keel,” the cynics may say, indifferently. I fear they are underestimating the potency and scale of instability breaking out around them. Holding that there is nothing new that they had not faced down before is, to my mind, a perilous illusion. Others, who find the rate and fluctuation of high drama emanating out of the region somewhat worrying, may plot out an ascending gradient. But there is always the hope that stabilizing forces would counteract it, thus flattening out the line and maybe have it descend into a bell curve, bringing down the region’s temperature with it too. This second group expends much time and effort identifying these forces, whether they be individuals or actuarial indicators, which may precipitate such an encouraging turnaround. And who wouldn’t want to be reassured that it will all work out in the end? I maintain that both groups, the “nothing-to-see-here” crowd together with the “on the one hand, yet on the other hand” shillyshalliers, are lacking in imagination. Rather than a flat or ascending line, I see the confluence of events plotting out an ominous circle, or rather, actualizing the circular rim of a black hole. Fanciful, I know, but those are the stakes as I see them.

*



[N. Kazimi, *Civil War 5*, 2015, 30" x 60"]

The essays began on an [optimistic note](#), but then progressively turned gloomier. At the root of the gloom was the [inability to debate](#) the Middle East, whether in Washington or in other locales that should be concerned by how things are moving, without coagulating into parochially-minded poses re-litigating the policy disputes of years past, still *agita* with immediate urgency and heated frenzy. The vapidness of the conversation shows itself in how [an important opportunity](#) for re-engagement was wasted by policy-makers in the run-up and subsequent let-down of President Donald Trump's visit to Riyadh last year. Even though U.S. power and prestige took significant hits in the intervening period since that visit, the conversation about the Middle East within policy circles did not turn serious. It remains, mediocre, generic and middling, and has found a knack for carrying on confidently through embarrassment. That is why I deem the latest salvo of swagger, notably annulling the Iran deal, more of the unserious same, for there is little acknowledgment or inventory taken of just how bad the last year has been.

Black holes are preceded by norm-disrupting singularities; in my previous essay (['Arriving at Singularity'](#)) I described the Islamic State's caliphate as such a singularity. Even though the jihadist venture borrowed heavily from the trappings of an imagined past, it was a fundamentally new phenomenon. The many attempts at describing the roots of the Islamic State obscured what was most incredible about it: the caliphate had cannibalized and dramatically expanded upon the trend lines leading up to it. It unexpectedly turned itself into a force of immense mass, with a gravitational field all its own, one that is greater than the

aggregate of forces that brought it to be. It began bending the region's destinies towards its core and orbit. Singularity here is the distinction that the levels of unpredictability had expanded to the point whereby unpredictability is the norm rather than the outlier. The trajectories that molded a younger Abu Musa'ab al-Zarqawi and the Iraq he first encountered in the immediate aftermath of Saddam Hussein's toppling would not have forewarned the emergence of a twenty-first century caliphate. However, al-Zarqawi possessed the gift of imagination. He projected his vision unto the early stirrings of conflating sets of unpredictability—a post totalitarian landscape, the crescendo of sectarianism, a bumbling military occupation, new broadcast technologies by which to concoct and disseminate new narratives, and easy money and munitions, among many other factors. Al-Zarqawi then created a singularity, almost by sheer individual agency: what was borne out of unpredictability became unpredictability's amplifier.

“How so?” one would ask, “Didn't al-Zarqawi's caliphal singularity collapse at Mosul?” That is one way to look at it. And I concede that it would be a good example to cite by those who argue that the Middle East is beginning to stabilize. But the victory at Mosul does not sit well with me. Nine thousand civilians died and were buried under the rubble of the Old City during the last few weeks of fighting as thousands of Iraqi troops engaged three hundred jihadists. That is almost three times the number of immediate deaths at Halabja. A year on, the headlines out of Mosul are almost wholly consumed with the hundreds of bodies that are still being exhumed every couple of weeks, never mind any talk of extensive rebuilding. Mosul's urban essence and corporate identity—its sense of itself and its unique narrative arc, a significant one by regional standards—lie in broken heaps of concrete and stone. It was urban Mosul that preserved a dialect of Arabic that had been spoken a millennium ago across 'Abbasid Iraq, one that only survived elsewhere among Baghdadi Jews and within some smaller riverine towns. Mosul and its environs exhibited a kind of stubborn continuity relative to the rest of Mesopotamia. That is one reason why its hinterland remained so diverse and heterodox. However, after three years of jihadist rule, Mosul does not resemble its past self, and it is unlikely to come back to it. The same can be said about a number of places in Syria where the jihadist storm landed. Such is the power of a singularity. Its shocking ability to upturn the present and mutilate the past did not go unnoticed by the likes of Masood Barzani. Being a seasoned hand at high-stakes geostrategic gambling, he understood how awesomely new this whole phase was, and in that newness he perceived opportunity. Consequently, Masood made a lunge at Kurdish independence. Consensus had it that he miscalculated and lost. In his loss, many discerned the hand of stabilization, with the central state in Baghdad reasserting its confidence and control. But that narrative does not sit right with me either. What happened in Kirkuk—both Barzani's decision and then Baghdad's following response—was the first major stress test of singularity; it was a direct result of the jihadist gambit that left

a major Middle Eastern city like Mosul in ruins, an antiphon to singularity's deafening siren call. As such, I understand what happened differently: the event and its supposed resolution are not distance markers on the path towards stabilization. What we witnessed last October was the foundation of a 'station', one in a series of many others to come, of various magnitudes, which may plot out and shape the black hole's rim.

It is tempting to neatly process an event such as Kirkuk's along a timeline of a few weeks, running from genesis to climax and then petering out towards resolution. Another way to look at it is to consider how the city of Kirkuk came to be, from a starting point of millennia past, and what that story tells us about the present and what is to come. But that overly indulges the *longue durée* view—there is little appetite or even aptitude for such archaic approaches at a time of torrential events. Notwithstanding the preceding argument that much of what we are seeing today is 'new' in such a way that the past is not useful as a predictor, history affords us a sense of magnitude. It is because Kirkuk was historically important and relevant that we need to give the events more than a cursory glance before moving on to the next gush of headlines. Moreover, a deeper sense of history helps us discern between what can be explained as a manifestation of historical progression versus what is actually innovative and new even though it still swaddles itself in historical garb. Informed by the general sweep of Kurdish and Iraqi history, I came to view 'Kirkuk' as a debilitating, probably mortal blow to Iraq's body politic. This, however, is a minority view, a tiny one at that.

A high-level and well-meaning Iraqi security official dismissed my take as hyperbolic. A day before Baghdad declared that it would be reopening Arbil airport, a deal that this official had worked out with his Kurdish counterpart, he confidently told me, "It is nowhere near this dire as you're describing it. It's over. Water under the bridge. Masood invited Abadi to hang out with him at his farm in the village when they last spoke over the phone. He mentioned something about fishing." I don't buy it. History explains how massive of a trauma it was, to Kurds and to Masood himself. Barzani, ever the revolutionary, ever the gambler, went for broke at the roulette table. But he is not broken. I cannot imagine that he would so easily rise above the humiliation, or that such proud men would just give up. Any measure of conviviality being expressed now should worry Abadi and my interlocutor when it comes from such a man. Masood's story arc led him to this moment, and it is this arc that informs the actions of the gambler during times of high unpredictability: more leaps into the unknown, self-destruction be damned.

Many gamblers are taking their places at the table right at this singular moment. They too took notice of the expanded realms of hitherto-unseen possibility. Some of them are high rollers such as Iran's Qasim Soleimani, Saudi Arabia's Muhammad bin Salman, and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Vladimir Putin may plop in to play a round or two. Some others are small timers just like Masood; Israel's Bibi Netanyahu and the phantom leadership of the

Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) would rank among them. America, until recently the manager and arbiter of this Middle Eastern gambling den, has gone home. It is my contention that every time the stakes are raised by one of these gamblers, then win-or-lose a station will take shape along the rim, and stations will continue taking shape until it comes full circle. Afterward, one more phase awaits us: the 'event horizon'. That shall be the point of no return for the Middle East as it sinks into the darkest of uncertainties. The gravitational pull of the black hole cannot be broken or disrupted through policy fixes or attempts at changing course after that point. What would constitute an event horizon? Given the unprecedented levels of unpredictability, it could take any number of forms if one lets one's imagination conceive of what is possible. But I have a premonition that the ground will likely give way first in Saudi Arabia, and that Bin Salman has the mark of destiny, and tragedy, about him. The irony of ironies is that the stabilization crowd, especially in Washington, perceive him as the great redeemer. His destiny, they would argue, is far cheerier and stands on firmer analytical and predictive ground than some elastic astrophysical allegories belabored by this author. Put in another way, rather than bring about the event horizon, Bin Salman is their hoped-for anti-Singularity. He is the great force that would disrupt the evolution of any scarier trends.

For many, myself included, figuring out such trends is critical to maintaining America's influence in the region, or what is left of it. Inherently stabilizing forces can expect American attention and support, since the costs associated with propping them up are manageable in the eyes of the current administration, which follows its predecessor in a stubborn unwillingness to overextend itself. However, if the trend lines are heading in the opposite direction then that will likely serve to speed up the process by which the United States vacates its outposts of power projection in the 'northern tier' of the Middle East, an expanse spanning Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran and even Afghanistan. Washington's foreign policy and national security doyens of the Realist stripe will draw a new defensive line, arguing that the security of the Suez Canal, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the maritime routes of the Persian Gulf and the Arabian and Red Seas should have always been the linchpin of post-Cold War interests in the Middle East. Those interests look secure as far as the Realists are concerned, counting as they do on the likes of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Bin Salman, Netanyahu, and a host of Arab monarchs, sheikhs, sultans and emirs, seconded by the U.S. Navy. They will consequently argue that whatever happens to the north of this axis, however much the oodles of unpredictability expand there yonder, need not be concerning at all. "Besides, did you not know that things are turning around?" they will reassure us. "The conniption to the north is short-lived, transitory, fleeting, nothing we have not seen in bygone decades. Don't worry, the Saudis and those rascally Little Spartans are on it! Did you not see that badass video of King Abdullah of Jordan teaching his young'un to shoot around corners?" Except, if they are wrong about the ascendancy of stability, even falling short of the modest gains of the 'good enough'

variety, such blinkered thinking only increases their margin of error in how well they have gauged the robustness of their new cordon. Saudi Arabia is this line's cornerstone, and there is a lot riding on the question of whether it is wobblier than usual.

This breaking of ranks among Cassandras and Pollyannas is a maxim of Middle East policy and analytical disputes, especially at times when big decisions are to be made. But I believe this time is different. There is a willful neglect of the 'facts' when either side presents its case. Naturally, being in the alarmist camp, I tend to indict the other side on this account. Last December I ran into a high ranking Coalition officer in Baghdad who I had known in the past and who was now tasked with 'annihilating' the Islamic State. He only had a few minutes to hurriedly run through a list of achievements that, from the onset, I recognized as delusional 'happy talk'. He was on his sixth or seventh point when he grinned and boldly stated that "Soleimani hasn't been showing his face around here for several weeks now," implying that this officer was doing such a stand-up job that he had managed to intimidate a leading foil such as the head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's Quds Force (IRGC-Q). I couldn't help myself, I interjected by saying "actually, Soleimani is here in Baghdad, or at least he was here last night at around 10 PM. I happen to know that because I was at a gathering yesterday when two men, both of whom are prominent Iraqi figures, got up and excused themselves since they had an appointment with him." It was their first time meeting him, so it wasn't as if Soleimani was only furtively conferring with confidantes. At least one of the two has a deep relationship with the Americans, and can be expected to keep his patrons abreast of his rounds. Yet here was a top commander who had not been briefed by the intelligence crowd on this critical piece of information, at a time when the whereabouts of Soleimani should have mattered to his mission as much as those of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's. He grimaced at this interjection but continued checking off the awesomeness of his achievements. I did not have the heart to add that Soleimani had been busy over the last few weeks because his father had died, then he recaptured Abu Kamal, and then he was stricken with the flu and was convalescing in Tehran. That latter tidbit was something I also overheard the night before.

This preceding anecdote is indicative of that larger problem whereby the two sides of the debate look past each other's facts, for the whereabouts of Soleimani tell a story that is either overstated, or dismissed out of hand. He was front and center at Kirkuk, and at several other critical junctures since. Soleimani was personally involved in the aborted attempt to have Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar Abadi run on an electoral slate in combination with the former's top devotees in the May election. Those overstating the issue seem to be settling scores, ones that relate back to the policy debate over the Iran deal. They would like to demonstrate how the Obama administration empowered the Iranians, and specifically Soleimani, to carry out his agenda. Their opposing number dismiss the individual agency of particular actors to point out that, in aggregate, matters are heading in the right direction. They may say that Kirkuk,

though an unpleasant affair, accrued significant returns towards Abadi, America's best hope for thwarting Soleimani. Most recently, they have been positively giddy pointing out Abadi's compliance with financial restrictions against Iran, followed by his countermanding of al-Muhandis' orders on PMU redeployments. They may also point to other events around the region as evidence that the tide is turning against Soleimani: active and continuing Israeli airstrikes against Iranian targets in Syria, the reinvigoration of US sanctions and Treasury designations, internal demonstrations and discontent within Iran, talk of the "imminent fall" (...for months now!) of Yemen's port of Hodeida that may compel the Houthis to negotiate, all this in addition to an expanded and activist involvement by the Saudis, Turks and Emiratis to counter Iran. Soleimani's brand of mischief is passé; the people of the Middle East have moved beyond the visions propagated by adventurists. They learned their lessons well after the agonies of the Arab Spring. Have a look at Jordan's disciplined demonstrations recently, they would say. It is no longer a matter of "the people want to bring down the regime". The people want to overturn a tax hike, and then go home. Ideally, Saudi Arabia and a host of other Gulf countries would step in to give the Jordanian monarch a helping hand by covering the budget deficit. Similarly, the central government in Baghdad would cover the backlog in public sector salaries for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), and then lay Kurds will forget all about the trauma and humiliation of Kirkuk.

There is certainly a case to be made for taking a deep breath and worrying less by pointing out the state of the Middle East four decades ago. The late 1970s and early 1980s were severely turbulent. These were the times that introduced us to Yemen's Saleh. Those living through those years may have concluded, as I am doing now, that the region was on the precipice of an unknowable abyss. Following the collapse of the Kurdish rebellion, a young Saddam Hussein, who had risen to the top through a combination of grit and nepotism, unexpectedly outmaneuvered the grey haired officers who had given him a leg up and was quickly consolidating his absolutist rule on one of the region's most dynamic and promising countries. Another wing of the Ba'ath Party had taken hold of Damascus, but it was effectively a cover for the historically analogous rule of a despised religious minority. However, its leading light, who had pulled off this unexpected change in fortune, was facing a ferocious Islamist rebellion, tinged with sectarian resentments. Lebanon, where cosmopolitanism seemed always a step ahead of tribalism, had broken down into wars to resolve century-old hurts, the picture being further complicated as 'tribes' acted as proxies of regional powers. Palestinian militants set up camp in Lebanon's south from which to mount a war of attrition against Israel. Dozens of terrorist groups were busy bombing, hijacking and assassinating their way across Europe in what they thought would advance their myriad causes. Israel's ruling establishment was upended with the surprising electoral victory of a hawkish and religiously-conservative coalition, presided over by the fire-spitting, populist Menachem Begin, fueling expectations of

further Arab-Israeli conflict. The sigh of relief over Begin's style of local governing and managing regional challenges during the early years of his tenure would later give way to renewed trepidation regarding Israel's daring attack on an Iraqi nuclear reactor, and then its bungling invasion of Lebanon. Pakistan's magnetic prime minister 'Zulfi' Bhutto was overthrown, later executed. A millenarian uprising had taken over Islam's holiest of holies in Mecca. Many began to wonder what else was brewing in Saudi Arabia's opaque stew. How long before an unheard-of rebel brings that royal line down too? Egypt under Sadat did the unthinkable by breaking ranks with Arab solidarity, of which it was the leader, and seeking peace with Begin's Israel. An Islamist revolt was breaking out in spurts there, eventually felling its leader. Istanbul's celebrated Istiklal Street was an arena of knife fights between leftist and rightist brawlers. Soon enough, the Turkish Army conducted its most reactionary of coups. The Soviet Union sent thousands of tanks into Afghanistan. Yemen was as dysfunctional as ever, Oman had narrowly escaped a civil war, while the Arab Gulf countries were still feeling out their way after the British had left them to their devices (more or less). In the midst of all this, the Carter administration was bumbling and overwhelmed. But perhaps the greatest plunge witnessed then was the departure of the Shah and the advent of a charismatic and obstinate Ayatollah to take hold of Iran's destiny, and to face down ethnic separatists, counterrevolutionaries, attempted counter coups and recalcitrant fellow travelers. One surveying this scene then would probably have felt the crush of debilitating unpredictability as to what the headlines may scream next. Such a precedent, however, makes the present look more manageable. The overall security structure of the region, whereby the West's interests are safeguarded, remained in place. The world did not end. Except for the victims who got caught up in the upheaval—their worlds did end. But in the cold calculus of strategy, that part of the lament rarely factors.

Still, that level of unpredictability in the late seventies seems to have produced a mini-singularity back then. Saddam Hussein looked out unto the same scene and saw opportunity. If no one was going to take the lead of the region, then he may as well do so, he thought. And to prove a point, he will embark on a limited military adventure against a distraught and distracted Iran, a campaign that he believed would last somewhere between ten days to three weeks, and may even afford him some vital real estate while doing so. Per that calculus, there was a good chance that Saddam would be able to break off a vassal state dominated by ethnic Arabs that would effectively gain most of Iran's oil wealth. Well, we know how that went. Saddam could not predict that Parliamentary Speaker Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani would turn out to be a gambler too, whispering fantastic possibilities into Ruhollah Khomeini's ears should the Iranians hold out and keep the war going. They may eventually take Baghdad, and Najaf and Karbala too, he hissed. Again, we know how that transpired.

Going a little further back in time, we can ask ourselves whether the lessons learned by Soviets in the Iraq's 1974 war against the Kurds directly influenced their decision to intervene militarily in Afghanistan four years on? The Soviets may have concluded that helicopter gunships were the new technological variable that that war demonstrated (in Pentagon wonk parlance, a RMA—'revolution in military affairs'). Helicopter gunships could neutralize tribal insurgencies operating from inaccessible mountain redoubts, even if they were propped up by foreign and regional powers. The Soviets deployed gunships, at times even piloted by Russian and Indian crews, on Saddam's side when he decided to stamp out the Barzanis' latest insurgency, to terrible and unprecedented effect. The insurgency's backers—America, Iran, and Israel—could not provide a technological antidote. The Kurdish insurgency had been effectively smashed by the time of the 1975 Algiers Accord when the Shah of Iran unilaterally decided to pull the plug on the Barzanis and strike a deal with Saddam without informing the Americans. One reason that the Shah retroactively cited to justify his behavior was that the insurgency was effectively dead in the water already. When the war began, the Peshmerga were at their historical peak in terms of materiel, territory, manpower, and international media attention and backing. But they had never faced such new, game-changing Soviet armaments, paid for by Baghdad's newly expansive war chest. Within a year, the demoralized Peshmerga were reduced to holding out in a sliver along the border, with Iranian artillery holding back the further advance of Iraqi forces. The Soviets may have looked at all this and told themselves that it can be replicated against a tribal insurgency in the Hindu Kush that was being backed by the U.S. and Pakistan. Hence it is tantalizing to think that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was another gamble inspired by the free-fall and dizzying changes of Middle Eastern balances during the 1970s. The Americans eventually figured out a technological antidote though, one that was later deployed to the mujahidin, who in turn brought down over 250 helicopters with these new weapons. Scholars still debate whether that extra five percent in Soviet military expenditure to pay for the war, on top of the heretofore bloated military budget, was what did in the Soviet Empire, and if there is merit to that argument then we can categorize the consequences of that decision to invade as another station forming in the wake of the region's mini-singularity, leading up to a proper Eurasian, East German and Eastern European event horizon as the Soviets disintegrated.

Upon reflecting on those tumultuous years, one may sense that present times are not so bad indeed. Maybe there is a point to the blasé and cynical calculations of the Israelis and the Realists? Maybe these levels of unpredictability are nothing new, and they can be coped with? To argue otherwise, one would need to make a case that there is something different and new about the current set of principal players, as well as the circumstances that empower and compel them. Such an argument must, by necessity, draw upon history. And it must make the historical case as to why the Islamic State was, and continues to be, ahistorical, and why the

stations forming in its wake are so too. Lastly, given the magnitude of the assertion, one must provide an explanation as to why the process cannot be reversed or even arrested at this time as we anticipate an event horizon, that is, why it cannot be walked back towards a semblance of order as was done in the mid-eighties. An answer, somewhat nebulous and difficult to quantify, and probably unsatisfying to most, may be discerned by the pace at which narratives of self and identity are breaking down across the region, compounded by the inability of the forces of order to replace them convincingly and soberly. That too is a stark difference from what was available by way of a policy tool-kit some four decades ago. To begin with, I would wonder whether that preceding era had a transregional fire-starter of the caliber and virtuosity and range to equal Soleimani. Carlos the Jackal? Ali Hassan Salameh? No names come close that I can recall.

* * *

Given that unpredictability whets the appetites of gambling men, I find myself deeply concerned with trying to figure out what's running through Soleimani's head. Why did he choose to be in the thick of things, and visibly so, in Kirkuk? What lessons did he draw from that experience? Why was he personally meeting with Abadi to iron out the deal on running the two slates together? These are unusual deviations from the norm. What is Soleimani seeing that we are not? Seven years ago, I deemed him a dangerous fool for standing in the way of historical progression. Surely no amount of the brutal repression enacted in Syria would preserve the Asad regime in the face of increasing protests and consequent insurgency. But he clearly saw something I did not, and I would rather not make the same mistake this time around, when the wind is at his back, and when he is feeling vindicated and victorious. As important is trying to figure out his projected timeline. His career is winding down—he's in his early sixties. Soleimani has a legacy, his own and that of the revolution's, to secure.

The protests across Iran that began in January may further compel him to hurry up. He must be incensed by the slogans and acts of disobedience evolving out of this particular wave of dissent. But I imagine one chant in particular rankled more than others, and of all places it happened in the symbolic city of Khorramshahr. That city was the first and largest that was lost to Saddam's armies in the first weeks of the war, even though it held out heroically for as long as it could, a tale retold in film, song and subsidized tours to that hallowed ground. One of the most memorable and poignant Farsi songs to come out from the war, one that I imagine Soleimani may find himself humming from time to time, was *Mammad Naboodi Bebini*, on the

occasion of the city's recapture by the Iranians a little less than two years after losing it, with the refrain going "Mammad, you weren't here to see that our city is liberated." The song commemorates a young Pasdaran commander, Muhammad Jahanara, who had led the initial resistance but later died in a plane accident, missing Khorramshahr's liberation, an event of immense importance to Soleimani's generation since it marked a turning point in the war and suggested that the Islamic Revolution was drawing back its breath and may endure beyond its first setbacks. It is just the sort of song that would leave a man like Soleimani pensive and forlorn, remembering his comrades lost to the war. But the protesters of Khorramshahr nowadays seem more preoccupied with the salinity of their drinking water—the same issue afflicting the Iraqi city of Basra a few miles upriver—rather than the blood spilt to win back their city some four decades ago. To add insult to injury, the Arabic-speaking youth of Khorramshahr adopted one of the more provocative slogans of the Basran protestors, which goes "in the name of religion we have been robbed by the thieves [ruling us]"; as direct an affront to the current crop running the Islamic Revolution as it can get, as well as rebuke to the preservers of its legacy like Soleimani. He must be fuming.

My go-to sources on Soleimani, who I have cultivated and tested over years, tell me that I am misreading the situation. Soleimani is not a rogue actor. He is part of a system that filters national security decisions through multiple layers and committees. At this point in time, they tell me, Iran's national security 'brain' will want to tamp down the region's jitters. They may want to explore Trump's willingness to hold talks, extended via Twitter. Soleimani does not get to decide on escalation all by himself, consequently my efforts at analyzing his persona and placing too much emphasis on individual agency—the league of gamblers, for example—is unhelpful in discerning Iran's next set of moves. Soleimani will follow orders if those orders spell out stabilization and restrained continuity. But like so many other things, my gut tells me that this does not add up, or more accurately, no longer adds up.

At many critical junctures that presented themselves over the last six years, it did come down to Soleimani being the sole voice counseling a particular course of action, carrying the day by pleading with the Supreme Leader to let him have one more chance to pull this through, despite the prevarications, and at points outright hostility, of many other establishment advisers. It was an act of desperation that took Soleimani to the Kremlin, supplicating for Russian intervention as the Asad regime was teetering. I can't imagine any other Iranian national security leader would have taken such a leap, with all its potential for rejection, misunderstandings, and abject failure. His timing was right though, for the Iranians had demonstrated to the Russians by July 2015 that the Obama administration was willing to stomach a lot in order to get its coveted deal with Iran, thus Russia's association with Tehran in Syria may not incur too livid of a reaction from Washington as one would have expected. The following months witnessed a spike in Iranian casualties on the Syrian battlefield as

Soleimani upped his commitment to match Putin's. Few would have assumed such a risk. Soleimani was even starved for funds, and save for such cash customarily earmarked for Hezbollah, was told by President Hassan Rouhani's government to figure out his own financing of his expenses in Iraq and Syria that ran up a monthly bill of around one hundred and seventy million dollars during some stretches of the war raging there. After all this, why would one expect Soleimani to climb down and play the obedient enforcer? In his mind, if it were not for him, and him alone, then the 'caliphate' would have Damascus and Baghdad by now. This is in many ways how he sees himself: the Islamic Revolution's last lion. His behavior in Kirkuk indicates he has a vision of his own. I maintain that even without Trump rescinding the Iran deal, Soleimani was preparing to realize this vision over the last eight months irrespective of the changed circumstances. Unfortunately, there is only so much we can glean of his plans at this point, but we need to plot out what little we know as it is. We certainly shouldn't be relegating him to a secondary role as many observers seem content to do. What cards does Soleimani hold, and why is he choosing to raise the ante?

I had recently undertaken a review of the Iraq-Iran War, that long miscalculation of Saddam's and Rafsanjani's. Much has been made of how that war was the formative experience of men like Soleimani. Haunted by the specters of fallen comrades, any number of which would have risen to the heights of post-war power, but whose remains have not been found despite scouring the mutilated landscape of the border regions, Soleimani and his fellow survivors who lead Iran today must feel an enormous burden to assign meaning to that sacrifice. Yet I was intrigued by a little studied aspect: Soleimani, and several others, became generals while in their twenties. These were the fluid and anything-goes days of the formation of the Revolutionary Guard. Any local boy who could rally a few dozen other boys from his village or neighborhood to make their way to the shifting front lines would suddenly find himself a newly minted officer of the Corps. It was so random and chaotic that an early commander of the Corps turned Salafist in subsequent years and found himself a leader of Afghan mujahidin. The first two years of the war witnessed Iran's resilience in the face of the Iraqi onslaught, later turning the tide and reclaiming most of the territories it had lost in the early days and weeks of the fighting. Soleimani had comported himself well in that first phase, and more importantly, he was still alive while so many others were not. He was given a high rank and told to prepare for the next phase: defeating Saddam and 'liberating' Iraq. It did not go that way. What followed was a drawn out and frustrating career. Not only did the war end without recognizable victories, his post war tasks of chasing down drug smuggling networks were decidedly unglamorous. Even after being made commander of the Qods Force, he was not doing a general's work; at best he was a nuisance in the great game of geostrategic balances. Some mischief in Bosnia, a few stunts in Africa, and a bombing in Buenos Aires. The greatest glory accrued from Hezbollah's confrontations with Israel, but even there, victory was

measured by holding one's own and not by dramatic turnarounds on the map. Was Marj 'Ayoun the equal of an exalted Jerusalem? Certainly not. Even those few highlights were dwarfed when the United States finally settled Iran's unresolved scores with the Ba'ath regime in Baghdad and the Taliban in Kabul. Where was the satisfaction in that for 'generals' like Soleimani?

However, it was during the recent war for the survival of the Asad regime, and the war against the caliphate when Soleimani and some fellow veterans of the Iraq-Iran war felt truly deserving of their ranks and trappings. In this fight, one that set them against the worst possible enemy of Shi'ism they could imagine, they could finally huddle around and point to markers on a map where the front lines would swing around in dramatic turns. Not only that, but whereas many of his former comrades had chosen the sedentary life and turned to mercantile concerns, Soleimani was still unapologetically a man of war and revolution. He did not go soft, he did not mellow. We can spot how important, and redeeming this fight was to so many of Soleimani's ilk. The IRGC commanders who were killed at or near the front lines were no small potatoes. Any number of them could have been living it up in gleaming opulence at one of the Shah's former properties back in the Corps various headquarters. That they chose to be so close to danger, and to be consumed by it, tells us that there is a lingering and unresolved tension within them, an aspiration to give meaning to their trajectories. Soleimani not only earned his britches, but he distinguished himself. He is no longer just another 'elder' among the three dozen leading lights of Iran's national security matrix. He has broken away from this constellation and created a galaxy of his own. How will this sense of fulfillment and newfound confidence express itself? Another aspect that this review of the 1980s taught me concerned the recessive ultra-radical gene still lurking within the Islamic Revolution's organism. It expressed itself back then in the Mehdi Hashemi movement that, among other things, sabotaged the Iran-Contra negotiations. It was anti-clerical, anti-rapprochement with the West or with half-hearted fellow travelers, and fully committed towards exporting the revolution. Hashemi was hanged in 1987 while his extremist acolytes were hunted down and discredited. Yet there is tantalizing hints that his ethos survived. I have no evidence linking Soleimani to Hashemi's network, but the now-victorious 'General' has been exhibiting some of those traits through word and deed. If so, what would Soleimani's endgame look like? I find it surprising that the conversation about the Middle East does not seem willing to imagine such scenarios. Dominated as it is by the Realist camp, Soleimani's revolutionary drive is either too weird for serious deliberation or disparagingly dismissed as a show. It is easier to divide up the quantifiable components of the news cycle into neat piles of nuts and bolts, laying out World Bank statistics in pie charts and vectors, rather than trying to get inside Soleimani's head. Because to do so, one would have to think like a revolutionary, and in the staid ways of career men and women, such dangerous thinking is just that, dangerous, and frowned upon.

As the fighting was winding down in Albu Kamal, Soleimani gathered around some of the Farsi-speaking fighters for a stint of sermonizing. His pep talk, heavily chopped up and edited, then subtitled in Arabic, with all faces but his own blurred out, was released online late November. Soleimani asks:

“Why does Allah render the people of Iran victorious? Why does Allah grant victory to the Islamic Republic? And I believe these victories are increasing day by day. Neither America nor Saudi Arabia can harm this nation. There is a divine will to uphold this nation and they cannot do anything about it. Because this nation is ready for martyrdom. And that is why it is deserving of victory. Divine aid needs to be deserved. And today, in the Islamic Republic, we have that capacity in our nation and in our Leader [Khamenei]...Today, you are the standard bearers of this great movement. You have been chosen by Allah for this great task.”

My sense is that Soleimani is actually talking about himself. He feels victorious and deserving of victory, and he feels divinely chosen. Sure, a cynic could point out that such is the hackneyed narrative of old-timey revolutionaries, and that those lofty words sound hollow from overuse and accumulating disappointments. Still, we must entertain the possibility that Soleimani actually believes it, and expects that through “calculated sacrifice” guided by faith to defeat America’s soldiery, that shows up to battles with diapers, expecting to soil themselves in fear, according to his words. Soleimani is not a very sophisticated man. He could have been a house painter in a provincial town to Iran’s east had he not be called to revolution and war. And he has been extremely lucky (or divinely aided), both with the hand he has been dealt, and with the even less sophisticated foils he has faced down, over the last seven years. He has accrued many wins, so much so that he can afford to be a little less lucky now. Will he cash out and go home to an idyllic retirement, where he will recount war stories to his grandchildren? I highly doubt that. I think that he believes he has much to do, and that it is finally within reach and doable. Consequently, we need to rethink and to reevaluate the recent events in which he has chosen to loom large.

And on the topic of hackneyed narratives, Khamenei tweeted out on April 30 that “U.S.’s feet must be cut off from West Asia; U.S. must exit this region.” Again, it sounds more of the same, but what if this time it was actually an order unleashing Soleimani to do what he can to attain this outcome—pushing America out of the Middle East?

Middle East watchers cannot have it both ways. They cannot extol the individual historical agency of an Abadi or a Bin Salman, and downplay that of Soleimani’s. I acknowledge that the opposite is also true. Alternatively, we can better understand the magnitude of events through

an evaluation of the skills, formative experiences, lieutenants and supporting cast, as well as the means and opportunities available to each one of these personalities in this contest. However, we must be mindful that it is these unique circumstances in the region, this unprecedented level of uncertainty, this stretch of time and space between singularity and the event horizon that is compelling these individuals towards reaping the trophies of possibility. A man like Qasim Soleimani, a man with a clear vision, may sense that it is now or never. There are others like him of varying stature and capacity. They too can be expected to act, and to leap forward. The aggregate of such willful and tenacious risk taking is likely to take us to the point of no return. Furthermore, we can disagree as to how close or how far we are from that point. It is my sense that we are very, very close, and I see much more of what is driving us there than what is impeding this course. Kirkuk, and Soleimani's role in what happened on October 15 of last year, spooked me immensely. And it showed me just how brittle our tools for countering instability truly are. The lessons Soleimani drew from that experience may shape his next set of moves, especially in light of the recent election's results in Iraq. If we are to witness a deliberate quickening in the debasement and demise of legitimate political life in Baghdad, then I maintain that we can trace the genesis of this new era back to Kirkuk.

* * *

Many moving parts had to align for Kirkuk to happen as it did, to Soleimani's favor. Principally, it was the interplay of characters, old and new, in lead and supportive roles, Iraqis, Iranians and Americans, that determined the outcome and pace of events.

On October 6, the day that former Iraqi President Jalal Talabani's body was transported back from Germany to Suleimaniya for burial, and among the throng of Iraq's who's-who paying their respects to the iconic Kurdish leader, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis took Bafel, Talabani's eldest son, aside to sound him out on the idea of returning the administration of Kirkuk Province back to the central government. Later press reports, citing a Kurdish member of parliament, had it that it was Hadi al-Ameri, the head of the Badr Organization, who had broached the topic with Bafel. But it was al-Muhandis who had been tasked with this mission, and that makes much more sense, for the tensions and oscillations in the al-Muhandis-al-Ameri duality are a good way to spot what Soleimani is plotting. Al-Ameri is an enforcer, not an ideas man, whereas al-Muhandis has creative panache. And while both are deeply connected to Soleimani, in what seems to be a mystical, devotional Sufi-like bond governing the relationships between masters and disciples, it would seem that al-Muhandis was the truer disciple of the two. Al-Ameri had turned out to be a disappointment by Soleimani's reckoning,

seeing that, like so many of his former comrades and brothers-in-arms, al-Ameri had become a 'merchant', too caught up with the vagaries of brokering deals and taking side cuts within the matrix of Iraqi corruption, especially during his ministerial sinecures. Al-Ameri redeemed himself somewhat in his master's eyes during the fighting against the Islamic State. It felt like the good old days of their youths, when they put their lives on the line in an existential fight for what they believed in, against a loathed enemy. Days and weeks spent in the dusty and scorched battlefields did much to reestablish trust. But still, if a situation required a delicate touch, one with a need for fluid improvisation, then Soleimani would send in al-Muhandis, his ablest fixer. So even at this early stage, it was evident how much Soleimani took the Kirkuk venture seriously. Those tasked with monitoring the Iranian general should have been paying closer attention.

The Saddam-era *mukhaberat's* [report](#) (undated, but likely 2001 or 2002) on Badr is thorough and well-researched, and it is interesting how it judged the differences in character between al-Muhandis, its commander then, and al-Ameri, his deputy and successor. There is grudging respect for al-Muhandis as a worthy adversary, whereas al-Ameri is dismissed as a "coward" who had fled the battlefield leaving his men to fend for themselves against the Republican Guard during the 1991 uprising in the Diyala sector. The report does get some of al-Muhandis' genealogy wrong though: he is not of Iranian origin and he isn't married to an Iranian woman. He is a Shia Arab from the Bani Tamim tribe in Basra, a third generation immigrant from Bahrain, and both his mother and his wife are of Bahraini origin. It is a significant mistake in the report, one that lends itself towards misreading the man's motivations. Such roots predisposed the man to think of himself as part of a Shia 'Internationale'. He does not serve Soleimani because he believes Soleimani is advancing Iran's national security goals, rather he sees Soleimani as the redeemer of transnational Shi'ism. Al-Muhandis rationalizes his work as a battle to protect Shias across the Middle East. This is his life's work, and this is why he is more in line with Soleimani. Al-Ameri, an Arab whose ancestors had tended the orchards to Baghdad's north for centuries, would parrot the party line but he is not motivated by the same urgency. Al-Ameri is parochially 'Iraqi' in Soleimani's eyes. And Soleimani is not too fond of Iraqis. At one impromptu gathering over a year ago, I even got one of al-Ameri's top aides to divulge the many ways Soleimani had offended him and his colleagues with his disdain for Iraqis, particularly on cleanliness, something the fastidious general places much emphasis on.

Bafel Talabani, on the other hand, aspires to be a character out of a Guy Ritchie movie. Gruff, with a cockney accent and mannerism, he had not been groomed by his father as a successor. For most of his life, he was (allegedly) a drug-addled embarrassment, one that his suave, earnest younger brother would compensate for. However, Bafel came back to usurp the family business during his father's prolonged absence. The caliphate came calling, political challengers took heart, suaveness and earnestness just did not cut it. The Talabani family

needed a brawler. Bafel, with his face sunburnt from spending long stretches at the front, where he earned the admiration of both young and grizzled Peshmerga that had fought under his father for decades, was cut out for for these times. This was his rise to the limelight, *a la* Henry IV, eclipsing his 'statesman-in-the-making' brother. His father had been a master of the political deal, and he could make the most audacious of flips work to his favor. Bafel was untested in this respect, and he would be handily bested by an operator of al-Muhandis's caliber. However, at the time it was thought that his mother Hero Ahmed, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) party's enforcer and secret treasurer, as well daughter and wife to the two founders, was in charge as she had always been. On October 8, a well-placed insider told me about the tentative deal reached at the funeral two days earlier. I did not believe it. I could see Bafel being panicked by his father's death and the family's rapidly changing circumstances, especially with the financial meltdown being experienced by the KRG. He was wet behind the ears and would have been an easy mark for al-Muhandis to push this audacious deal on. But I figured that Hero would never let it stand. It was too risky, too uncertain, and too at odds with the passions and history of the Kurdish movement. This would be a stain harder to scrub off even if measured against her husband's former embrace of Saddam Hussein during the 1980s (...the embrace goes back even further: Saddam threw a wedding party for Jalal and Hero in the early seventies at the Hunting Club in Baghdad). Kirkuk did indeed matter that much. Only later did it emerge, in hushed and furtive natter, that Hero was not herself. She lacked focus and fire, and would look on, adrift, while sitting beside her sister and political copilot, Shahnaz, as the pair watched Bafel and his coterie of wannabe gangster paternal cousins take over the show. It is said that even Soleimani was stunned and saddened to see such a remarkable lady wither away in silence. For many years she had been his secret weapon within Kurdish politics. He had watched the deterioration closely. He spotted Bafel's rise probably ahead of anyone else. So it was no accident that al-Muhandis went to Bafel first.

Bafel traveled to Baghdad two days later and had a sit down with Abadi on the evening of October 8. There, the deal, brokered by al-Muhandis on Soleimani's behalf, was formalized. This roundabout through Soleimani's mediation did not have to be: Abadi and Bafel already had an existing channel. It was established exactly four months earlier, right after the decision to head towards a referendum on independence was taken at a meeting of the Kurdish leadership in Salahuddin on June 7. The decision was unexpected. Previously, such a proposition had been on the agenda of several preceding meetings, but it hadn't gone anywhere. There was a sense that the Barzanis were unserious about it, and that it was only being employed to buy them time and to deflect popular attention away from the financial crisis.

Such were the atmospherics in the period prior to the Salahuddin meeting: In December 2016, I was asked to chair the opening session of a conference on Kurdish independence at the

American University of Dohuk. The university was the brainchild of Masroor Barzani, Masood's son and Arbil's security chief. Masroor would later emerge as an enthusiastic enabler of his father's push for the referendum seven months later, but at the time of the conference, there was a suspended aspect to the place. The financial crisis had caught up with this ambitious venture, like so many others, and left it hanging. A grand central administration building, in a faux-American architectural style, stood grandly and alone, surrounded by the open spaces of what would be. If one looked closely, the sloppy finish of the structure would prove too distracting. The conference itself, a first for the university, had a slapdash bearing to it also. Microphone issues, seating confusion, and all the tiny little details that tend to go wrong, did go wrong. An assistant professor at the university had recommended me as a somewhat objective voice: I was a skeptic on Kurdish independence, and such was the tone of the opening remarks and questions that I had posed to the panelists. One panelist, Hoshiyar Zebari, most recently Iraq's Finance Minister and a leading member of the Barzani oligarchy, who was to become a leading advocate of independence later along with Masroor, was still, at the time, a skeptic too. It wasn't too difficult to draw it out of him. I would survey the faces in the front rows. Much of Arbil's Kurdish leadership was sitting there. Masroor listened attentively, and so did his cousin the Prime Minister of the KRG, Nechirvan Barzani, whose body language and latter remarks belied a subtle discomfort with, and opposition to, the proceedings. Save for a handful of Westerners who were enthusiastic about Kurdish independence, my sense was that these folks are not ready for primetime—albeit, admittedly, it could have been a case of confirmation bias. At that moment, I too deduced that they were unserious about independence, and I breathed a sigh of relief. But Masood was not in attendance. I did not get the chance to read him. He was the one who mattered.

Masood indeed surprised his fellow congregants at the June 7 meeting by forcing a decision to go to a referendum and setting a date: September 25. The next day after the meeting, Bafel was in Baghdad to confer with Abadi, ostensibly to signal that the Talabani family was not on board with Masood's escalation. There is a possibility that both Abadi and Bafel assumed that Masood would back down when faced with a cocktail of local, regional and international inducements and threats. A cordial phone call between Abadi and Masood followed a few days later, with Masood publicly stating later that he will do all that he can to support Abadi's premiership. Maybe that is why Abadi's face-to-face with Bafel did not harden into a firmer alliance.

Masood, however, did not back down. The referendum was held on its prescribed date. Abadi panicked, yet he did not call Bafel. Two or three days after the referendum, Abadi somberly invited al-Ameri and al-Muhandis, separately, to his office. He asked them a question, but they were not its intended recipients. Abadi knew that both were Soleimani's top standbys in Iraq, but he was unsure as to who was the senior to the other. He asked: "if I were

to move against Kirkuk, will you support me?” Both men did not answer. They relayed the message to Soleimani, who began to think it over. Soleimani had sent multiple messages to Barzani ahead of the referendum trying to get him to drop it. Soleimani told him that if he went through with it “then war was coming.” Considering that Iran has a separatist Kurdish movement of its own, which may be inspired by the example of Iraqi Kurds, then that outcome would naturally worry the leadership back in Tehran. Many hold that that is why Soleimani got involved. However I sense that Soleimani’s principal motivation was not a fear of Kurdish separatism within Iran. He had his eye on another prize, and he wanted to deny the Americans the optics of an easy win. In the calculus of the region, an independent Kurdistan led by Masood would be interpreted as a victory for Washington and Jerusalem. Soleimani is sophisticated enough to realize that that is not necessarily the case. But he was loathe to allow Middle Eastern public opinion to think so. Masood had his reasons to think that Soleimani’s threats were hollow; he could not conceive of a unilateral Iranian move against him within the region’s complicated landscape. More worrisome to him was his new obstinacy in the face of American pleas to back down too. This was out of character for him. But he believed that there was a vague opening in a new Washington, with a new administration in place. Three weeks prior to the June meeting, Masroor returned from Washington to report to his father that their friends there, as well as the Israelis, were telling them that the Trump administration didn’t know what it wants, and that they should go for independence, letting the chips fall as they may. Trump would later be inclined to acknowledge and support their *fait accompli*. The traditional establishment was still hostile to such gambits, but they mattered less and less. This time around, they were superseded by the Israeli and Emirati ambassadors to Washington, and a few others. The new powerbrokers, who have an ‘in’ with the Oval Office, would be able to sell Kurdish independence when a snap decision needed to take place. Masood would have listened to his son telling this outlandish new tale, and he would have watched Trump traveling to the Riyadh summit as his first international sojourn. Why wouldn’t he believe that a new era of possibility and opportunity was in the offing?

Fate is a fickle mistress, they say, and opportunity, rather than glancing Masood’s way, called upon Soleimani instead. It presented itself when Jalal Talabani, a man with a stature as iconic in the Kurdish struggle as that of the Barzanis, died after a long debilitating illness. Jalal’s long absences from the scene, ever since his stroke while in office in late 2012, had already contributed massively to the breakdown of politics in both Baghdad and Arbil. Fate would have it that his final departure would also ripple out across Iraqi and Kurdish destiny. After al-Muhandis had the talking-to with Bafel, the ball began rolling quickly. On October 13, on a Friday, Abadi gave the Kurds forty eight hours to undo the results of the referendum. I believe that this timeline was Soleimani’s. On the next morning, Soleimani went to Suleimaniya to meet Hero and Aras Sheikh Genki Talabani, Jalal’s nephew and the most senior

cousin within the new crop of Talabanis both age wise and in terms of apprenticeship with his uncle. Soleimani explained the broad outline of what was required of them. If Iraqi troops move against Kirkuk, then the PUK forces under their command would stand down and withdraw. It all sounded fantastical at that moment; no one really believed that the forty eight hour ultimatum would be acted upon. Certainly no one believed that Baghdad would risk a shooting war with the Peshmerga. After all, how would Tehran, Washington, or even Ankara (the latter had come to view Masood as its vassal) allow it? The following day, October 15, on a Sunday afternoon, the Kurdish leadership met in the PUK headquarters overlooking Dokan Lake. Masood was there, and so was Hero. She informed the congregants that the PUK did not have a unilateral agreement with Baghdad or anyone else, and that she would be absolutely supportive of any resolution that would be agreed upon. So confident was she that her agreement with Soleimani did not really count for anything, that Bafel's father-in-law and leading PUK party leader Mulla Bakhtiyar was not informed of the deal. At a news conference following the meeting, Mulla Bakhtiyar stood alongside Nechirvan, the most dovish pair among the Kurdish leaders present, confidently predicting that Baghdad would find that the Kurdish position had softened significantly when both men would travel there the next day for a restart to negotiations.

Nechirvan and Mulla Bakhtiyar were beaming because they had gotten Masood to accept a plan that was being tabled by the Americans to tamper down tensions around Kirkuk. The [American plan](#), proposed a week prior by Brett McGurk, the Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL who had been appointed to that role by the Obama administration, would be minimalist in approach, but would provide some face saving cover for McGurk's current pet project, Abadi's continued tenure as Prime Minister. The Kurds had been under some pressure from Baghdad and a few regional powers: air space over Iraqi Kurdistan was closed, and Iranian border crossings had shuttered. The Americans felt that Baghdad had made its point regarding which party still held sovereignty and international legitimacy, and that all that was required going forward would be a few cosmetic measures to help Abadi sell a narrative of unflinching 'leadership' to a local constituency in Arab Iraq. McGurk's plan required a redeployment of Peshmerga out of some key installations in Kirkuk, two oil fields to be precise. The Iraqi Army, whose 12th Division had fled in its entirety as the jihadists approached in August 2014, would again be garrisoned at the K1 Airbase near Kirkuk alongside Peshmerga forces, jointly managing the installation. A high ranking American officer would be stationed there too, to mediate conflicts that may arise between them. McGurk had been shuttling back and forth pushing for his plan. He must have been aware of Soleimani's competing scheme, because the British were likely aware of it. Bafel had briefed them almost immediately about al-Muhandis' offer, and they seem to have asked him to pursue it. Abadi too would have informed them about it. British participation in blessing this off-the-books

undertaking was highlighted after the event when Iraq's oil minister clumsily announced a pre-2014 plan to bring British Petroleum (BP) back to managing the same oil fields around Kirkuk that the Kurds had promised the Russians. (It seems that Britain's spies had voluntarily moonlighted as brokers for the BP deal in the run-up to Kirkuk even though there is no evidence that the higher rungs of BP management in Europe had desired this outcome.)

After the Dokan meeting, McGurk asked Abadi for a twenty four hour extension. Abadi was noncommittal. The next time McGurk called, Abadi had switched off his phones and was unreachable. In the intervening hours between the two calls, around 8PM on the night of October 15, representatives of Soleimani's—in [one telling](#) a high ranking IRGC general— informed front line Peshmerga commanders that the central government's troops, especially its Counter-Terrorism Units and the Federal Police's Emergency Response Division, the latter's hierarchy being thoroughly compromised by Soleimani, as well as certain Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) forces, would advance and take over their positions. They were told that any resistance would be crushed. This was the first time Hero may have realized that Bafel's deal with Soleimani entailed more substance and consequence than she had thought. In the following melee, the Vice President of the KRG and a rival to the Talabani family's hold on the PUK leadership, Kosrat Rasool, was injured and almost left for dead along with dozens of his men when those troops advanced.

The Talabani family signaled instructions to their loyalists to withdraw. It happened very quickly. Suddenly, the limits of the operation were not confined to a couple of oil fields and an airbase; rather the Iraqi forces advanced on a territorial arc extending several hundred kilometers from Sinjar Mountain to Khaniqin. Kirkuk city was taken, and then Soleimani began probing further on multiple sectors. The KDP's Peshmerga collapsed in a manner often seen throughout Kurdish history. McGurk had initially failed to inform his higher-ups in Washington of the severity of what was transpiring; he certainly did not give them a heads-up about its possible scale. The Trump administration was surprised and had to scamper about quickly putting up a brave face on the situation, as if it hadn't dropped the ball. Instead of a warm embrace, all Barzani got out of Trump was "We don't like the fact that they're clashing. We're not taking sides, but we don't like the fact that they're clashing..."—probably a soundbite drilled into him by the haplessly inept then National Security Adviser, H.R. McMaster. Are we really to believe that Abadi, in a huff, would not give McGurk the requested extension? McGurk went into damage control mode, to salvage his career more so than the situation on the ground. The talking point *du jour* was that it was Abadi calling the shots, and everyone should be impressed by his gumption. It wasn't Abadi's fault that the Kurds folded with such surprising ease. He was moving forward to fill a vacuum much like the Kurds moved into those territories initially to prevent the jihadists from seizing them. Suddenly, there was an effort from Washington to counsel Abadi not to "overreach"—and by not overreaching

Abadi would be displaying wisdom and restraint. “Soleimani? Where?” cried out the incredulous orchestrators of Abadi’s public relations contortions, even when Al-Muhandis and al-Ameri drove home the point by being overly visible during the operation. One could almost expect the Abadi boosters to exclaim that “Never mind that! Soleimani is just photobombing Abadi’s glamor shots!”

Soleimani’s actions seemed calibrated towards embarrassing the Americans. The Kurdish governor of Kirkuk, Najmiddin Karim, was an enthusiastic supporter of the referendum. He knew that including Kirkuk’s population in the referendum, with Kirkuk being a disputed territory whose status had not been resolved by the central government and the KRG, would be viewed as extremely provocative. Karim visibly and noisily broke with the rest of the PUK leadership and pushed for balloting Kirkuk’s say on independence. Tensions had been building up between him and the party, with the latter accusing him of corruption and consolidating a personal power base independently of the Talabani family. When matters went south, Karim became a hunted man, with an arrest warrant on his head from Baghdad. There was one important detail: Karim is an American citizen. To leave an American to the mercies of his enemies, ones led by an Iranian general, sends a potent message to the Kurds. That is exactly the sobering reality that Soleimani wanted all to see. Karim was exfiltrated from his place of hiding within the city of Kirkuk not by American efforts but by Masroor’s special operations team. He was then told by American authorities to lay low and not return to the United States for a few months.

Pointing out such details as Karim’s travails, ones that have the power to mold perceptions of Middle Eastern public opinion, are swatted away by those self-same Abadi boosters. “You’re giving Soleimani too much credit by overstating his role” came to suggest that rather than sounding the alarm, such dissenting voices were unwittingly and effectively boosting Soleimani! Abadi as the ‘leader’ calling the shots was a reassuring narrative. Iraq-watchers looked upon Kirkuk as a local issue. Accusing naysayers of overstating Soleimani’s role was an analytical hedge that protected careers. But the fellow who sets zero hour is no accidental or interloping actor, *n’est pas*? And Soleimani and his guys could not have signaled their role in zero hour any more clearly. They must have sat back with puzzled amusement at Washington’s desire to look away.

Right after Kirkuk, there was a standoff at Altun Kupri. Soleimani wanted to further push the envelope to determine the limits of Kurdish collapse, as well as to ascertain how much more embarrassment Washington was willing to stomach. Here again, some pro-Abadi analysts and functionaries began warning of overreach even though the situation had overreached many times over already. Soleimani wanted to go all the way to Arbil airport as further demonstration of the wide sway of Iraqi ‘sovereignty’, or whichever way he defined it to work to his ends. Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, a former Deputy Foreign Minister of Iran and

current Assistant to the Parliamentary Speaker, acerbically tweeted out on October 18 that “Baghdad could take back Arbil within a few hours if it so wanted.” Altun Kupri was occurring at a time when all sides had previously agreed to dial things back. The *casus belli* cited by those itching for a fight was an act of vandalism at the town’s local Turkman party headquarters by ethnic Kurds. So are we to believe that Soleimani consciously risked the incendiary optics of ‘going to Arbil’ as an answer to some charred desks and twisted ceiling fans? The stakes had been taken to new heights, with some even suggesting that the Barzanis were now allied with the jihadists of the Islamic State, the latter now arrayed against the Iraqi Army at Altun Kupri. Ranj Talabani, deputy to the head of PUK’s intelligence outfit, had tweeted on October 16 that the “KDP had armed 2,500 ISIS detainees, dressed in Peshmerga clothes, who have just launched multi pronged attack on ISF in Dibz,” that is, in the immediate vicinity of Altun Kupri. Heavy gunfire and mortar barrages were exchanged. Peshmerga resolve was not firmed up by jihadists fighting alongside them, however, but rather by desperate fighters from Iranian Kurdish guerilla groups such as Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDP-I) who knew what bloody fates awaited them should Soleimani roll up further territories. They may remember a time back in July 1996 when the Badr Corps attacked their bases within Iraqi Kurdistan near the town of Rawanduz per Iran’s instructions. Kosrat’s men had also fallen back to this position, determined to avenge their fallen comrades. Pushing through could have cost both sides thousands of casualties. Soleimani then decided that he had made his point and did not need to press further. As a closing act, he set his sights on Arbil’s lucrative border crossing to Turkey. Getting that would be a future bargaining chip with the Turks. (In the end, he chose to forego that prize too, probably because the Turks signaled some sort of deal having to do with Syria.)

One would think that the foremost question presented to Middle East watchers in Washington and elsewhere by this dramatic turn of events would be “Why did Soleimani do it?” Instead, there was an inexplicable eagerness by many to look away from the role and intent of the Iranian general. Whilst the minority that highlighted it and were worried by it pedantically stuck within the confines of believing that Soleimani was targeting the Kurds in doing so, and concomitantly showing up the Americans. They too misread what had happened. There was more to it, much more. I maintain that his prize was not denial of Kurdish independence, the Kurdish referendum was not a local fire for him to put out, rather it was kindling for a larger inferno that Soleimani sought to harness while burning through Iraq’s political possibilities. Soleimani, having a deeper sense of how Iraq works than most, understood the opportunity presented to him by Abadi’s panic, and he had the skills and means to wield this moment in the service of his grander goals. Iraq’s political process was the hidden jewel that those worried by Soleimani’s rise have consistently neglected, or willfully misinterpreted as useless and ultimately empowering the Iranians, whereas it was a consistent

obstacle to Soleimani's agenda. He seeks to set it aflame. This consecrated fire would later chase out the pestilence that had overtaken the revolutionary spirit in Tehran, or at least that is as much of his endgame as I can make out at this time.

My conjecture is that it is less about Arbil and Suleimaniya and more about settling scores in Baghdad and Najaf, and then eventually Tehran and Qum. It had been a rough seven years for Soleimani. He fought against the majority consensus view reached among Tehran's strategic mandarins. It was existential, on multiple levels, for Soleimani. At every downturn—and there were many—he could sense that the knives were out for him, and that his epic career, that he thought he was divinely chosen for, would come to a derisible end. The hard fighting, the terrors of those touch-and-go days, are now behind him. 2017 was a good year for him, a year of vindication and triumph. That 'sermon in the dust' he gave at Albu Kamal was a moment he had been yearning for. That is why I would take his syrupy pap seriously. If anything, he is a serious man. In the very least, he may seek to make the lives of those who questioned him as miserable as they had made his. I think he will go further than that. Men on a divine mission rarely stop at 'good enough'. Iraq is an important platform for his vision. Najaf is packed with the kind of turbaned quibblers and second-guessing idlers that shrug at the awesome responsibility of preserving and propagating 'Islamic Revolution' as well as rescuing transnational Shi'ism. They scoffed at and questioned Vilayet el-Faqih, deeming it a dangerously misguided innovation that was out of bounds with traditional Shi'ism. They hardly lifted a finger for Syria, or Bahrain. They were the parasitic clerical types that the Mehdi Hashemi cult disdained. And ever since Najaf blossomed in the post-Saddam era, its competitor twin city Qum has felt emboldened too in questioning Iran's revolutionary zeal and transnational range, this time from within. For Soleimani, such sedition must be stamped out.

Hard men like Soleimani did not spend their lives fighting for a revolution so that some soft-palmed thirty-something seminarian from a clerically aristocratic pedigree would pontificate about how Iran would benefit economically by backing away from its maximalist rhetoric and mischief. The establishment's way of doing things, of talking things out respectfully, subtly, collegially, over tea and biscuits has failed to put such debutantes in their place. They are in fact heartened, especially with the growing provincial protests. Harsher, radical measures must be tried, even at the risk of upsetting the delicate balances of the ruling elite. The wrath engendered by that footage from Khorramshahr, with that incendiary chant on the protesters lips, would flash across Soleimani's eyes, justifying these measures. I think he intends to make an example of Baghdad and Najaf to give his enemies, and the enemies of the revolution—the same thing in his eyes—a preview of what is coming their way. Political life in Iraq had frustrated Soleimani all too often. It also protected Najaf and empowered it. Politics came very close to thwarting Soleimani and Maliki in the summer of 2012 when a

parliamentary no confidence motion was imminent. Those were dark times for Soleimani. His travails in Syria had just started, and he could not afford to lose the maneuverability and logistics offered by Maliki's acquiescence, even outright support, to his Shia chauvinistic agenda. Luckily for Soleimani, the measure was foiled jointly by Iranian and American intervention—McGurk had also been Maliki's patron and booster before switching over to Abadi. Weakening political life, or doing away with it all together, is far smoother sailing for Soleimani's timeline and endgame when shortcuts around politics become the norm in Baghdad, as happened with Kirkuk.

* * *

The trauma of Kirkuk was about resorting to a show of force as an alternative to resolving reconcilable political disputes. The return of political life had been Iraq's greatest asset, and its potential salvation. By the evening of October 15, it was largely eroded. With Kirkuk, Iraq transitioned from the post-2003 ethos, or rather the promise, of political settlement to the pre-2003 holding pattern of ceasefires. Nothing could have captured the regression more poignantly than sending tanks into that particularly symbolic city. There was plenty of history, streams of tears, leading up to it *because* the Kurdish issue is the quintessential transnational issue of the Middle East, impacting as it does four of the region's countries, and it was always a measure of the health of Iraq's polity. By failing to break with the past, including an Ottoman one, on how to deal with the Kurds, Iraq would always be a failing state. By failing to resolve Kurdish aspirations, Iraq would not serve as a model for its neighbors, one to emulate as they work out their own problems with their Kurds. Stability is fungible across borders on such transnational issues as the Kurdish one: the wider the region's adoption of a functioning model, the more secure Iraq can be. The serial infractions against the constitution, or Sadrist antics, or the proliferation of militias, or the jihadist insurgency and its comeback in 2014, or the congealed clot of corruption clogging up the insides of the state, all these travails over the last fifteen years did not have as much impact as this one incident. This was a transgression against a foundational idea of a 'New Iraq'—one that I now believe is irredeemably lost. The blame game at this point is futile; a line has been crossed. A post-singularity marker, or station, had been realized. Not seeing Iraq's ensuing story through this lens, including its post-election convulsions, means you are not paying attention as to how Soleimani sees the play at hand. He drew important lessons from that experience. Many others have not. Which puts him ahead, already.

I understand what Masood did. If it were simply about authority and money then there are paths of least resistance short of galloping towards independence that would have given him what he wanted. But he's a revolutionary, a true believer. Independence is his life's work. He was actually born into an independent Kurdistan: his birth certificate, if there had been one, would have been stamped by the Republic of Mahabad during its brief ten month existence. One of Masood's most cherished keepsakes is a small flag—only nine by twelve inches—that is allegedly the first version of the Kurdish flag ever sewed. He keeps it in a frame hanging on his private office's wall. It was made, like him, in Mahabad. The fingers that stitched it were those of a fourteen year old Jewess from the town of Zakho, a convert to her husband's Muslim faith. She had followed him east as he hitched their destiny to Mulla Mustafa Barzani's star, Masood's father, and who I would count as one of the five most important personas of Iraq in the twentieth century. Mulla Mustafa then took the completed flag from her and offered it to Qazi Muhammad, the republic's chosen president. After the Shah's troops put an end to the Mahabad Republic, Mulla Mustafa and his men fled in a heroic journey to the Soviet border. As their venture was collapsing around them, Qazi Muhammad returned the miniature flag to Mulla Mustafa, who took it as a gesture to mean that the cause of the Kurds had been entrusted to him. The infant Masood was sent to Iraq and at first raised by his maternal uncles, the Zebari chiefs, who hated his family with a century-old burning passion. Masood was then taken to Baghdad for schooling, enrolling at an elementary school in the Adhamiya district, a bastion of Arab Nationalist sentiment. All throughout his life he felt like a hostage, one who was expected to be as brave as his father and to break free from the clutches of his kidnapers. He would only get to meet his father again at the age of twelve, after the legendary Kurd had returned to a hero's welcome and was embraced by Iraq's new 'revolutionary' junta. One of the first images that I recall when thinking about Masood is that of a twelve year-old boy in a bulky ill-fitting suit, sitting beside Iraq's then president, General Abdul Karim Qasim. That picture should give one a foretaste of how to size up the stature of a Masood versus someone like Abadi. Mulla Mustafa's rapport with Qasim only lasted a few years. Masood, at sixteen, joined his father as a guerilla fighter. He saw firsthand how easily and quickly an alliance with Baghdad could fracture. Many years later, Mulla Mustafa would offer the Mahabad flag to Masood. It remains his totem, and he probably imagines a day when Kurdistan would achieve independence again, and he can bring out this relic to legitimize and consecrate the event. Only then would he feel that he can give it up, so that it can be housed in a museum for Kurdish history that is to be built in the shadow of Arbil's ancient citadel. These are but a few of the formative experiences that went into the forced decision taken on June 7 to hold a referendum on independence.

It was reported that once the referendum polls had closed, Masood retired to the village of Barzan. He went off, alone, to sit by his father's grave. He sat contemplating and savoring that

moment for hours. I don't think this was an act for show, as it may seem to some. It had the ring of authenticity to anyone who had studied the man. That very location of his father's grave reflects a painful but ultimately triumphant passage. Mulla Mustafa passed away, defeated, at a hospital in Washington in early March 1979. Khomeini's month-old regime in Tehran offered to receive his corpse and for it to be buried somewhere in the territory of Iranian Kurdistan. By doing so, the Iranians were showing up the Shah and the Americans, who had 'betrayed' Mulla Mustafa, and they were needling the soon-to-be self-appointed President of Iraq, Saddam Hussein too. They also wanted to gesture to their own ethnic Kurds that the Islamic Republic intends a wholly different approach to the Kurdish issue. Mulla Mustafa's death was also an occasion for Saddam to offer welcoming the body and burying it within Iraqi territory, perhaps the display of magnanimity for the history books would persuade Saddam to have even allowed the family to bury him in Barzan itself, though the village had been a heap of ruins for some time. Mulla Mustafa's family opted to take up Khomeini on his offer instead. (At times when he was exasperated with the Barzanis, Ahmad Chalabi would sometimes insinuate to me that it was him who arranged Iran's offer but I could never get clear confirmation.) Mulla Mustafa was interred at a point west of Oshnavieh. During the early phase of the Iraq-Iran war, the area around the tomb fell under the control of KDP-I, the same group that put up the fight at Altun Kupri. There was plenty of bad blood between KDP-I and the Barzanis going back to the last days of the Mahabad republic, and under their watch, Mulla Mustafa's body was disinterred and desecrated. Somehow the Barzani family retrieved the remains, which were then reburied in a safer location. The village of Barzan was freed in the wake of the Gulf War, as Saddam's troops receded after having faced a Kurdish uprising, and in 1993 Masood brought his father's body home. In an odd twist of events, the United States Airforce performed a salutary flyover during the proceedings. Masood held back his tears. And I would think he kept his sense of closure in check too for he knew that the show counted for nothing. That moment may yet prove to be fleeting, like so many before it. Much more needed to happen before he could feel that his father's rest would be final. To think that he had mistakenly thought that the evening of September 25 was that moment of finality should move even the more cynical among us.

Masood may have miscalculated. He is an obstinate, driven man. But he was being true to himself. He never believed Baghdad had changed. Centralizing chauvinism, not racial, was how it traditionally dealt with the Kurds. It was a vestige of nineteenth century Ottoman and Qajar policies, one that was inherited by Iraq. Barzani sought confirmation bias in that this ethos was still there. He interpreted the furor over the attempt to redesign the Iraqi flag during his tenure as the rotating President of the Governing Council in April 2004 as an early indicator that the centralizing chauvinism of the capital had not fully disowned the legacy of the Iraqi state in its dealings with its Kurdish minority. What he saw then was an alacrity to

preserve a forty-year old Arab Nationalist flag, one that Saddam had personally left his mark on, rather than address the hurts of a Kurdish nation that witnessed planes bearing those colors as they dropped chemical weapons on their villages and towns. That the furor was tinged with an accusation that the proposed flag carried some cryptic Zionist symbolism, and that a Kurdish head of state was doing so to serve his long-standing alliance with Israel, was further evidence in Barzani's eyes that not much had changed. Iraq's politicians could not even agree on a new national anthem, their default standby, still in use, is a hand-me-down Palestinian one. It was a wholly unlucky experience, marred as it was with the first battles of Fallujah and Najaf, further stressing Masood's preconceptions that this notion of an Iraqi comity just around the corner was untenable.

The challenge on Baghdad was to prove him wrong last September. It required leadership, courage and vision. And a deep sense of history, as well as a deep understanding of the flawed, legendary revolutionary they were dealing with. But Abadi was shown to be lacking. The trauma of Kirkuk revealed that Abadi is a two bit player; the sum of his political calculus was to stay a step ahead of Maliki. He was thinking small. He was frazzled by what Iraq's version of troll factories ('electronic armies') were putting out on Facebook and WhatsApp groups which Abadi spends the bulk of his down time perusing. It wasn't coincidental: I think he was deliberately manipulated by Soleimani's war drums. Abadi was worried that Maliki would seize upon the issue of Masood's obstinacy and recalcitrance to mobilize a chauvinistic constituency ahead of the May elections, an electoral wave that may even bring Maliki—the party boss and comrade that Abadi had betrayed—back to power. What was lost in the night sweats of Abadi's panicked state of mind, as it weighed the option of a return to force, was the gentlemen's agreement underwriting an era of new politics in Baghdad: violence would not be employed between the pillars of the political establishment, especially the cast of characters that hark back to the opposition days, among whom Masood would be respectfully offered to sit at the head of the table. That such actors would never again settle disputes with tanks was supposed to be especially true of the Kurdish issue that had been haunting Iraq since its inception. These considerations were purportedly sorted out at the landmark events of the Vienna and Salahuddin opposition conferences that created the Iraqi National Congress (INC) in 1992, the latter hosted by Masood on the territory of a 'free' Iraq, even with Saddam licking his wounds not a couple of hours drive away. Federalism was adopted by the attendees as a historic resolution of Iraq's Kurdish problem. The acknowledged leaders of the Kurdish movement, Masood and Jalal, both acceded to this solution. However, Abadi's Da'awa Party never really bought into this new ethos. With Da'awa at the helm of power since the Ja'afari cabinet, this was bound to make Masood think twice about how committed a post-Saddam 'New' Iraq really was to the idea of federalism. These details were not given sufficient consideration by the Iraqis and Americans who were managing the Kirkuk crises. Soleimani,

on the other hand, was very aware of these dynamics. Breaking the norms and the gentleman's agreement undergirding political life was precisely the prize he was seeking.

Just how badly and heavy-handedly Kirkuk was managed, without a deep respect for history, was evidenced, to my mind, by one of its aftershocks. The aforementioned Kosrat Rasool, who had just cheated death and was nursing his physical and spiritual wounds, put out a statement in the immediate aftermath calling Baghdad's takeover of Kirkuk and other territories an "occupation." Baghdad responded with an arrest warrant on the KRG's vice president. But Kosrat was far more than a title. He belongs to a different time. Before September 2014, if Abadi would have walked up to him to shake his hand, that is before being picked as prime minister, Kosrat would have looked upon him, indifferently and deservedly, as a tertiary actor. Kosrat was an old lion who cut his teeth doing the exceedingly dangerous work of managing urban guerrilla cells against the Ba'ath Party, including in cities such as Kirkuk. He even looked the part, no one would mistake him for a meek lamb. I have a poignant memory of why that kind of past and reputation still matters in Iraq. It was Nawruz 2004. I was accompanying Ahmad Chalabi during a trip to Iraqi Kurdistan. There had been a series of meetings in Salahuddin, followed by a number of others in Suleimaniya. Chalabi was due to meet Jalal at his redoubt in Qala Cholan. Kosrat told Chalabi that he would take him there himself, even though he was still convalescing from a stroke. He was considered a political has-been, masterfully marginalized by the dastardly Jalal, his party leader and rival. Kosrat was idling the years away in Suleimaniya after the PUK had lost his traditional power base around Arbil in 1996. He was also hurting for money by which to maintain patronage networks and his battalions of fighters. At that time he was still uncorrupted if measured by the rest of the PUK leadership. That has changed more recently, with his being the silent partner in the Taqtaq oilfield development, but back then he could not even afford to rehabilitate and furnish one of his grandest prizes: Ali Hassan al-Majid's (the notorious enemy of the Kurds, aka 'Chemical Ali') vacation villa overlooking Dokan Lake. (He indirectly asked Chalabi for that sum by offering the villa for him to stay at during the lead-up to the war. Chalabi obliged this roundabout way to allay the man's pride, and turned it out elegantly.)

Kosrat had limited mobility in his arms, yet nonetheless he insisted on driving himself. Chalabi sat in the front passenger seat while I was sat by myself in the back. He was steering with his right arm, while his left was slung out the window. Their security details followed behind in a number of vehicles. Being the Kurdish New Year, it seemed as if the whole city had gone off to picnic out in the green expanses. The winding road going up to Qala Cholan took us through scenic stretches coveted by picnickers. This was their first Nawruz without Saddam. Something a friend's father had told him kept ringing in my ear: "as long as Saddam was around, no Kurd owns anything," meaning whatever gains the Kurds had accrued could evaporate once again if the tyrant caught his breath. The tyrant, though, had been overthrown.

The picnickers seemed relieved, liberated, at long last. The roadside was packed with family groups huddled around portable grills, while some of the men sat apart, huddled around cans of beer. The green hillsides were dotted with thousands of white colored vehicles. These were government cars imported by Saddam during the months preceding the war. The latest model SUVs, salons, pick-up trucks, courtesy of the United Nation's Oil-for-Food program, and a sure sign that matters had been turning to Saddam's advantage. The previous regime had long shown its favor by awarding a government car, or a gift car, to a party member, military or security officers, tribal chiefs or an obsequious foreign supporter. For many years in the nineties Baghdad could no longer afford handing out such perks to loyalists, but in the two years ahead of his downfall, Saddam's financial drought had broken. When war came in 2003, such newly arrived inventory was parked at government warehouses throughout the country. It was quickly appropriated or stolen. Much of it was resold, very cheaply, to all manner of folks in Iraqi Kurdistan, whose local authorities fudged the papers and made ownership look legitimate. Now the beaming owners of these spoils of war were out in strength, while Saddam was tucked away in a prison.

It also meant that there was plenty of traffic, so we advanced at a slow pace up the mountains. This led to an odd, heart-warming interaction—endearing to me at least. The windows were down, and the men by the roadside were standing or squatting only a few meters away. Thus, I could make out what they were saying as we were passing. The vast majority had a similar reaction: they would make out the occupants of the car, then they would softly and knowingly say “Kak Kosrat and Dr. Chalabi!” to the person nearest to them. Most looked caught off guard as they witnessed this pair slowly driving up the road; it took them a couple of moments to process what they were seeing. Chalabi hadn't been visible on the outer roads of Iraqi Kurdistan since the mid-nineties, when he was remembered for walking onto battlefields carrying an INC flag amidst the Kurdish factions to get them to stop shooting at each other. Kosrat was sending a political message: “I am still around. I still matter, and that is why someone like Chalabi would be riding along with me.” The menfolk would wave politely, and Kosrat would slowly, achingly raise his left arm, extended as it was out of the car, in returning the salutation. They drove in silence for what seemed like a good hour and a half. The two men looked out on the scene, and they felt ownership of that moment. It was their many years of work, at times ducking mortars together—such as their attempt in 1995 to pick a military confrontation with Saddam's troops—that cumulatively contributed to this feeling of ease and relief by the picnickers. Both men admired each other's courage. They had tested one another, and been tested by tribulations. It was my sense that many onlookers, especially the older types, also understood the meaning of that fleeting connection, and they showed a form of gratitude and acknowledgment that they owed this moment with their families out in the Kurdish countryside, enjoying this shade of a long yearned-for freedom,

partly to these two men. It was the oddest victory parade I'd ever witnessed, but it did indeed feel like victory. It was probably the only one Kosrat and Chalabi would ever have.

In a post-political world, the title makes the man. But no titles can legitimately confer upon one such a moment of ownership, acknowledged concomitantly by the two men and those serenely saluting them. In the complicated considerations of the old and new hierarchies of power and stature in the Middle East, elections do not tell the whole story. Voters did not care much for either Kosrat or Chalabi, but wherever they went, they were acknowledged, by laymen as well as by the elite, not for their titles, but for their larger-than-life story arcs. Note that not I am not calling 'acknowledgment' here a form of admiration or veneration. It is a neutral reserve of stature, all its own. These things are not passé in a place like Iraq. Stature—whereby strangers immediately recognize your visage and recall your name and exploits—earned the hard way, still matters, or at least it did on that day and on that road. Soleimani and his team understand these subtleties well. That is why, despite the government's arrest warrant, and after his orders had nearly killed Kosrat and indeed killed many of his men, Soleimani arranged for a private plane to take off from Arbil's shuttered airport to transport the wounded Kosrat to Germany for medical care. The Americans, in contrast, did not want anything to do with Kosrat lest they offend Abadi; the former's calls for their help went unanswered. Soleimani's clever gesture, and America's insouciance, did not go unnoticed.

Another incident also serves to highlight how pathetic America's after-the-fact remedies to what happened in Kirkuk were: On January 24 McGurk tweeted out, "In Iraq, intensive meetings with PM Abadi in Baghdad and then KRG PM Nechirvan Barzani, DPM Qubad Talabani in Erbil. Welcomed their important meeting two days later in Baghdad. U.S. encouraging swift resolution of outstanding issues". McGurk was implicitly taking credit for arranging this sit down between Nechirvan and Abadi. But those in the know tell a different tale. In their telling, it was Soleimani who finally got Abadi to relent and to receive the Kurdish delegation. The proof was in the pudding when immediately afterwards, the KRG heads travelled to Tehran to offer gratitude and fealty. McGurk's desperation did not go unnoticed in Baghdad, Arbil and Tehran. But nobody seemed too bothered by that in Washington. Such incongruences are usually consequential in the perceptions of power.

When Soleimani was about to be stymied in 2012 as a no confidence vote against Maliki loomed large, Arbil was one of the nodes of Iraqi political power orchestrating pushback alongside the Shia *marji'iyya* in Najaf and the political oddity of the Muqtada al-Sadr phenomenon. Such multiple, diffuse loci of power had ameliorated the centralizing and autocratic tendencies in Baghdad. They were effective brakes slowing down the whims of adventurists. Soleimani knocked out one of those centers of power when he orchestrated the events in Kirkuk. The fewer the number of peripheral power nodes, the stronger the center becomes, the easier it is to wield power by whoever wields the center. The process is

accelerated as political life withers; the narrower the political terrain, the narrower the margins of political possibility in which the remaining peripherals can maneuver. Furthermore, as politics recede, the stature enjoyed by men such as Kosrat holds less and less value, as the narratives that retell the tales of their exploits fade away too for they can only reprise themselves within a political milieu, one where not everything is about titles and officialdom's prerogatives. The fewer the numbers of troublemakers like Kosrat, who may stand-up to would-be autocrats, the easier it shall be for the center to rule by decree. It may be difficult at this point to guess what Soleimani intends to do with that unencumbered power in Baghdad once he finishes off the power nodes one by one, but it should be clearer by now that that is where he is heading.

The achievement of men like Kosrat and Chalabi was to return political life to Baghdad in 2003. After watching the tribulations of Iraq's twentieth century, they understood that flexible, gentlemanly politics was the only reliable pathway that may allow picnickers to enjoy a blithe and relatively prosperous Nawruz for years to come. Men like these two, from radically different backgrounds and causes, tend, or at least are more likely to find each other within the realm of politics, building on foundations of trust and respect to pursue limited mutual objectives. The merry-go-round nature of electoral judgment keeps them in play for such a day when the voter decides to try something different. Kosrat and Chalabi, among many, had finally worked out a way to normalize the Kurdish experience within Iraq. They had agreed on the basic federal framework. But as with any structure or habitat, it needs to be lived in to ensure modifications, repairs and renovation. Political life ensures that all parties must find a way of tolerating others, and working with others, to live under that roof. The structure was there. But political life was always fledgling; it needed constant nurture and attention. Few outside and inside Iraq understood its existential value. Masood, being an adventurer, is uncomfortable with the restraints of politics and would gladly do away with them as Soleimani is wont to do—in fact, he had, by appallingly freezing out the Kurdistan Parliament for a while during a political crisis, and barring its Speaker from entering Arbil. But even Masood could be persuaded to play along within a gentlemanly game, had his peers been gentlemen, or gentlewomen. As much as he hated Jalal with a vengeance, he could stomach working alongside him within the realm of Kurdish politics, if he really had to. Whatever fault he can find with Jalal and Hero, Masood would acknowledge that they too, like him, had paid their dues. Just as Masood, in 1991, held off the Iraqi Army's advance at a strategic pass by (allegedly) firing RPGs himself, with only a hundred Peshmerga remaining by his side, after thousands of others had deserted and fled, Jalal and Hero were also making a stand at another chokepoint tens of miles to the south with less than two dozen fighters. As such, Jalal would be a peer he could work with, so was Kosrat, as was onetime PUK leader and later Goran Movement founder Nawshirwan Mustafa. The young Speaker, although elected on Mustafa's

slate, could boast no such feats, or present receipts for dues paid—he was thirteen years old when the Ba’athist darkness receded from much of Kurdistan. He was just an impudent loudmouth as far as Masood was concerned, and he would take no finger wagging from him; barring him from the KRG’s capital, where the Barzanis hold sway, comes more naturally to the grizzled revolutionary—to hell with political decorum.

Many Iraq watchers, and Iraq policy practitioners, began watching after 2003, therefore elements of Iraq’s past do not loom as they should in their deeper sense of the place. The urgency of the Arab Sunni insurgency warped their cognition. That is one reason why Americans tasked with managing Iraq would always lean on Masood to relent and to allow critical benchmarks, such as activating Article 140 of the constitution that is supposed to resolve the issue of Kirkuk, among others, or having parliament pass an oil and gas bill for that matter, to lapse and fester on the backburner for fifteen years. Masood was already primed to be skeptical of the political game. He then watched as politics broke down and eventually the issue that was supposed to get top billing in Iraq’s list of priorities—that of Sunni anger and resentment—broke out in the re-emergence of the caliphate. He resumed talking about a referendum in public, as he had in early 2005, right after ISIS tried to make a dash for Arbil as part of its countrywide blitzkrieg in 2014. Masood must feel vindicated after Kirkuk too. He was right: Baghdad would easily drop the fig-leaf of political consensus, and its Abrams tanks and freshly delivered F-16s would be used to fire upon political dissenters who until recently were allies. In his mind, this was a replay of the early 1960s. There would be no resolution, only a clean break would do. But here, Masood too lost history’s plot and the roles it had assigned to the Kurds within the larger Middle East.

* * *

It was an accumulation of geostrategic relevance that got the Kurds to the point where they could opt for independence and confidently demand international recognition of their national rights. The irony is that independence would have diminished their relevance, leaving them vulnerable, again. There is a clear case for a self-determination argument underwriting the Kurdish cause. On principle, a people’s choice for nationhood must be acknowledged, respected and facilitated. But newly-minted Western and Israeli boosters of an independent Kurdistan were making a geostrategic argument for that upshot rather than a principled one, and in doing so they missed an essential truth: throughout history, the Kurds mattered most because of the roles they played within the stories of Persia, Anatolia, Mesopotamia, the Caucasus, and the Levant. Alternately, they were the disruptors or enablers of stability across

the Middle East, but never the headlining act. “That is ancient history,” the boosters may contend, “many other nations achieved statehood despite historical illogic.” The clearest Middle Eastern example would be Zionism’s triumph despite improbable odds. So why not so for the Kurds?

By geostrategic calculations, the world has indeed changed over the last one hundred years, especially in Kurdistan and across the region: engineering allows for new travel and trade routes; what is under the ground (oil, for example) became as important, if not more so, as what is above it; demography and displacement—think of the Armenians, Syrians and Assyrians now missing from much of the picture, while the Jews have made a miraculous comeback—had redrawn the positioning of identities on maps; imported ideologies of nationalism recast imagined history as a mythologized sense of national distinction and sequestration; and changing ecological vectors, such as acute water shortages, will probably bring even more change over the next one hundred years. So, is the one-thousand-year-view, or even the five-hundred-year-view, relevant to the conversation? I would say it is, namely because we have yet to arrive at a stabilizing formula: neither peace has been arrived at nor an independent Kurdistan. Maybe there is an overlooked nugget of wisdom in the historical expanse that has yet to be mined, one that may prove helpful to future generations of Kurds and Middle Easterners in finding their way out of the morass. For over how many tries, and for how many generations, should Kurds await independence? Why are they under the impression that they are destined for it? The part of their ancestral story that precedes the twentieth century, the one where they ‘belong’ within a larger story, has not been adequately or creatively articulated to them, neither by their nationalist leaders and intellectuals, nor by the nationalist, centralizing governments hell-bent on suffocating their ‘otherness.’ That is unfortunate, for their unique otherness was their anti-alienation, it is how they have always belonged to the land, and to the story.

An independent Kurdistan would not have become an anchor of stability, as some argued in Washington and Jerusalem during the run-up to the referendum. In the best case scenario, it would be comparable to Jordan, but without the immediate security usefulness for Israel. A better analogy would be Azerbaijan; similar oil output, with several Aliyev-like dynasties possibly emerging. Even if there were to be a future federal structure that incorporates Rojava in Syria, with a Nakhichevan-like enclave in Afrin, the Kurds would have played themselves out of usefulness to great-power politics as partners and decisive arbiters within Iraqi and Syrian politics—the very substance of their geostrategic worth.

Azerbaijan treads carefully when factoring in Russian and Iranian concerns regarding its usefulness for America. The same would be true for an independent Kurdistan with regards to Turkey and Iran. Maybe even more so. The boosters argue that Kurdistan’s alleged trump card would be its facility to agitate for an expanded state that would incorporate Turkish and

Iranian Kurds. But can an existing model of Kurdish independence really be leveraged to destabilize, even dismember Iran, for example, or to slip the rug from under an increasingly obnoxious Erdogan? It seems to me like a hollow threat. To think that this new country would be able to influence an internal Iranian dynamic is likely mistaken; it may turn out to be comparable to Azerbaijan's clout with Azeri Iranians, which isn't much in terms of a coordinated alignment. More likely, the opposite of what is intended may happen: it would revert to the models of ancient history when Kurdish princes would serve as bondsmen to Persian or Anatolian autocrats. Furthermore, Kurdistan would not be able to offer Turkey's Kurds a better option than the vibrancy of an Istanbul, now considered to hold within its city limits the largest concentration of ethnic Kurds anywhere, many of whom are rapidly assimilating. Hereafter, Kirkuk's resources cannot sustain over thirty million people—it barely suffices to pay the public sector salaries of the KRG. Kurdish divisions, as well as the presence of Arab and Turkmen minorities, serving as Nagorno-Karabakh-like fissures, will remain levers that outside regional powers can use to undermine Kurdistan.

An independent Kurdistan would have ho-hum geopolitical value: U.S. airbases, Israeli diplomatic representation, may be the extent of it. So what? Will it stanch the bleeding of American leadership and stature in the region? No. Is Baku, analogously, that much of an alpha player on the regional scene? Certainly not. Damascus and Aleppo, Baghdad and Najaf, these are the pivotal nodes of the region's destiny; how it plays out there will reverberate to Riyadh, Tehran, Ankara and elsewhere. The Iranians are cashing in their recent geostrategic triumphs with the public perception that Baghdad, Basra, Damascus, Aleppo, and Beirut, even tenuously-held Sana'a, are 'theirs'—whatever that is supposed to mean in applied power. It looks and feels like 'winning', making it enough of a trophy. Arbil is not much of a consolation prize for the opposite 'American' camp. Arbil, Suleimaniya, and Al-Hasakah do not set the tone of the region, holding them aloft does not relay the same intensity of a winner's affectation.

Those miscalculating groupies in Washington cheering on Masood played a significant part in the timing of his decision. The ones in Jerusalem were relevant to him only in so far as they can influence wider circles in Washington, and not for any particular affinity to Jews or Zionism, a sentiment he shares with his father who in his day welcomed Israeli assistance because, a provincial man as he was, he thought the Jews controlled America. There was an accidental aspect to how the Kurds got to September 25, 2017, the day on which the referendum was held. Much of it is related to their calculation of where they stood in relation to Washington. Their thinking followed the broad framework that American support, or even acquiescence, would allow them to attain their goal. It will turn out that they had misread Washington. Something they may be excused for now given the obscurity of Trump's foreign policy inclinations to anyone, even to his staffers. But it goes deeper, since the Barzanis were

habitually misreading their standing in America, as well as Kurdish leverage with its influence peddlers, for decades.

Some of those relationships, such as the ones that went back to the sixties, when the likes of Jim Hoagland and Bill Safire would occasionally pen pro-Kurdish Op-Eds in America's flagship publications, had atrophied in the period preceding the 2003 war. That generation had allayed their remorse over 'Kissinger's betrayal' in 1975 (as well as for George H.W. Bush's later failure to support the 1991 uprising) by agitating for the No-Fly Zone, which came to be under the guard of the U.S. Airforce. But the attention spans of great powers are limited, leaving the Kurds feeling perpetually vulnerable and uncertain of America's continuing solidarity. For however sympathetic many individual worker-bees and managers may be to the Kurdish cause, Washington's influence industry runs on lucre, and the Kurds had very little of it. It takes magic to become part of Washington's contrived sense of urgency otherwise. The Kurds may have had that in the person of Mulla Mustafa. He had 'it': he exuded the alchemy of folksy charisma, enveloped within a haloed miasma of blood-and-tears, and wedded to a persuasive narrative that may be newly fashioned to align with changed policy objectives. His story, bearing and vision would have made up for their lack of lobbying largesse. But when he decided upon—or rather was badgered into—going silently into the night after his defeat in 1975 and not taking his case to the American public directly, the Kurds were bereft of that once-in-a-generation resource. Kurdish infighting throughout the 1990s under the protective umbrella of the No-Fly Zone didn't help either.

The relationship with the Israelis had soured in Mulla Mustafa's final years too, as both sides failed to live up to expectations of support. At its heart was a bifurcation in how either side envisioned the future. The Kurds understood that the nations around them will be forever their neighbors, ones that would ideally turn friendly and cooperative after the fighting had subsided. The Israelis, on the other hand, thought that the Kurds were kindred, embattled outsiders, a thorn in the side of larger, aggressive regional powers, who would survive in this tough environment by forever bleeding out their enemies. A battle at the foot of Mount Henderin in 1966 showcases these two different approaches. Israeli Mossad officers had designed an ambush to which they lured the Iraqi Army. The ruse was pulled off expertly. The Israelis continue to claim that the Peshmerga had killed 2,000 Iraqi soldiers in that battle. Upon hearing of this exploit, Mulla Mustafa blew his stack: he would have settled for twenty casualties, a manageable number for the opposite side, nudging them towards a face-saving settlement. The actual number of soldiers who died that day was two hundred; several hundred others were taken prisoner, treated fairly by the Kurds, and then released—but it was still excessively brutal in the eyes of the Kurdish leadership. Israeli historians would peg Henderin as a victory, brandishing it as such in the faces of their enemies, while the Kurds would apologetically reckon it an unfortunate misunderstanding. Other disappointments

followed: Mulla Mustafa's fighters were not much use for Israel when Iraq deployed two brigades to the Golan in 1973 that had been freed up from fighting the Kurds, while the Israelis could not even pick up the tab for his hospital stays in America. Later generations of Barzanis would nod politely towards the enthusiasm for their cause emanating from Jerusalem, but would keep the Israelis at arm's length given their knotty past and a tendency to embellish their influence and prowess, such as the death toll at Henderin, or how far they could push Washington. Netanyahu may have been one of the most vocal international advocates for the recent plebiscite, but his endorsement does not reflect a continuum to the relationship that existed half a century ago. All that mattered to Arbil was, always, who would deliver America.

By 1998, Kurdish standing in Washington had deteriorated considerably. Masood was deemed a sell-out to Saddam, while Jalal was written off as an Iranian asset—it was Iranian artillery backing up the latter that drove the former to Saddam's embrace in August 1996, as a result of which the U.S. reluctantly had to airlift and resettle 6,600 refugees. But a new variable entered the picture: Chalabi—he had the kind of magic that could sway policy without ample resources, without much of anything to go for him at that time actually. Chalabi had worked closely in the past with Mulla Mustafa. He learned an important lesson from that experience: when 'betrayed' by the Central Intelligence Agency (as he chose to interpret the events of 1996) then one should do the opposite of what Mulla Mustafa did and become embarrassingly noisy, to get the American media and Congress to pay attention. And they did, to the consternation of many.

The Kurds became relevant in Washington again as a direct result of the Clinton administration's spite towards Chalabi, and as part of its efforts to stymie his advance along the Potomac. The administration scrambled to broker a peace accord between the warring Kurds in September 1998, to show Congress that they were trying to do something when it comes to Iraq. They also needed the pliable Kurds back in the picture to show-up and undercut Chalabi, to prove to congressional committees that the Iraqi opposition simply will not unite for any palpable purpose, and they certainly would not do so under Chalabi. The Clinton administration did not want to be bothered by Iraq, after all as far as they were concerned everything was running smoothly with both Iraq and Iran constrained under 'dual containment.' But here was a "discredited" Chalabi, with what amounts to an Agency "burn notice" on his head, creating a ruckus, and he was within striking distance of doing something that had never been pulled off before in Washington's annals: by legislating the Iraqi Liberation Act (ILA) in October 1998, Congress had made regime change in Baghdad America's policy. Which would only serve to agitate Saddam, prompting an American response, Clinton officials would warn. The Kurds, difficult to band together as they were, would be the centerpiece of the dysfunction and mendacity of the Iraqi opposition, demonstrating that substituting these clowns for Saddam would be ill-advised and dangerous,

no matter what a loose gaggle of wet-behind-the-ears congressional staffers smitten by Chalabi “the charlatan, the snake oil salesman” had to say about it.

If only they could designate PUK, KDP and Kurdish Islamists as part of the ILA, as the Clinton Administration eventually did, then they were confident that Chalabi wouldn't be able to herd these cats together. Plus, Chalabi's pique at Masood's betrayal of a thirty-year-old close friendship linking him to the Barzanis could not be overcome, given what they thought about Chalabi's personality. Jalal had also poisoned his relationship with Chalabi back in 1997; he had expelled the latter's crew from Suleimaniya after sensing that they were about to pull off a momentous strike against the leadership in Baghdad. Furthermore, to ensure that the ILA would not go anywhere, the State Department assigned one of its ablest Arabists with the task of conjuring up byzantine plots and conspiracies setting the Iraqi factions against one another. His task with the Kurds was an easy one—they certainly were not ready for primetime back then. The Kurds would arrive in Washington looking like provincial bumpkins. The only one who could pass as spiffily-dressed and somewhat sophisticated was Nechirvan; his sartorial arsenal replenished by a running tab at James in Tysons II mall in Northern Virginia. Qubad's first jaunt as his father's heir was to New York City to participate in the INC delegation to the United Nations in September 1999. Other party cadres were reduced to writing status reports for Langley, which kept ordering them to maintain the status quo. Najmiddin Karim, later Kirkuk's governor, was heading the U.S.-based Kurdish National Congress at the time, which was only relevant because it was perceived as a front for the PKK. They were truly small timers. Just trotting them out, as State and the CIA often did, would put the lie to the idea that there is a ready and credible alternative for managing a country as thorny as post-Saddam Iraq. After all, here are the Kurds who, although ethnically homogenous and had been fighting for the same goal for decades, cannot govern themselves, are mired in corruption and are drenched in each other's blood, all while serving as proxies for their age-old oppressors, such as Saddam and the Iranians, to boot. Besides, “look here, they are signaling to us not to trust Chalabi,” and that they don't actually want to overturn the applecart according to his ‘harebrained’ plan, America's diplomats and spies would tell Congress and the media.

Even up to 2002, Kurdish wealth was generated primarily from oil smuggling proceeds on behalf of Saddam. Hence, the Kurds were as economically relevant as the smuggling barons of Basra. They were set on a course towards renegotiating their status with Baghdad, one that, despite the No-Fly Zone, would have to be initiated by kisses and embraces in Baghdad, as in 1991 with Barzani and Talabani practically kneeling before Saddam. The formation of the INC in 1992 delayed that renegotiation for a few years, until the Kurds began fighting. Saddam was drawing up his strength towards the end of the nineties under the Oil-for-Food program, and more and more people were advocating for normalizing relations with him (...even the late Kofi Anan's son was allegedly on the take!) One could sense that the Kurds were slowly

making their peace with an inevitable rapprochement—what form it would take would be left to negotiations, punctuated by some fighting as usual. Chalabi's feat in creating the ILA out of thin air was a reprieve from that fate. Chalabi also did not fall into the various traps laid for him by those who did not want the opposition to succeed. What followed was political mastery at the highest level, and, yes, a touch of magic. There were many instances where he could have allowed pique to derail the larger effort, and to consequently validate what the detractors were saying. He held it together, both his pride and the clowder of feral cats that passes for the Iraqi opposition, and carried matters through until such a point as there was no going back for the Bush administration. Chalabi returned for the first time to Iraqi Kurdistan after the 1996 betrayal in January 2003 through the snow driven pass of Haj Omran. Awaiting him was a third tier KDP official. It was a striking contrast to the Honor Guard that the Iranians had assembled for him and his delegation as he departed their territory. Then, as if to drive the humiliation further, the INC contingent was taken to the Barzani lair in Salahuddin and deposited at a two-star hotel that had been the INC's headquarters before it was ransacked by the Republican Guard in 1996. Several aides turned to Chalabi at that moment and beseeched him that he should not allow this slight to stand, that they should go out and rent taxis and head over to Jalal's territory, where they could expect a warmer, respectful welcome. He sat there waiting, unfazed by their tantrums. An hour later Masood sent his chief of protocol and brought the delegation over to stay at the 'presidential' guest houses. Chalabi and Masood had some time to themselves, and seemingly sorted out their personal hurts. Something bigger than them and their egos was stirring. Bringing down Saddam, and enshrining federalism as the ethos of a 'New Iraq', thought to be impossible not long ago, was about to be.

The New Iraq brought many dividends for the Kurds. Though what one sees today in Iraqi Kurdistan, gleaming and somewhat polished as it were if compared to the rest of Iraq, was not an 'eventuality' of Kurdish statesmanship and strategic wisdom. By my measure, it was accidental as we have seen. It was almost derailed by their narrowmindedness and their propensity to be swayed by some State Department desk officer or a CIA station chief. The Kurds reaped those dividends because, post 2003, they found their niche as arbiters of Iraqi politics, often doing so to complement American wishes. The Kurds believed they were building up political capital with Washington, one that they could spend to create their own stand-alone relevance for U.S. policies. Masood may have thought that, one day, that capital could be swapped for independence underwritten by America.

By early 2005, Masood, reliably misjudging the balances around him as ever, was already making noises indicating his inclinations towards independence, but many incorrectly interpreted those gestures as grandstanding to get better concessions for the Kurds during the constitution drafting period. Getting him, and his opposite number, Jalal, on board was

supposed to be the historical codification of reconciliation between the Kurds and the Iraqi state. It came to be, albeit superficially, by popular consensus. Yet it was a tortuous run-up, unnecessarily so. Masood was not entering the pact in good faith. His objection, followed by expressed hesitation, and ultimately dissembling, would prove disastrous to himself, to the Kurds, and to political life and the possibility of democracy in Baghdad. This is [how I put it](#) thirteen years ago:

Barzani and Talabani are a lot like Arafat, and I'm not only talking about the corruption, lack of freedoms, nepotism, and cronyism that are the hallmarks of the Palestinian Authority, as well as the governments of Arbil and Suleimaniya. They share the same sort of weird political legitimacy of representing a battered cause, even though Talabani used to do Saddam's bidding in the past and should have on his conscience the massacre of Iraqi opposition forces in Pesht-Aashan in 1983, and Barzani brought in Saddam in 1996 to wipe out his archrival Talabani, in return for the regime's destruction of Iraqi opposition bases in 'free' Kurdistan. Both leaders have also handed over Iranian, Turkish, and Syrian Kurds to the regional oppressors of Kurds. But, no one can speak with authority on behalf of the Kurds, and shape Kurdish aspirations, like these two gentlemen.

And here's the rub: the rest of Iraq's polity understands the Kurdish demands for Kirkuk and the Peshmerga as veiled maneuvers in the direction of outright Kurdish independence. If that's the case, then Barzani (who on election day said that he hopes to see an independent Kurdistan in his lifetime) and Talabani need to come out and speak clearly on the issue of independence. The language for the right of Kurdish self-determination, and a timetable for disentanglement within five years, should be working into the upcoming constitution-writing process (to be concluded by next August) that spells out the nature of the Iraqi state. Iraq cannot afford to raise two generations on the notion that Iraq's unity is inviolable, only to be confronted by a "surprise" Kurdish secession down the road, thus enabling demagogues in Baghdad to whip up national sentiments to send young Iraqi men to do battle with young Kurdish men. This has been tried in the past, and now is the time to start negotiating an amicable and mutually agreed separation.

If the Kurds and their leaders are still toying with the idea of remaining within the Iraqi union, then they should also make it clear to Iraq's other component ethnic and sectarian groups, the Arab Sunnis and Shias as well as the Turkomans, what they need to compromise on in order to keep the Kurds happy and Iraq unified. Kirkuk does not need to be administratively controlled by the Kurds in order for them to get their share of its oil wealth; rather the wells could be privatized and the Kurds represented, along with Kirkuk's mixed Arab and Turkoman populace and the Iraqi central government, on its executive board. A cordial three-way sharing of the proceeds could be worked out. If Talabani and Barzani want to remain part of Iraq, they should turn around and tell all those Kurdish youngsters who have grown up without knowing a word of Arabic and devoid of any sense of belonging to a larger Iraq that an independent state of Kurdistan is never going to happen and that they should get used to existing as Iraqi Kurds. They should also deliver this message clearly to other Kurds in Turkey, Syria, and Iran that harbor hopes for national independence.

As it is, Kurdish reluctance to spell out what they want is setting up the stage for further strife. Talabani and Barzani need to decide, now, whether to call for a Kurdish referendum on independence by March 2010 or seal a binding union with the Iraqi state. Keeping matters in flux against the backdrop of terrorist turmoil in Iraq is a massive shortcoming of the Kurdish leaders and an uncharacteristic mark of cowardice. The delays in forming a government this past March have left a bitter taste in the mouths of most Iraqis who are eager to move on from the travails of the last few years. The right thing for the Kurds to do now is to inform the rest of Iraq, as well as the Americans who have invested so much in creating a new Iraq, whether they are staying or leaving.

On October 15, 2005, the constitution passed a national referendum, with overwhelming support in Kurdish areas because their leaders had sold them on it. It was one of the greatest triumphs of Iraq's nascent democracy; Iraq was thought to have turned a corner on that the unhappy and brutal legacy. Two weeks later, the Americans rewarded Masood with an Oval Office meeting with President George W. Bush. Masood took that photo-op and mentally deposited it to his political capital that he was still hoping to exchange for full sovereignty one day. Was he simply being deceitful? As always, there are other elements to consider: two days

after the referendum, the hillsides of Barzan witnessed a somber ceremony as the remains of five hundred and twelve Barzanis that had been found in a mass grave in the southern deserts of Iraq were delivered and reburied. They had been initially identified by the distinctive red headress many were wearing at the moment of their killing. These corpses accounted for one sixteenth of those of the Barzani 'nation' (not a tribe, more on that later) who were made to 'disappear' by the Saddam regime in 1983. A couple of days after that, Saddam stood in court for the first time to answer for the execution of 140 Shias from the town of Dujail, where he was targeted for assassination in 1982. Even though there was some symbolism and satisfaction in seeing that the presiding judge was Kurdish, someone like Masood would have questioned why the Dujail affair—close to the heart of Shia Islamists—was given precedence to the victims he had just reburied. Masood wanted to find reasons to be disappointed with the New Iraq. He actively sought out evidence of its dysfunction and lack of 'newness'. He did not have to look far, but it still did not amount to a damning case.

* * *

Try as Masood did to find a reason to condemn post-2003 Iraq, its track record with the Kurds was still, on balance, defensible—until, that is, the evening of October 15, 2017. For thirteen years, to the exact day, the Iraqi state stood on the moral high ground of constitutional legitimacy conferred to it by the 2005 referendum. That it sent tanks into Kirkuk to uphold the constitutional document is the irony of ironies: those who took that decision, and those who endorsed it, had forgotten the deep memory that animates the letter of the law. This particular issue, the Kurdish issue, is not one that is handled through artillery or belligerence. That unadorned and straightforward covenant was breached, and the ghastly legacy of the pre-2003 Iraq came roaring back. Nonetheless there was one person who emerged triumphant from the debacle in Kirkuk: Masood. Now he had his moment of *j'accuse*.

That particular date in mid-October also happened to coincide with the ninetieth anniversary of the 1927 Baba Gurgur oil spurt, which heralded a new age. Suddenly, Kirkuk switched over from being a historical obstruction on the path of Kurdish statehood to its lifeline. Baba Gurgur was a field where an 'eternal' fire had rolled through its gaseous emissions long before it came to be recognized as a 'Super Giant' in oil exploration lingo. The name roughly translated to 'The Flaring Saint.' There seems to have been an actual eponymous saint who died in the early fifteenth century who was associated with that fire—a Kurd according to one of the records we have—and [he lies buried](#) within the folds of Old Baghdad. The saint's wooden sarcophagus abuts a Bektashi Sufi lodge, which was built to honor and

remember him. It stayed with the Bektashi order until an Ottoman sultan decided to eviscerate the janissaries—certain units of which were affiliated with the order—in 1826, as part of one of the first stirrings of reform and centralization. At the time of the sultanic decree, Baghdad was not under direct Ottoman control, but five years later it would be, and those allied with the janissaries were promptly booted out. The Bektashis returned to this lodge after some restrictions were lifted in later decades, under subsequent sultans. Midhat Pasha, the famed Ottoman reformer of the late nineteenth century, even sought out one of their dervishes at this location to interpret a dream he had during his tenure as vali of Baghdad, at the peak of the empire's centralizing drive of which he was one of the principal architects, a time when the administrative borders of Iraq ran all the way to Arabia's Empty Quarter, encompassing much of what is today eastern Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries. The dervish listened to a recounting of the dream, which involved a deer hunt in a forest north of Istanbul, telling the vali that he would marry, so he took a wife from one of the Circassian slave girls who had been serving a Baghdadi family he was acquainted with. By 1881, the chief religious magistrate of Baghdad (of Kurdish origins) decreed that Baba Gurgur's tomb and its adjacent lodge would no longer be administered by the Bektashis, and he transformed it into a religious seminary, swiftly appointing a fellow Kurd from Suleimaniya, whose father had been the top religious authority in Kurdistan in his day, as caretaker of the new school and its principal instructor. One can still find this teacher's headstone, along with that of his two sons, under the shredded sponges and trimmings of today's workshop; the British had refused to keep paying for the upkeep of this institution during their brief occupation, and with time, the neglected space was taken over by the upholstery guild that runs that particular nook of Baghdad's ancient markets. Meanwhile, the roof over Baba Gurgur has caved in, and his tiny tomb chamber lies in disrepair, surrounded by collapsing walls. The respective governmental bureaucracies in charge of Sunni and Shia endowments cannot agree as to which sect the half-forgotten holy man, he of a spirit aflame, belongs. The Shias lay claim because of the Bektashi association, and the Sunnis do so because of the 1881 decree. The tomb will remain a heap of ruins, if it remains at all, until such time as a resolution can be reached.

The preceding paragraph may seem permissively chockful with obscure minutiae, unnecessarily so as far as the general reader is concerned. Yet so much of the phantom code that still asserts itself, startlingly, within the region's narrative can be found in the preceding sentences if one knows what to look for. It is that faint hint of etched-out, older tales that one can barely make out, in the right light, lying underneath the bolder text of a reprocessed palimpsest. The events of the Middle East are overwhelming as they are, now try factoring in the multiplicity of stories, such as that of Baba Gurgur, Midhat Pasha and the British colonial bureaucrat who nullified the seminary's budgetary expenditure, as part of the necessary math needed to better understand what is going on in totality. Why are some stories forgotten? Why

are some other stories forgotten then suddenly remembered? Is there rhyme or reason to the process? Is the choice contrived, beholden to individual agency, or is it as arbitrary as a fluke tempest, or a manuscript rediscovered? I have been unable to conclusively discern the pattern, although my inclination is to privilege the drive of the individual, the storyteller, whether prophet, scribe or polemist. And then, once you have mastered both the apparent and concealed versions of the past, you must sift through what is actually old from what is 'fake old', that is, what is new in the guise of the old, an original manifestation which is usually brought into being by an inspired narrator.

Such an exercise, when applied to the story of the Kurds, and when purposed towards understanding the three-week span between the referendum and Baghdad's recapture of Kirkuk, has taught me that while Mulla Mustafa and Masood were true to their family's revolutionary legacy, the story of the Barzanis is, as a whole, a historical anomaly within the larger Kurdish story. By way of contrast, Jalal was an anomaly to his family's story, which itself was a clear archetype of how Kurds traditionally, and preponderantly, made their peace with powerful centralizing forces. That story is hardly ever told. There is a balance to be struck between anomalies, which capriciously leave their mark on historical progression and may even divert it, and the leaden forces of how things ploddingly are. That would be the ideal application of statecraft. Politics would serve as the medium of resourceful mediation and grudging consent. But maybe it is too much to hope for that the current crop of policy makers and decision takers in Baghdad, Washington, Tehran, Arbil and other regional capitals would be proficiently mindful of such dialectics. Their hash choices, taken on the fly, while dismissing laborious 'extravagances' such as considerations of historical granularity and a nation's cherished narratives, will yet bear toxic fruit, producing even more human misery. There is probably very little that can be done about that now. However, it may be useful at this juncture to rethink the problems inherent within the region. Just as Kirkuk is the first stress test of the Singularity, it can be its first lesson too. What we glean from it may prove instructive for the era following the region's emergence from its inchoate black hole. Here, the exercise in rethink would begin by asking not 'who' the Kurds are but 'what' are the Kurds? Kurds always have right of way to define who they are, individually or as a group. But there is slightly more room for a reasonably dispassionate consideration of *what* their past was all about.

Maliki's declared genealogy has him descending from an eleventh century Kurdish chieftain, while Masood claims the princes of Amadiyya—who descend from an Arab 'Abbasid bloodline—as his ancestors. Maliki thinks of himself as an Arab, while the Barzanis are indisputably Kurdish. There are several theories attempting to append the Talabani name to an Arab tribe or bloodline too. How does that happen? Geography had located the Kurds at the margins of centralizing (read by some as 'civilizing') forces in Anatolia, Persia and

Mesopotamia. It also placed them in between all three, so that the populations that would one day become Kurds would always find themselves part of those central sagas, unfolding faraway, as these imperial nodes went to war or traded. The Kurds existed at the frontiers of empire, but their land was itself the borderland among empires. They could not be ignored behind a wall or string of forts, as the unruly brood of the Central Asian or Mongolian steppes were. They had to be subjugated or turned into reliable vassals lest the empire on the other side of the Kurdish buffer finds a way through. Being at the confluence of imperial ambitions and anxieties meant that the Kurds were not left to their devices. That is the principal reason to my mind as to why they came to be an integral part of the Middle Eastern story.

Topography had given the Kurds an altitudinal identity; they were sheep and goat-grazing pastoralists who seasonally settled along slopes and highlands, cultivating small plots along thin plateaus, meadows and upper valley crags. They were socially organized into clans and tribal confederations. Their roaming grounds were demarcated from those of the tribeless souls who lived further down the valleys and across the wider plains beyond. The inhabitants of the valleys and plains were often dragooned by centralizing forces into tilling the flatlands and paying out taxes. The states found that chasing down and taxing the pastoralists was too costly of a logistical exertion. Acquiescence to central authority was what set these two populations, the peasants and the pastoralists, apart. Whether national attributes such as languages, dialects, costumes, cuisine, faiths and hierarchies follow or precede such differentiation in acquiescence would be difficult to answer in the case of peoples such as the Kurds who did not leave behind a written or monumental record, even though there is a tantalizing assertion by the tenth century alchemist Ibn Wahshiyya that he had spotted multiple volumes in a Baghdad library written in a long forgotten ancient Kurdish script. Twentieth century Kurdish nationalists, following the musings of a Russian orientalist, appropriated Median civilization as the forerunner to their identity, but count me skeptical. I tend to give credence to the variance in conformity to central rule as the likeliest arbiter in this case. What records we have demonstrate that the highlanders played cameo roles in imperial sagas rather than dictating the script of historical progression across the region, and that this paradigm regulated the relationship between Kurds and their neighbors for millennia. It is one that Kurdish nationalists advocating for a narrative of separation and separateness ignore, or emotively cast within the condition of unremitting persecution and victimhood.

The central authorities would sometimes raid the semi-sedentary highlanders, carrying off manpower and womenfolk to augment their own populations, especially the slave classes, and to set an example against aspiring runaways from its suffocating hold. States would sometimes transfer populations in a wholesale fashion, setting the hardy Kurds against other would-be nuisances. Such is the reason that the Krak de Chevaliers near Syria's Homs, far removed from the Kurdish mountains, was known as Husn al-Akrad (Castle of the Kurds) before the

crusading Knights Hospitallers expanded it. Four centuries ago, the Safavid regime, keen on consolidating its rule in Persia, felt the perennial threat of Uzbeks and Turkmen raiding its domains, so it uprooted several Kurdish tribal confederations from the northwest and settled them across the frontiers from the troublemakers. Today there are still hundreds of villages in Iran's northeasterly Khorasan Province where Kurdish is spoken. Some of these populations were repurposed and moved yet again in the mid-eighteenth century, this time to protect Persia from Russian incursions. It should be noted here that Iranian historian (and contrarian) Ahmad Kasravi has argued that the Safavids themselves were ethnic Kurds from Sinjar. Other Kurds proved critical to the Ottomans, helping to stave off Safavid expansion heading their way. Even earlier, a caste of Kurdish soldiers managed to attain the highest glories of power and expanded across the map under the Ayyubid dynasties of Saladin fame. With roots in what is today a Yezidi village near the Armenian capital of Yerevan, and with Tikrit as his birthplace, Saladin grew up in Mosul and in several of the interior Syrian towns, and was eventually buried right outside the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. He is considered history's greatest Kurd, even though his storyline only makes him a nominal one. Saddam debuted the new province of which Tikrit is its capital by his name—however, what this revised version of history leaves out is that the newborn Saladin only spent a night after his birth in Tikrit and then his family was forced to flee to other lands due to a blood feud. Saladin's cousins, lieutenants and soldiers, left Kurdish bloodlines across the Middle East as far away as Yemen and the Sudan. Similarly, a good number of the established Sunni 'Arab' families of the Levantine coast, in places like Beirut and Tripoli, are of Kurdish extraction. Ironically, the Ayyubids, stopped relying on their kin within a generation, and turned to even harder Turkish slaves, the traditional store of hardy soldiery, to replenish their martial ranks. The Kurdish interregnum in lordship over the region was followed by a resumption of centuries of Turkic ascendancy.

Sometimes the Kurds were invited to relieve embattled minorities. According to one version of Nusayri-Alawite lore, the folk-worshippers of the Mediterranean highlands invited in a Sinjari chieftain and thousands of his troops to protect them at the peak of (Turkic) Mameluke persecution. Historians are still debating which Sinjar is being alluded to (there is a village by that name near Hamah) and whether the Sinjar in today's Iraq was populated by Kurds at the time, and even whether the Yezidis were established there by that date. The Sinjari chieftain is still one of the most important personages of Nusayri-Alawite history, and most consider him a Kurd—he has purported resting places ranging from high up in the mountains to the suburbs of Damascus, to an obscure shrine near Talafar. The Wuld 'Ali 'tribal' federation, one of the four principal kinship corporations among Nusayri-Alawites, consider themselves Kurds. And in at least one version attributed to a leading Asad family member, told to Jalal in the eighties, the Asads claim themselves to originally be Kakai Kurds

from Khaniqin on the Iraq-Iran border. The Kurdish Junbulat strongmen of the area that now straddles the borders of Turkey and Syria north of Aleppo provided the Ottomans with generations of officerly talent. The family's most famous general participated in the Ottoman conquest of the island of Cyprus four and a half centuries ago and lies buried within the walls of the fort of Famagusta. One of his descendants aimed to expand the family's mainland statelet, even conspiring with the Venetians while doing so, but was smacked down by the Ottomans. His kin dispersed across the Middle East, one of them making himself useful to the Druze minority in the Lebanese highlands; his three grandsons would rise to assume the titular temporal leadership of the Druze when opportunity came knocking. That particular story line gave Lebanon the larger-than-life political agitator and confessional disruptor Kamal Junbulat and his son Waleed—the latter holding exclusive rights to journalism's moniker of 'mercurial' for many decades long before Muqtada al-Sadr usurped it. History often comes full circle and one instance in which it did so was reflected in the composition of Waleed's fearsome militia during the Lebanese Civil War: not primarily Druze clansmen, but rather stateless Kurds (nominally Sunni), some of whom had come to Beirut at the turn of the last century, or following the suppression of Sheikh Said Piran's rebellion in Anatolia that sought to restore a caliphate that the Turkish National Assembly had abolished.

Kurds dispersed to points near and far from their mountains and hillsides. Whether as subjugated individuals, or as a fighting corps, or as mere economic migrants—the larger Middle East too was their abode. Some of their bloodlines did not end abruptly or fade out into obscurity; many leaders and modern-era celebrities across the region can be traced to a Kurdish ancestor. Atatürk's lieutenant and successor had Kurdish grandparents. A couple of Syria's presidents, who preceded Assad, did so too. The Damascus-born founder of the Syrian Communist Party was a Kurd, with his family electing to bury him in the capital's 'Kurdish' cemetery in the nineties. If the Lurs are to be counted as Kurds, then Shi'ism's first modern 'grand' ayatollah, Iran's Hossein Borujerdi, was also a Kurd. There is a case to be made that Muhammad Ali Pasha, the creator of modern Egypt, long thought to be an Albanian or a Macedonian, may actually have Kurdish roots. Kurdish progeny enriched Egyptian letters (Qasim Amin, the Middle East's pioneering advocate for women's rights), law (Muhammad 'Abduh, the region's pioneering modernizing Islamist), poetry (Ahmad Shawqi, 'Prince of the Poets'), and cinema (Suad Husni, adoringly nicknamed the 'Little Cinderella'). These opportunities to make it, although falling short of statehood and sovereignty, are not nothing either. They are symptoms that Kurdish talent often found it convenient to go along with a neighboring, centralizing civilization. Or just a state that appreciated such talent: the first commander of Saudi Arabia's royal guard was a Kurd from Kirkuk. A Kurd from the village of Barzan made it to and made it in Baghdad a few centuries ago. His progeny, going by the surname al-Barzanli, counted among the city's wealthiest merchants throughout the

nineteenth century. They didn't huddle away in one of the Kurdish enclaves there, but rather took their place among the town's notables in the affluent, mixed Ras Al-Greyyah neighborhood, and were known to be proud of their Kurdish roots. They had the rare distinction of having their own family cemetery within the grounds of a mosque they had built in the very center of the 'center'.



The pyramid-shaped tombstone of Khalid Bekdash's grave (left), and the Bedirkhan enclosure (right), Sheikh Khalid al-Naqshbandi cemetery, Damascus

However, most Kurds stayed put, and neighboring centralizing civilizations let them be for centuries, largely following a pattern of mutually adhered-to distancing. At other times the pastoralists would sense a weakening in the far off capital city, and would bear down on those peasants in the lowlands, extracting stores and tribute. A caravan making its way from one market to another during turbulent times would be too good of an opportunity to pass up. But most years passed with the three sets of populations—the pastoralists, the peasantry, and the urbanized elite—trading and generally trying not to step on each other's toes lest they invite mischief or punishment.

For most of their story as their identities evolved and expanded, the Kurds of the Middle East were unable to forge an empire. The two elements of geography and topography that afforded them a lifestyle—and from that lifestyle an identity—also conspired to thwart a unitary cohesion. If we were to look solely at the region of what now encompasses Iraqi Kurdistan, we can identify four main agricultural plains: Shahrazur, Arbil, Nineveh and Diyala. The launch of imperial ambitions requires maintaining and outfitting a soldiery for a crescendo of campaigns. Such expensive endeavors require a scale of wealth generation that only large, well-watered and firmly controlled plains can afford. Other than these four major plains, there are numerous intermontane valleys of agricultural value in the core of geographical Kurdistan, but they do not scale up to the output of a large plain, even in

aggregate. A would-be empire builder would need to control two or three of the aforementioned plains. From the get-go, the Nineveh plain was a bridge too far, since it radiates from the city of Mosul, which is part of a trading matrix that encompasses the apex of the Fertile Crescent extending to Aleppo through Mardin, Diyarbakir, Urfa and Antep. There were too many powerful vested interests that sought to keep the hinterland of Mosul profitable and under control, and would not relinquish it so easily to a Kurdish upstart. It is interesting to note that as enterprising Kurdish sheikhs built up their own fiefdoms in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the areas southeast of Dohuk, and sought to cement their standing by enforcing religious and customary orthodoxies, the Yezidis were gradually pushed out of the hills and mountains and forced to retreat to the lowlands of the Nineveh plain, working as impoverished sharecroppers for absentee landowners. In effect, they escaped their ethnic kin not a couple of escarpments away and found relative refuge within urban Mosul's orbit. This seems to have been an older dynamic, since all the important Yezidi shrines are easily accessible from the lowlands; their locations do not seem to have been chosen as protection from bullying Islamic orthodoxy emanating from Mosul, as one would expect it to, and sporadically did so under a couple of overly-zealous Ottoman valis, or when there was a lag in paying taxes—the latter being the real motivator for harassing them in most cases. But clearly it was not too heavy of an iron fist as to disperse them away from the Nineveh plain. Even Sinjar Mountain is not much of a 'mountain', and it can be easily scaled by centralizing powers seeking to protect the caravan routes that closely bypass it on the way to or from the next eastern stop over, Tel Afar. In fact, several notable genealogies in Mosul can be traced back to families who had once held noble standing among Yezidi communities in Sinjar and elsewhere. One of the many aberrations of the Islamic State in the twenty first century was that it turned this historical formula on its head, with existential danger visited upon the Yezidis from the direction of Mosul.

Once Baghdad was picked as the principal site of a new Abbasid state, the central coffers invested heavily in a maze of massive irrigation works in Diyala to feed the capital. A major trading roadway into Persia and markets further east ran through the plain alongside lush orchards and fields of grain. Diyala also was too prohibitive of a prize for ambitious Kurdish statesmen-to-be. A road broke off from this thoroughfare and ran north, through Kirkuk and then to Arbil, linking Baghdad to Mosul. Successive powers went to great lengths to protect it. Beginning with the Seljuks, ethnic Turkmen tribes were settled along the route, occasionally replenished by more Turkic stock who were awarded lands to hold on to against any aspirant challengers descending from the Kurdish hills further east. This strategic highway rendered the Arbil plain a vital interest too, even though it was more vulnerable than the preceding two—the population of Arbil's citadel was majority Turkmen for centuries. Small-time Kurdish emirates in this region emerged here and there, such as the ruling family that controlled the

valley running along the so-called Brussels Line from Zakho to Shanidar Cave, building out a 'capital' in Amadiyya, and from which the Barzanis claim descent. But these were limited ventures, usually a mere extension of Mosul's economic matrix, providing its markets with gallnuts and sheepskins. Only the easterly-most Shahrazur plain, running from Suleimaniya to Halabja could sustain an ambitious polity, one that had a fighting chance to serve as a base for a would-be empire. It was sufficiently buffeted by natural obstacles to make it the easiest of the four for a homegrown chieftain to wrest away from remoter powers. The last dynasty, the Babans, established the city of Suleimaniya a little over two centuries ago as that plain's local capital. If only a Kurdish prince could gather an army and put Arbil too into play. Alas, that army would have to wait until the twentieth century, when engineering tamed topography in order to cut a road from Shahrazur up the Jafavi valley, cross the lower Zab and then scale either the Heibeti Sultan ridge or find a road through or over Safeen Mountain—such as the case with the current Arbil-Rawanduz road, eponymously named the Hamilton Road after the New Zealander engineer who supervised its construction in the early 1930s. The harder the topography, the easier for predatory tribes to cut logistical lines running through it, and a Kurdish prince would have to contend with the havoc wreaked by such mischievous fellow Kurds stymying efforts towards a wider polity, for that was the principal reason why central states did not bother extending their rule that far to begin with. The only reasonable way to do it, for millennia, was to pass through the Bazian cleft towards Kirkuk and then take the main road to Arbil. Thus, whoever held Kirkuk wielded authority over Kurdish aspirations, and that was a basic geostrategic truth that stood unyielding for many, many eons, long before Kirkuk's oil wealth would nullify and compensate for the need to wield a suite of richly productive agricultural plains.

The Ottoman vali of Baghdad put an end to the last of the Babans sometime around the middle of the nineteenth century. This was part of a larger effort on the part of the Ottomans and the Qajars to roll up autonomous Kurdish enclaves. The larger world was changing; European powers were encroaching on some of the best lands that those two Islamic empires held. Consequently, they had to squeeze out taxes from other locales to make do. And the very nature of the state was changing. One way to emulate the successful European states, as reformers such as Midhat Pasha and his opposite numbers in Tehran wished for, was to think in terms of borders, neat lines on a map delineating sovereignty and the right to indigenous riches. No longer would the concept of 'the Kurds are the frontier' be tolerated. Previously, it was enough for the Ottomans to count the Babans as their own, while the rulers of Persia would rely on the Ardalans, for example, to match the other side. Whatever forts changed hands between the Babans and Ardalans, well, that was sort of the border—more of a ceasefire line than an expression of identity or sovereignty. It ran, and it still does, through a sub-identity within Kurdishness, that of the peoples of the Hawraman range. Some scholars argue

that their Gurani dialect is actually a wholly different language than Kurdish, and certainly their belief systems, esoteric and dazzlingly heterodox until being homogenized in the last couple of centuries, would place them into a separate category. It would have been far more reasonable for the current border to move a hundred kilometers to the east or to the west, accordingly keeping Hawrami identity intact by maintaining territorial integrity, but those were not the considerations at play. Historically as we have seen, centralizing forces had drawn out individuals Kurds or 'manageable' groupings of Kurds out of Kurdistan proper in the preceding centuries. What was changing a century and a half ago was that centralizing states wanted to incorporate Kurds who existed deeper within the disobedient folds of Kurdistan, even within the plains of Shahrazur or the valley of the Brussels Line, for example, into its direct and absolute governance. We are still living with the aftereffects of those policies. Within the Iraqi context, it held more prospects of success than other places. But it also unexpectedly unleashed radical disrupters into the mix, namely the Barzani family.

From early on in the story of modern Iraq, the central state's relationship with the Barzanis had been one of the essential definitions of said state. The fact that this relationship was serially mismanaged, and continues to be so, is explained by some—such as Masood—as a hardware incompatibility issue within Iraq, rather than as a software glitch running through the political character of Baghdad. Every Iraqi regime has had a 'Barzani problem'. The earliest warning signals began even before Iraq's formation: Masood's eldest uncle was hanged by the vali of Mosul in the run-up to World War I. The vali was himself an ethnic Kurd, one of the many drawn out to the service of a centralizing power, whereas the uncle was ostensibly being punished for religious deviance; that too is an early signal of the 'otherness' of the Barzanis. Hanging Barzani leaders did not work, nor did later episodes of wholesale massacre. And so begins a complicated story, one that I feel is best explained by revisiting four books, all published in Baghdad before the seventies, before 'final solutions' to the Barzani problem were applied. I cannot for the life of me understand how someone familiar with the story told by these books, and the tragedies that followed, would allow a monumental and regressive misstep such as what happened in Kirkuk last October to occur. Most non-Iraqi watchers may be excused for their lack of familiarity with the historical lead-up, but it says much about the Iraqi political class that such basic insights were missed or forgotten. A lingering question is whether Soleimani realized all this, or was simply winging it. I think he understands it all too well, and that already, as we have seen in several other respects, puts him ahead of the game.

I was struck by the title and the date of publication of [*The Tragedy of Barzan, the Wronged*](#) (1954). It was a very rare book, but the Mutannabi Street bookseller who pushed it on me had amassed dozens of copies. His family was Kurdish. They had moved to Baghdad over a century ago, during Ottoman times, settling in one of the capital's handful of Kurdish enclaves. He came to age during the early Saddam era, at a time when he would always be

made aware that the powers that be had not overlooked his ethnic roots and would always suspect him of mixed sympathies in its war against Kurdish troublemakers. Accordingly, the subject of the book was one that was close to his interests, and he wanted a new generation of scholars to be aware of its contents because it was indeed an eye-opener on one of the foundational aspects of Iraq. The book consists of an aggregation of articles written by an author who was sympathetic to the Barzanis. Seemingly there was enough of a margin of tolerance during that final stretch of the monarchy's reign allowing for the expression of such sympathies on a sensitive subject, a sensitivity engorged after almost a quarter of a century of friction between the state and the sheikhs of Barzan. That alone was a surprise to me. More surprises were to follow.

For in 1954 the Barzanis had been broken and dispersed to southern Iraq, while a number of them were living in exile in the Soviet Union. The author, Ma'arouf Jiyawook, was making the case that it was time for the state to display clemency by letting them return to their lands and villages. A decade had passed since the last major confrontation, when one of the component 'tribes' of the 'nation' of Barzan, the Pirozis, had emigrated en masse to join the nascent Kurdish republic across the Iraqi-Iranian border in Mahabad. After that republic crumbled, many of the womenfolk and children returned to Iraq but several hundred men decided to follow their leader, Mulla Mustafa, on a 250 mile trek along the borderlands, on foot, while under Iraqi, Turkish and Iranian fire, and that for weeks at a time, to ultimately ask for asylum under the rule of Joseph Stalin after having crossed the Aras River delineating Iran from Soviet Armenia.

The word 'nation' is as close as one can get towards conveying how the Barzanis themselves were using the term 'milleh' to describe their community at Barzan. The term 'Barzani' here is no mere indication of association with the village of Barzan, one whose name is of likely Aramaic provenance. The village's earliest inhabitants comprised Christians and Jews of questionable ethnic stock (Judaism had been a proselytizing creed in those lands, incorporating converts into the remnants of the 'Assyrian exile'). They were the self-same farmers who at times were taxpaying subjects of a distant urban authority, or the tribute-paying prey of emboldened mountaineers descending upon them during times of political and economic upheaval. The term, as used by the Barzanis, neither indicates a shared bloodline or ancestral descent, or even a shared religion: the Barzani nation is composed of several tribes, minor clans, tribeless Kurds and ethnic flotsam, peasant converts, and wayward strangers, drawn to the Barzani cause—a cause that more or less tolerated Jews and Christians sticking to their faiths but still counting them as part of the community, holding (more or less) equal 'rights'.

Christians and Jews experienced a far harsher reality under Kurdish aegis not thirty miles away. The Jews in particular had a turbulent experience in those parts, partly a legacy of their

attempt to seize the principal town Amadiyya in the twelfth century when a native son declared a messianic Jewish revolt. Something that a friend of mine had told me, while driving to that town, stuck in my head. He said, “The Christians have the best lands. The lowest in the valley, the most fertile, and the closest to water streams.” It was just an observation that had percolated down to him through preceding generations that had envied the Christians for such good fortune. But I tend to think it speaks to an older truth. An even older truth is that there had been, until 1948, a few wholly Jewish villages and hamlets that eked out a livelihood through farming. Most of the farming Jews however, lived as minorities within other villages, usually dominated by Christians. It may suggest that many of those villages were Jewish before converting in full or in part to Christianity. While the “best lands” observation suggests that they were there first, having their pick. Kurdish highlanders, arriving either as dispossessed households or individuals, dislocated by some ecological, economic or tribal event, would have joined those earlier farmers as a weaker social element, one consigned to the lands that are harder to farm. The dominating force would remain the central state, or in its absence, the Kurdish tribal formations that could diversify their pastoralism-based income with raids and levies.

There were several compounding factors that dismantled the highlander-lowlander model over time, reaching its nadir in the early part of the twentieth century. Increased centralization in the nineteenth century brought with it state-driven sedentism of pastoralists, often through coercion. Increased populations and restrictive land allocation may have had the effect of already limiting the latter’s ability to roam and access their traditional grazing grounds, usually earned through tribal warfare. However if the state coveted those same lands then the tribes were usually not much of a match. As such, seasonal settlements or villages would become permanent, and the problems of its poorer, meager lands, with low yields at those higher altitudes, would be further compounded by expanding, tethered-down populations. Consequently, more and more Kurds would have found it difficult to make it by their ancestral methods, and would turn to farming down-valley too, competing for lands with more-established minorities and tribeless peasants, but in contrast to the latter maintaining a semblance of clannish cohesion, even if just by name and a nominal acknowledgment of a titular tribal head. It was not a complete process though, with a significant proportion remaining pastoralist and semi-nomadic, their obstinate observation of the old ways would bring with it its own set of complications later in the century when, for example, one needed to determine the prevalent ethnic composition of a certain locale.

The ascent of the Barzanis to prominence coincided with a time of great dislocation. The dislocation enabled their rise, but the decisions they took on that path were at variance with similar cases. The easiest course of action towards temporal dominance would have been to agitate against the Christians, for example. Yet the Barzanis not only chose not to, but rather

behaved in contravention of popular sentiment. The cause they espoused was singularly egalitarian, and profoundly at odds with the patterns prevalent in other Kurdish lands. Those patterns would begin with the arrival of a holy man, a mendicant mystic or an emissary of a Sufi order that was prospering and flourishing nearby, around whom the peasants would rally, and that rally would organically create a new power center to rival the authority of an overbearing Kurdish chieftain, lurking on higher ground. As power and wealth accrues to the challenger and his progeny, a resolution of the rivalry between the religious and tribal authorities would be arrived at, usually through intermarriage. What follows is a joint venture in squeezing out the peasantry.

The story of the Barzanis follows this pattern in its early stages, but then deviates significantly. An emissary of a new Sufi order, the Nakshabandiya-Khalidia, arrived in Barzan after having been ordained by the Sheikhs of Nehri, a village now on the Turkish side of the border, where an old line claiming descent from the ('Arab') Muhammad had taken residence and had switched over to this new order from the previously prevailing Qadiri one, whose twelfth-century lodestar and founder is buried in Baghdad. The Nakshabandiya-Khalidia had been founded a few decades before its call had reached Barzan, by a Kurd from the environs of Suleimaniya, and had spread like wildfire across the Middle East. The founder, Sheikh Khalid, had gone to India, where he picked up the tenets of a new militant Sufi order that was becoming virulently anti-Shia. His new teachings found traction in a Middle East that felt under siege, partly against Shiite proselytization in some of the Kurdish borderlands, but principally, and this is where it accrued its biggest successes, as a vehicle for anti-Christian sentiment, especially as Christian minorities were being emboldened by Ottoman reforms and Western patronage. His tomb, standing above Damascus, is no accidental location: inland Syria was seething with anti-Christian and anti-Western wrath even before the reform rescripts were ever uttered. The West was exercising hegemony, Christian minorities were militant and uppity (Greece was in full blown revolt by the time of Khalid's death), and in the parlance of the time, it meant Christendom was making a comeback. Khalid's acolytes, such as the Sheikhs of Nehri, were in turn agitating against the Syrians and Armenians of what is now northern Iraq and Southern Syria, as well as against Shias further east. One of their number, Sheikh 'Ubaidullah, would in later years invade Iran in the early 1880s, massacring Shia towns, while harassing and persecuting Christians nearer to home—some Kurdish historians consider his outburst to be the first stirring of Kurdish nationhood. But before all that, these were the atmospherics that had molded the young emissary arriving in Barzan. The peasants flocked to him, and very quickly he became a nuisance and a threat to the principal tribal authority there, the Aghas of Zabar. But rather than following the usual story, the Barzanis never turned feudal, choosing instead to distribute the land fairly among their congregation; hardly accommodated the tribal authorities or even the other Sufi dynasties arising nearby; and

instead of persecuting minorities and the peasantry, elevated Christians and Jews to what would have counted as first class citizenship, back then, within the Barzani nation.

A few years ago I got it into my mind, when exploring the Tur Abidin region near Turkey's Mardin, to go looking for my friend's ancestral village. His grandfather, a Syriac, had ended up an orphaned toddler in Jerusalem following the anti-Christian massacres and forced deportations that convulsed Anatolia throughout World War I, carrying with him the name of the village as a surname—the only legacy of his family's that he would get to keep. Place names in modern southeastern Turkey are a sensitive matter. Place names can communicate some uncomfortable truths about past and current demographics. So one had to figure out what name the Kurds who had displaced my friend's grandfather had given to his village. And if it was too Kurdish-sounding of a name, then Atatürkist authorities would have probably changed it again to fit in line with the state's policy of refusing to recognize Kurdish distinction. An acquaintance had arranged for his nephew to drive me around the usual sites in those parts. The young man, an ethnic Arab, was used to this routine, shuttling visitors in his brand-new van, bought on a loan from his uncle, to this or that heap of ruins or tourist attraction. He hung back with some puzzlement, though, as I questioned a priest at a surviving Syriac church on possible contenders for that almost-forgotten village, and the driver's eyes betrayed a look of unease and worry as he beheld my elation when I was given its updated appellation. We got back into the vehicle and I promptly restated the directions I had been given. He reluctantly proceeded that way, in silence at first. However, at one point, he put out a few probing questions concerning my interest in this unusual destination. I thought to myself that maybe this young man is moonlighting as some security informant—there were adjoining vicinities still aprowl with PKK types, especially in the evenings—and he would have to file this detour in his daily report. I casually told him the truth. It did not sit well with him. He somberly turned the van around, telling me that we would find ourselves in imminent danger if we were to go there, and that “they will break our bones.” They meaning the Kurds who now live there, who were likely to pelt his gleaming windshield with stones as they would infer that a foreign-looking stranger would only make it out there if looking up some long since defiled land deed that used to belong to a Christian. In contrast, the Barzanis, allegedly, were taking in and helping Christian escapees from that upheaval that left my friend's grandfather adrift and alone, with strangers living in his home.

Such a deviation from the norm would subject the founding mystic of Barzan and his descendants to all sorts of accusations. At various times they have been 'slandered' as crypto-Jews, Christians or Yezidis, whose intent was to undermine Islamic orthodoxy. The Yezidi appellation particularly stuck since the Barzani sheikhs at one point decided on a sartorial distinction: a red colored headdress, in contrast to the predominate black favored around them. It was likely adopted as a revolutionary red (red was a revolutionary color long before

the socialists adopted it) rather than a copying of, or a nod to, the Yezidis, the only community that would wear that color for hundreds of miles around—and who probably did so at first motivated by a revolutionary spirit too. The devotion the nation held to its designated leader was seen as heretical and messianic; at one point the Barzanis revealed that they were calling such leaders, such as Mulla Mustafa's older brother, Ahmed, the 'Khudan', implying divinity. Their tribal and Sufi rivals would often complain of such deviancy to the central authorities, who, as guardians of orthodoxy, would show varying levels of interest, at times hanging the Barzani chief, and at other times, such as the early days of the Iraqi monarchy, sending in an investigative committee to ascertain whether the Barzanis had indeed departed from the confines of hazy Islamic gradations to clear-cut, out-of-bounds unbelief. One recent author (Farhad Asserd, [Al-'Aqid al-Barzaniya](#) (*The Barzani Tenets*), Suleimaniya, 2008) even posited a theory that the Barzanis are remnants of a centuries-long dormant Ismaili Shia rebellion, reminiscent of the Assassins or the Qarmatians, the latter of 'ransacking Mecca'-fame. He did so by enumerating the many tantalizing areas of overlap in beliefs and behavior between the two strains, although falling short of demonstrating a clear line connecting the Barzanis to Ismailism. Whatever the case of its origins may be, this revolutionary deviation colors where the Barzanis stood vis-à-vis the long-established Kurdish acquiescence to central authority, revealing also an inherent drive to create a new society, taking on the form of Kurdish independence in later generations. Now, if the Barzanis could not stick to the anti-Christian tenets of the Sheikhs of Nehri, who had ordained their forefather, and would not tone down their otherness with the lure of feudal status and accrued wealth by making their peace with how things are traditionally done, then how would one expect to tether them down with other doctrines or inducements? They were just too weird and unyielding, but rather than stamp them out, the author of the *Tragedy of Barzan* was arguing that this rare and wild mountain floret was deserving of sympathy and fascination.

The background and character of the author are interesting too, and they tell a story at variance with that of the Barzanis: the story of Kurds who gravitated towards central authorities. Jiyawook was born in one of the alleyways of Baghdad in 1885 to a family with roots in a village that is not far off from Barzan. Jiyawook's grandfather, Hajj Mawlood Sa'adi (nicknamed Badi'ulzaman, 'The Luminous of [His] Age') was a famous cleric who had supported the Ottomans against the Russians on two separate 'raids'. His father, Ali Asghar Effendi, was also a renowned cleric and worked as a religious guide for the army in Baghdad. He also represented the military institution in the courts. The father managed to get his son, the author, admitted to a school in Istanbul, to eventually train another generation for the Ottoman civil service as was the custom at the time. However, during his studies, the young law student was exposed to the flurry of ideas swirling around the capital city, all desperately proposing to reform the Islamic state ahead of the malfeasance of the 'West'—or that's how

most saw it. His Kurdish roots may have prevented him from joining the right-leaning sentiment of Pan-Turkishness that was coming to the fore at the time, leaving him with the option of championing the concepts of Islamic liberalism as propagated by Shahzadeh 'Prince' Sabahettin. Such activism prompted Jiyawook to return to Baghdad, fearing arrest at the hands of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) junta. But his self-righteous, almost extremist, character drove him to more trouble, electing to join the *jihad* against British forces in Basra during World War I (he had been appointed as a schoolteacher in the southern city), which was followed by arrest and internment in a POW camp in far-away Burma. He returned from exile to a new state called 'Iraq', and soon enough found his footing in its fledgling civil service, as many Ottoman-era officials did.

Jiyawook's outlook on the convulsions of his times was colored by a familial adherence to a central authority whether in Istanbul or Baghdad, as well as an awareness of his Kurdishness. He was further imbued with anti-colonialism, being especially hostile to the British, and a rabid hatred of Christian minorities, holding them culpable for enabling Western powers to undermine the forces of Islam, a sentiment shared by many of the Ottoman elite and populace. Thus he understood the source of friction between the Barzanis and the nascent Iraqi state differently: it was land rights rather than independence that sparked the first volleys of Barzani resistance. Jiyawook reveals to his readers a British plan to settle Nestorian Assyrians along the Brussels Line that follows the shape of an upside down crescent running from Zakho to Rawanduz parallel to the Iraqi-Turkish border and through the villages of Barzan and Sarishmeh, the latter being the author's ancestral home. The vast majority of the Assyrians were refugees who had fled the anti-Christian measures during the period of the Armenian Genocide, many subsequently signed up as an auxiliary fighting force for the British in Iraq. According to Jiyawook, "Britain had secretly pledged to the Assyrians to form a state for them in Iraqi Kurdistan that is similar to the Israeli state in Palestine."

Hence, this book is a forerunner in the genre of how the West had betrayed the Kurds. Its historical value lies in that it was one of the first of many narratives concocted by Kurdish intellectuals to describe the story of their people, and as is the case with such formative phases, the storytelling was fluid and elastic, and could have gone in any one of many directions. The Kurds, according to this narrative, were wizing up to the reality that the League of Nation's pledge to award them the "highest-form of administration", which they took to mean self-rule as an outcome of any negotiation towards Iraqi independence, was not going to be honored. It says more about Jiyawook than it does about the Barzanis that the author decided to attach the rebels' passions to the issue of resettling Assyrians, riding on the coattails of popular hostility towards the latter, seen as lackeys of the British. Such a talking point would fit naturally within Jiyawook's comfort zone as a 'centralized' Kurd: had it not been for the 'foreigner' sowing dissent and sedition, then most issues could be resolved

amicably and there would be no reason to take up arms. Tempers were flaring during the negotiations with the British in the late 1920s that would eventually lead to an independent Iraq (in 1931), and it was something that Jiyawook said during the raucous parliamentary debates (he was an MP for Arbil Province at the time) that led then prime minister Abdul-Muhsin al-Sa'adoun to commit suicide a few hours later. Jiyawook, already miffed that the British had reneged on the pledges made to Kurds, accused the prime minister of stalling the talks for full independence and implicitly suggesting treason, for al-Sa'adoun was known for the view that Iraqis should not rush headlong into independence if they are not ready to take on the burdens of statehood. Jiyawook's zeal and anger colored his opinion of al-Sa'adoun as a British lackey, when he actually should have seen him as an ally and a true friend of the Kurds.

I wonder if Jiyawook had forgotten al-Sa'adoun's honorable stance on the Kurdish issue back in 1924, when European powers were still debating whether to attach the Mosul Vilayet, with its Kurdish populace, to Iraq or whether to keep it within the new Turkish republic. During the [first parliamentary debates](#) in Iraq, held under the auspices of the country's Constituent Assembly, al-Sa'adoun said these incredible words:

“It is not lost on my colleagues, the members of [this] Higher Council, that the primary reason that led to the fall of the Ottoman government was its scorn for the benefits of nations and the rights of sects that were under the Ottoman flag, and if we followed the Turkish manner that scorned the rights of nations then we would be mistaken as they were mistaken. Therefore I see that it is necessary and imperative that we be free men and give freedom to all components, and we should not be stingy or overly cautious in giving this right to its people, and it is no secret that there is in Iraq a great component and that is the Kurdish component. If we do not give the Kurdish component its right and let its schools teach in the Kurdish language then the result will not be pleasant. Yes the Arabic tongue is magnificent and beloved and I do not think there is an Iraqi who does not endeavor or exert effort to learn it but original content in a clear meaning will benefit us politically and satisfy all our non-Arab and non-Muslim brothers so I do hope that this council will not begrudge giving this right so that the hearts can be unified and in agreement and supportive of Arab unity, for if we do not give them these rights then we cannot gain the Arab unity we desire...”

Al-Sa'adoun realized that the Kurds needed to be invited into Iraq, rather than forcibly appended. His thinking was revolutionary, a product of a decades-old liberal tradition within

his social class that had been incubating throughout the late Ottoman period, which then flowered as the short-lived 'age of enlightenment' in the Arabic-speaking capitals of the twenties. Consider that these two men, one an honorable and hasty man and the other an honorable and cautious man, could not recognize each other as allies, working in tandem for the same political vision. What can we then expect from the current political crop managing Iraq's crises? If luminaries such as al-Sa'adoun and Jiyawook could not accommodate each other at the birth of the Iraqi state when matters were still malleable, even though they were ideally positioned to do so by virtue of their shared Ottoman past and their libertarian outlooks, what can we expect now? Several historians suggest that when the obtuse yet seasoned Faisal I died an untimely death, and was replaced on the throne by his creepily bizarre heir apparent Ghazi, Iraq experienced its first of many tragic turns of ill fortune. Historians remember al-Sa'adoun as a high-strung and toadying servant of British interests. They usually skip over him to consider Nouri al-Said to be the consummate politician of that era. But al-Sa'adoun, being from a Sunni family deriving its stature from leading the largest 'Shia' tribal confederation for generations, as well as his deep sense of what might actually make Iraq (the 'New Iraq' back then) succeed as an idea, was in my opinion the statesman best suited to lay the foundation for an independent, well-governed Iraq, one with a healthy political life. His suicide in a moment of pique over Jiyawook's comment, put an end to that propitious talent in the winter of 1929. World markets were crashing, extremist ideologies began edging out liberalism among the young, exasperating their restless pining for quick, maximalist solutions, the political realm was turning ungentlemanly as evidenced by that barb that came his way within the august chamber of parliament — al-Sa'adoun's romantic sense of honor could not bear it all. That, not Faisal's early death, was the first unlucky turn for the country, the first episode worthy of a 'what could have been' lament.

Jiyawook died in the beginning of 1958, so he did not get to witness the end of the monarchy by way of a military coup. He did not witness the return of a triumphant Mulla Mustafa from his Soviet exile, recast as an ally of Iraq's new strongman, Abdul Karim Qasim. Two years later, discord set in, again, and cordite would waft, yet again, from the clutches of oak and cypress trees in the environs of Barzan. And a generation after this book was published, the 'Tragedy of Barzan' came to mean a whole new paradigm after the Iraqi government, in 1983, set out to exterminate all male bloodlines associated with that name, killing some six thousands of them, and even uprooting all the trees. I let out a macabre chuckle when I came across the edict read out on Iraqi radio on August 8, 1945: "Towards the purpose of restoring order and regulation and to prevent the reoccurrence of crime, it had been decided to occupy the Barzan area militarily and to arrest the criminals and bring them to justice." It sounded a lot like the order to arrest Kosrat. Seventy-two years had passed and Iraq was still pacing in place.

A second book, consisting of two volumes, and published a little over a decade before the preceding one, tells us more about the auspicious prospect that antiquity as well as geopolitics had created for Iraqi Kurds and the Iraqi state. The first volume of [*A History of Iraqi Provincial Celebrities*](#) was published in 1946, focusing on the province of Suleimaniya. It begins with a short biography of its previous governor, the above mentioned Jiyawook. The second volume, focusing on Kirkuk, ends with more biographical background on him. It seems that Jiyawook had helped the non-Kurdish author, Abdul Majid Fahmi, during his travels in Suleimaniya and had instructed the official bodies to assist him in every way. The author repaid the kindness with an extensive backgrounder on his benefactor. When the first volume was published, the monarchical authorities in Baghdad had not appointed a successor to Jiyawook, but by the second volume, published months later, we learn that the successor was Hassan Talabani, another Kurd, who would later become a minister in Qasim's first republican cabinet.

What I found arresting in these two volumes is that the Jiyawook phenomenon, that is, the Kurd who aligns with the central government, whether it be in Istanbul or Baghdad, was not limited or superficial in nature. By studying the brief biographies of officials as presented in these two provinces we find that Baghdad had a reservoir of administrative talent, trained under the Ottomans, who were either ethnically Kurdish or could speak the Kurdish language. It was to them that Baghdad could assign the administration of Kurdish-majority areas as envisioned by the "excellent administration" (self-rule) that the League of Nations had determined for the Kurds within an independent Iraqi union.

For example, Jiyawook is related to the Baban family through his mother. This is the same family mentioned above that managed to tear off the Shahrzur plain from Ottomans and to rule it as a semi-independent principedom. After smashing the Kurdish principalities, Ottoman policy sought to coopt the Babans within the Ottoman elite, and by the late Ottoman era members of this family had served as ministers and governors across the empire, such as Mustafa Zein Pasha, the governor of Hejaz or Isma'il Haqqi Pasha, the minister of education, or Khalid Beg, the private tutor of Sultan Mehmet Reshad, and many more others. This trait continued after Baghdad had turned into the object of centralized fixation, and we find the two brothers Jamal and Jalal Baban serving as ministers in various cabinets, while Salah Baban was an enduring member of parliament. Fadhil Baban served as the deputy head of police. Ahmed Mukhtar Baban was the chief of the royal court for long stretches and holds distinction as the last serving prime minister under the monarchy.

This phenomenon was not restricted to the Baban surname. The two volumes are chockful of tens of officials, merchants and tribal leaders, and especially military officers with similar backgrounds. Kirkuk in particular was supplying the Iraqi state with capable men who could speak Kurdish, Arabic and Turkmen, given that city's stature as a meeting point of all those identities because Kirkuk, as we have seen, was a point of control on one of the main trade and

administrative routes between Baghdad and Mosul and points beyond. Turkmen surnames such as Qirdar or Nafatchi (the latter had been awarded exclusive rights to oil extraction by an Ottoman sultan in the seventeenth century) or others mask intercommunal relationships with Kurdish bloodlines through intermarriage and partnerships between the ruling elite of that city, whose overall identity was one of Sunni Islam and allegiance to the Ottoman throne. The situation persisted after allegiance shifted towards a Hashemite throne in Baghdad.

Kurdish origin, whether arriving paternally or maternally, sometimes clear-cut and boasted of, or ambiguous and gossiped about, manifested itself among the leading men of the monarchical era, such as the aforementioned al-Said (the 'Grand Gentleman' of Iraqi political life under the monarchy who grew up in the 'Kurdish Hill' neighborhood of Old Baghdad where an ancestor had settled four centuries earlier. Al-Said claimed to be a Qaraghul, which was more of a militia guild than a bloodline), Ja'afar al-'Askari (al-Said's brother-in-law who established the Iraqi Army; claimed Arabness but his roots go back to the village of 'Askar), the brothers Taha and Yaseen al-Hashimi (also claimed Arabness, however Kaka'i Kurds in Kifri remember the pair's father and grandfather as kinsmen), Bakr Sidqi (a high-ranking Army officer who notoriously pulled off the region's first military coup; one in which al-'Askari, a distant cousin of his, was killed), and others. Kurdish roots ran among the leading intellectuals such as Ma'arouf ar-Rusafi and Jamil Sidqi al-Zahawi, and extended into the Qasimite era with reports of Abdel Karim Qasim's mother being of Kurdish stock (in reality her clan, the Sawakin, is of indeterminate ethnicity, and was pushed out by other Kurdish tribes that had expanded down the water flow of the Khabur River, with the defeated clan electing to resettle in and around Baghdad in the early nineteenth century). Such nebulous genealogies are an indication of the large numbers of Kurds who were absorbed within the administrative layers of the state over hundreds of years as a result of a myriad of circumstances.

One of the incongruences in the first volume is that it was dedicated to "his preeminence the free leader Sheikh Mahmoud Sheikh Said (al-Hafid)" who is described later as "the preeminent leader of the Barzanji Seyyids, as well as being the supreme leader of the tribes of Suleimaniya Province, and singularly influential among them." The incongruence lies in that al-Hafid was in a state of near constant rebellion between 1919 to 1931 against the British and then in defiance of the Iraqi state, and he was exiled externally and internally many times over. He remained irksome until the thirties, after which the authorities confined him to southern Iraq, but subsequently was allowed to return to his village of Darkeli to live out his autumn years. *A History of Iraqi Provincial Celebrities* had been licensed by the governmental Directorate of Public Advertisement yet it is quite jarring to see that, at the same time, this directory is celebrating a man who until recently was considered a brigand and a traitor to the Iraqi state. The author recounts the sheikh's past by showing how al-Hafid travelled to Shu'auyba near Basra with eighteen hundred horsemen and three hundred soldiers during

World War I to “protect Islam” and spent eight months fighting the British there. He also beheld twenty battles against the Russians who were advancing on the environs of Rawanduz. Even when he rebelled in the early 1920s and declared himself ‘King of Kurdistan’, he was being a ‘nationalist’ since he was fighting the British—according to the author—and a “crushing war broke between them that lasted forty five days at the Tasloogeh [Bazian] gorge where he faced down fifty thousand warriors but they couldn’t overpower him until he was betrayed by one of his closest acolytes...” He was then exiled to Bombay then Pune, and so on. As for his latest acquiescence to central authority “in the end he surrendered to the Iraqi government so as not to spill the blood of Muslims” meaning that he gave up on the independence of his people not because he was convinced of Iraq’s unity but to spare lives. Such state-sanctioned hagiography of a would-be secessionist seems uncharacteristically magnanimous for the state censor to allow, but it could reflect one of the many moments during its modern history when Baghdad thought it had turned a corner in pacifying the Kurds.

The Barzanji lineage began when two brothers, claiming descent from Muhammad, left the city of Hamadan (in present day Iran) and took up residence in the mountains east of present day Suleimaniya, probably in the early 1400s. It is thought that at their beginning, they were influenced by the Nurbakhshia Sufi order, which would explain some of the heterodoxy tolerated and then adopted by their progeny. The main line, though, eventually adopted the Qadiri order, and became loyal advocates for the House of Baban, up until its demise. They then transferred their allegiance to the House of Osman in Istanbul who saw fit to give the Barzanjis a promotion, as part of a policy that the sultans followed in the wake of the demise of the Kurdish principalities by devolving temporal as well as religious authority onto rising Sufi orders, allowing them to effectively govern in the Sultan’s name, and to grow immensely rich while doing so. Substituting the Sufi dynasties for the old noble houses, or rather turning the mystics into feudal lords, was the model encouraged by the state across Kurdish territories. The Barzanjis had such a strong grip on their locale that even a local boy who had made it big across the Middle East, the aforementioned Sheikh Khalid, could not plant his order anywhere in the vicinity of his birthplace because the Barzanjis would brook no competition. However, given that recessive gene of heterodoxy, harking back to a time when one of their ancestors was called ‘The Red Sulphur’ (note the revolutionary red here again), a couple of Barzanjis went off and lorded over communities that strayed far from the orthodoxy. Sultan Zahak was one such ‘revolutionary’. He became the rejuvenator of ancient belief systems that today encompass the Ahli-Haqq (alternately called Yarsans) of Iran and the Kaka’is around Kirkuk and Khaniqin (who one of the Asads claimed descent from as noted above). Sultan Zahak’s shrine lies on the Iranian side of the border and his progeny are still today serving as the leaders of these communities. Another Barzanji line took to proselytizing a string of villages to

the north west of Suleimaniya, ones in which some older belief systems lingered, including the village of Asker that gave Iraq its first defense minister and the man who murdered him, Iraq's first coup enactor. Those stubborn impulses towards heterodoxy exhibited themselves when the community first turned to the new fad of the Nakshabandiya-Khalidia, but then swung around wildly marrying a form of Salafism to a radical antinomian socialism (Sheikh Abdul-Karim Shadhala's Haqqa movement) akin to what the Barzanis were practicing. One offshoot of the offshoot, this one led by Hama Soor ('Muhammad the Red' — one speculative but alas untrue rumor at the time had it that he was a wayward Scot or Irishman, a la "The Man Who Would Be King"), established a Shaker-like pacifist community that enforced absolute celibacy and implemented full communal ownership.

Indeed, one sometimes finds a minority seeming to lean towards the margins of heterodoxy and refusing the heavy hand of centralization throughout the last couple of centuries in this case as with others, eventually consigning themselves to modern-day marginality, however, the majority and mainline of the Barzanjis continued observing both orthodoxy and a keen allegiance to Istanbul. In turn they were accorded the highest honors the empire could bestow on its loyal enforcers, one branch even taking on religious leadership in Medina in the Arabian Peninsula (they are prominent Saudi citizens today). One of the grandfathers of Sheikh Mahmud was a habitual guest at Sultan Abdul Hamid II's court, where he was always welcomed effusively and warmly. In fact, this sultan at times treated the environs of Suleimaniya, and the various feuds pitting the Barzanjis against the Talabanis, or the Barzanjis against some other tribes, as if it were a suburb of the capital. But then again, Suleimaniya abutted his private estates around Kirkuk, where he was itching to get oil exploration going, and he did not want any nearby hullabaloo to delay the arrival of European engineers and prospectors. Even though the Lausanne Peace Conference (1923) prioritized the status of those estates, deeming them state lands rather than private, before even addressing the final heteronomy of Mosul and its environs, including that of Kirkuk's, relatives of Abdul Hamid's continue to lay legal claim to those lands. His two great-nephews were still circulating memoranda around Britain as late as 1987 to influential persons explaining the injustice done to them, denied as they were the riches accrued from oil sales while some of them were living in penury and on the doll.

Returning to the book at hand, it seems clear that the author and the censors felt that Sheikh Mahmud's rebellion against Iraq and his attempt to create a Kurdish kingdom was ancient history. But it wasn't. This narrative reflects the impression that was prevalent in 1946—a year after the massive conflagration of World War II, Europe's black hole—that a whole bunch of pages had been turned on something as secondary as the Kurdish issue. So much so that the state could act confidently and magnanimously in allowing such a sympathetic profile of one of its bitterest former foes to be published. But January 1946 also

witnessed the birth of the Mahabad Republic, which would last just shy of a year until its demise in December, as well as the formation of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) headed by Mulla Mustafa (formed in August, although there is some dispute over the timeline, with a suggestion of an earlier date). Maybe the author wanted to contrast al-Hafid's acquiescence and happy retirement to the turmoil playing out in Mahabad that had managed to draw to it several defecting officers from the Iraqi Army—Iraqi Kurds still yearning for independence. Seemingly asking why they would seek that, when even the mighty icon of the struggle was now resigned to peacefully tending his rose beds in his home village? To highlight the importance of this moment, note how the author of the directory introduces us to the youngest son of Sheikh Mahmoud's, Abdul Latif al-Hafid, to say that he is "following his father's path in getting closer to God" and has "consumed himself with agricultural concerns." What the author missed was that the younger al-Hafid had helped Mulla Mustafa escape from incarceration in Suleimaniya in 1943, and had been secretly elected at the time as Barzani's deputy in the newly formed KDP during its first formative meetings held in Baghdad. The revolutionary embers had not gone out, it seems.

The two volumes contain many important tidbits that can be interpreted, after the passing of seventy years since its publication, to indicate alarm. For example, the author tells us that forty percent of the populations of Suleimaniya and Kirkuk provinces are migratory seasonal pastoralists, and that it is consequently difficult to count them within a census or to determine their fixed abodes. This demographic fluidity will cast an ominous shadow on the future of these two provinces when counting which ethnicity constitutes a majority or which sect counts as a minority, and by how much. Another intriguing sign is that most of the advertisements are for merchants and craftsmen in Baghdad and Basra, meaning that Suleimaniya and Kirkuk were secondary markets within Iraq, and had not produced a capitalist class similar to that of other cities. It also means that they were in the orbit of Baghdad rather than of Mosul, as was the case with Arbil and Dohuk.

In introducing the second volume, the Baghdadi author Muhammad Abbas al-Salih casually writes that "Kirkuk is the bride of Kurdistan" without the sense of provocation that the term "Kirkuk is the Jerusalem of Kurdistan", as Kurdish leaders are wont to declare, would now evoke. Another provocative topic is also mentioned unironically: the effective 'Arabization' policies that royalist administrations had undertaken through the sedentarization of the 'Ubaid tribes as well as others as part of the Hawija irrigation project. The 'Ubaid had moved into Iraq four centuries ago from Najd and found a realm for themselves in the Jazira area north of Sinjar Mountain. But the subsequent migrations of the Shammar tribes from Ha'il pushed the 'Ubaid in the southeast direction, moving them to the Hawija plain where they in turn pushed out the 'Azzeh and Bayat tribes, which resulted in an identity crisis among the defeated, scattering them among Kurdish, Arab and Turkman

allegiances. Even by the publication of the second volume, the 'Ubaid had not been officially registered within the population of the Hawija sub district. All these elements will later become demographic landmines, ones that are still exploding in the environs of Kirkuk and Diyala. The overland route from Baghdad to Mosul, running through Kirkuk, had inspired centuries-old ethnic displacement and re-configuration projects; that is how the Turkmen ended up here as we have seen. Oil was the central state's newest muse in creative demographic reengineering. Oil sector jobs attracted all sorts of Iraqis, namely a large Christian component, while the central state made sure the oil fields were buffered against Kurdish claims by newly settled Arab tribesmen, playing a role identical to that of the Turkmen for the Seljuks and later Turkic dynasties. As such, the second volume is describing a city and a province in the midst of a transformation: twentieth century Kirkuk did not beckon one and all to join the centralizing project. It purposely excluded and ejected Kurds (and later, Turkmen too).

Sheikh Abdul-Rahman Talabani chose well when picking Kirkuk as the nerve center of his ambitions. With roots in the Iranian Kurdish town of Bokan, where the sheikh's forbearers were known by the surname Kaka-Soor ('Red Older Brother'), an ancestor of his had come to serve as the local religious functionary in the villages around Suleimaniya. Some of his grandsons spread out further to villages near Kirkuk, one of which, Talaban, would give the family a new surname. Abdul-Rahman decided on building a shrine around his father's grave on the outskirts of Kirkuk in the mid-nineteenth century. He already had a reputation as a particularly powerful mystic. It was a fortuitous time for him and his disciples, since a very wealthy and eccentric benefactress in Istanbul, the wife of the preceding Sultan and the mother of the sultan to be, whom the eunuchs and other harem ladies considered a creepy, necromancy-practicing witch, was busily sending funds and prized religious manuscripts and relics (a crowd favorite being hairs from Muhammad's beard) to any promising holy man on the up and up around the empire. In a nod to Istanbul's largesse, the new institution, the Talabani *tekye* (Sufi lodge) came to be called the Buyuk ('Great') Mecidiye Mosque, in honor of the witch's brother-in-law Sultan Abdulmecid, ruler of the realms at the time of its completion. Abdul Rahman's venture proved exceptionally successful, and he was able to establish satellite lodges and to franchise the Talabani variant of Qadirism out to Baghdad, Istanbul, the Anatolian towns of Sivas and Tokat, as well as to several towns in Iranian Kurdistan, even out to Samarkand in Central Asia and, allegedly, to the Nile Delta. His descendants, as was the norm, accrued wealth and became feudal lords over dozens of villages in pockets across Iraqi Kurdistan. One wayward son made it further afield to Ramadi, where the Talabanis can count seventy households of long-lost relatives who pass for sheep-rearing Arab tribesmen. Abdul-Rahman's descendants or the descendants of his nephews would eventually serve as ministers, parliamentarians, governors, professors, high level bureaucrats

and diplomats within the Iraqi state. Some of them fought against the same state in its various iterations, either as ideological revolutionaries or as nationalist ones.

Another Talabani, Jalal, would go on to assign funds to rebuild the lodge when he became president of a New Iraq. Sitting in the refurbished reception hall, I would be amazed at how the conferees would begin a sentence in Kurdish, meander into Turkmen and then end their point with Arabic. Many of the order's disciples yearned to be buried near Abdul-Rahman and his successors, and the cemetery behind the lodge features their diverse backgrounds, with Kurdish tribal names interspersed with a few Tikritis, many Turkmen and a number of Arab tribal names from the Diyala basin. It wasn't 'coexistence' in the modern liberal sense or of the saccharine bumper-sticker variety, but rather the various identities had synchronized with one another over common denominators, sometimes awkwardly so. They were aware of their differences and there was some tension hanging over them, but it seems that they had accepted that on this hallowed ground, in the vicinity of this holy man, and as they recited multilingual mystical poetry to a rhythmic drumbeat and a dancing hop—with some intense head banging at times—they could at least agree that the bonds of Sufi brotherhood could supersede their differences for a few hours. And those few hours were enough to drain the poison of a biting barb or a derogatory slur yelled out in a moment of resentment over some dispute or another during the preceding week. A complex matrix of such compromises and contrived associations kept the city at peace, a state of suspension that is better described through literary form, for example Fadhil al-Azzawi's novel *City of Angels* (1992), than through any attempt at cold-blooded analysis or anthropological reasoning. Kirkuk's unique positioning, and its role in checking the possibility of uniting the plains of Shahrazur, Diyala and Arbil into one Kurdish polity, and the services it provides to the central authority, compelled its residents to arrive at a formula that held slighted passions and grandiose ambitions at bay. It also welcomed any Kurds that opted to be part of the centralizing control system and afforded them every opportunity to shine, as Abdul Rahman did. His progeny would then marry into the highest of Turkman society producing peculiar combinations a few generations later, such as the case of an Istanbul-born Turkish journalist, who worked as an Arabic-speaking foreign correspondent in the Beirut of the mid-sixties, then reinvented himself as a liberal parliamentarian in the late sixties before turning into a 'soft' Turkish nationalist and then a 'soft' Islamist in later decades. Here was a 'Turk' who was descended from Abdul-Rahman Talabani through three separate pedigrees! Al-Azzawi tells that story well, that of the tensions between old Kirkuk, which created such an odd combination as that of the journalist's, and what followed, the intense political and ethnic polarization, some of it provoked by the state, some by Kurdish nationalists, all of which led to the near breakdown of communal accord. The cataclysmic dystopia the novel ends with almost matches the horrors perpetrated and homogeneity contrived by the Islamic State.

Kirkuk witnessed another peculiar and unintended combination in the 1930s. Continuing in its role as the fulcrum of centralization, the city's high school was the sole educational institution serving Iraqi Kurdistan at that level. Kurds from all over were attending it as a consequence. Yet they could not find their futures as Kurds within the Iraqi union when leafing through their schoolbooks laden, as the curriculum was, with the stringent code of Arab nationalism seeking a unification of all Arab lands and peoples. Tension also hung over the town after its Turkmen had all too eagerly celebrated the visit by a Turkish Foreign Minister who had passed through Kirkuk as part of his advocacy for the Saadabad Pact. So those high-schoolers formed a secret society, which they called the 'woodcutters', thus finding a regionally analogous guild to that of the Italian 'Carbonari' that had managed to unite Italy's principalities into one kingdom under Garibaldi. Missing from their reasoning and their adopted model was that history had actually witnessed the unification of those Roman lands before, which then served as a springboard for empire—something that 'Kurdistan' never had. That secret society then developed into the Hiwa ('Hope') Party, choosing the high school's former headmaster as its party leader. This was to be the first organized political party of Iraq's Kurds. It underwent one final incarnation as the KDP, from then and until now headed by the Barzanis. So instead of continuing to serve as the accommodator and assimilator of ethnic Kurds, the city of Kirkuk in this modern instance launched the vehicle of their separation.

The backstory to what is acknowledged as the Kurdish national anthem neatly envelops these contradictions. *Ay Raqib* has a mesmerizing hold on many Kurds. The words were borrowed and reworked from a poem written by a young lawyer, allegedly while he was spending time in an Iranian jail. The poem is addressed to the jail's warden, allegorically representing all the countries repressing the Kurdish nation, to tell him of lofty things, namely that the Kurds will not fade away or will not forget who they are. The author, Younis Mullah Raouf, went by the penname 'Dildar'. He is from the Khadim al-Sajjadeh family of Koy Sanjak (the same town Jalal hails from), and his family name literally translates to 'Servant of the Rug'. The rug in question purportedly belonged to Muhammad. Family lore has it that it was passed down to them from their ancestor, the third caliph, 'Uthman—a Qurayshite Arab, not a Kurd—who had received it as a gift from the prophet of Islam. To honor them and their prized rug, Abdul Hamid II had ordered that a mosque be built, right at the foot of Kirkuk's citadel, to house the blessed fold of khaki-colored textile. This Ottoman association is probably the reason as to why the city's Turkmen claim the family as their ethnic kin. The family would go on to provide several parliamentarians and administrators in the service of the Iraqi state. 'Dildar' was born in the year of Ottoman defeat. He finished his early schooling in the family's original hometown, then, like many, went to Kirkuk for secondary school. He would later study law in Baghdad, but while still at college, Dildar signed up for the Hiwa Party (he had been one of the original 'woodcutters'). Note how loyalty shifted in this case, within a

generation, from Islamic to nationalistic, so much so that one of the lines of the poem goes “Kurdistan is our religion”, a line that still irks Islamist parliamentarians in the KRG, some of whom refused to stand when the anthem was played during their swearing-in ceremony in 2013. The words also state that the Kurds are “the descendants of the red banner of revolution” as well as those of the “Medes and Kai Khosrow”—the latter being a sixth century Sassanian king, who most would have assumed was an ethnic Persian. There was no longer any glory to the act of proclaiming descent from a caliph, at least not for the author. Missing too was an acknowledgment of all the Arabic loanwords that had made it into the Sorani-dialect of the original poem. The words were put to music twice (there is some confusion about that), and the version that came down to us was composed by a member of the aforementioned Barzanji family in the early forties. This version was allegedly sung during the first time the Kurdish flag was hoisted over a two-way intersection at the town of Mahabad, at the declaration of its independence. Lore has it that Dildar was there to witness the event, but as is the case with many gratifying tales, it just isn’t true. Dildar would die young at the age of thirty not a few years later, of a heart ailment, in 1948. However, several years before his death, he signed on as a member of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), ostensibly because their creed enshrined a “nation’s right to self-determination.” By the end of 1946, Dildar had the option of signing on with the KDP, but he didn’t. We can only speculate as to whether he saw a future for the Kurds within an Iraq that was managed more fairly, rather than as part of an independent Kurdistan.

If the Kurds had this reservoir of competent administrative talent that had been accumulating in the half century preceding the modern Iraqi state, which would have facilitated their integration within a new administrative structure centered around Baghdad—far advanced as to the situation of Iraqi Shias, by comparison—and if the atmospherics of the mid 1940s suggested the extinguishing of Kurdish aspirations for independence, then how did the Iraqi state miss the opportunity? How did Dildar’s newly and fantastically concocted narrative supersede older, sobering ones? This all happened before the advent of ‘cordon sanitaire’ zones where thousands of villages were eradicated, before the Anfal, before Halabja and before the passing of twenty six years of de facto independence since 1991. That opportunity eluded Iraq before the tragedy of the Yezidis at the hands of the Islamic State, and before the violent recapture of Kirkuk and other disputed areas. The wounds of 1947 were relatively minor as shown by these two volumes, and that ‘Ottoman generation’ of Kurds could have been the sinew and tissue binding Kurds to the Iraqi organism. Was it destined to come to this, as Masood always believed?

In a span of six months in 1961, the relationship between Abdul Karim Qasim and Mulla Mustafa swung from that of a strong alliance against the hostile forces arrayed against the newborn republic, to one where Qasim mobilized the army to resolve a political dispute with the Kurds. The third book we shall consider, [*Who Operates Barzani? Secrets Published for the*](#)

First Time by the journalist and scholar Hashim al-Bana', was published in 1962. The book is heavy on the terms "traitor" "agent" "thief" "bandit" in describing Mulla Mustafa, Qasim's erstwhile ally, while Barzani's followers are alternately described as "monkeys", "the cat's paws" and "the paws of imperialism." During the recent crisis, Iraqi social media was jam-packed with these exact terms in describing Masood and those who supported the referendum, much of it vigorously generated and directed, seemingly, by 'electronic armies', keyboard mercenaries at the pay of political and intelligence actors. This book shows that there is little originality in the center's vocabulary when describing the cause of Kurdish secession.

Al-Bana' adds that Mulla Mustafa stands against "the holy national procession [that is] based on national unity" and wonders "do they want to distract the heroic Iraqi Army in the north to strengthen the English Octopus nestled on the Arabian Gulf in the south?" Al-Bana' stresses that these attempts will end in failure, "for upon the rock of the people's faith and devotion to their leader Abdul Karim Qasim, treason shall crash and its remains shall disperse whichever way." The imperialist plans will be uncovered and documented and "soon these documents will emerge in a military or civil court that shall look into this oppressive imperialist insurgency..." Clarifying that this "treasonous insurgency was not a response to military movements but that these movements came about as a result of the declaration of the insurgency and it was necessary to protect security and stability from the malice of corruptors."

The break-up between Qasim and Mulla Mustafa had a complicated background, and many aspects are still vague. But the question to ask was whether what happened was inevitable, or whether the ascending rhetorical acrimony between the two sides had them blundering towards war? The coup conspirators of July 14, 1958 were keen on winning over the Kurds as did the monarchy, and they sought to do so by incorporating Kurds into the new governing class. One of the three-member ruling council was a Kurd: a retired officer from the village of Bamirni, who had served as a governor of Arbil province prior to the coup. They also chose the second son of Sheikh Mahmoud al-Hafid, Baba Ali Sheikh Mahmoud, as minister of transportation (he had previously served as a minister in one of al-Sa'id's cabinets).

There was political life in Baghdad under the monarchy, and it can be argued that it was expanding and prospering in its final decade despite myriad challenges, not the least of which was the rousing example of Gemal Abdul-Nasser's coup against the Egyptian royal house; the disruption of the country's private sector middle class and its loss of managerial resources with the departure of the Jews; the rise of Soviet-inspired leftism; and the first stirrings of Arab Sunni resentment at what seemed like the royal family's intent on accommodating and empowering Shias. However, at the same time, oil revenues (almost all from Kirkuk's fields in those days) engorged successive budgets allowing for transformative mega-infrastructure projects, while perennial headaches such as Kurdish secession or tribal infractions seemed like

problems of the past. The monarchy was becoming far more inclusive, the early investment in higher education and scholarships abroad was returning a crop of talented administrators and disciplined bureaucrats, and the enormous wealth pouring into the state coffers promised to soften and reduce the massive income discrepancies that juxtaposed gleaming new neighborhoods such as Al-Mansour with slummy shanty-towns like its neighboring Al-Washash. Qasim's copy-cat coup put an end to all that. No longer did the chief executive need to balance his actions against a multitude of intermediary power centers. The top conspiring officer was now the 'fatherly' strongman. There would be no side-deliberations and distracting disputes with that interest group or the other while hurtling through time and space upon the Leader's great leap forward. His whims were effectively policy; the less room for politics, the greater room for the strongman to maneuver and coerce—the most vivid manifestation of individual human agency there is. This new chapter in Baghdad's relationship with the Barzanis began with Qasim's intent on salvaging it; He then changed his mind.

The new regime had welcomed Barzani's return from exile in Moscow. By happenstance, Mulla Mustafa was in Czechoslovakia during the coup, and promptly returned to Iraq by sea to arrive in Basra on October 5, 1958 where tens of thousands of rapturous Kurds and Arabs waited to see him. On his way back, he had lingered in Cairo where he met Nasser whom the Kurds counted as a sympathizer. Mulla Mustafa's return not only endeared the Qasim regime to its Kurdish constituents, but also proved a bulwark against the regime's enemies. In March 1959, a military counter coup was launched in Mosul; the Kurdish role in stamping it out proved consequential as they managed to subdue the counter coup's Arab tribal supporters, so much so that the head of the Shammar tribe was ambushed and killed by Kurdish militants. Qasim now saw another value in Mulla Mustafa, which also colored his view of the Communists; that of an auxiliary militia that could come in handy if other Arab nationalist army elements decided to conspire against him. So he allowed the return of the rest of the exiled Barzanis from Soviet Russia, even allowing them to keep arms. Furthermore, Qasim ordered the Development Council to rebuild the ruined village of Barzan. A month after the failed counter coup, a ship left the Soviet port of Odessa carrying "459 Iraqi citizens, in addition to 394 women and children, and an additional one hundred disabled or elderly persons" according to the TASS agency. But the Egyptian press decided to cover it differently, reporting that 850 armed soldiers from the Kurdish minority of the Soviet Union (there are pockets of Kurds in Armenia and Azerbaijan) were aboard three weapons-laden ships that had passed through the Suez Canal and that they were the vanguard of "an army that will impose Soviet occupation on Iraq". The Nasser regime had come to view Qasim as an enemy, and they were using his alliance with the Kurds against him. The TASS agency responded to these Egyptian claims to show that they were baseless and noted that, one ship named in the press

reports had unloaded agricultural equipment in Egyptian ports, another carried cement to Burma, while the third was laden with sugar destined for Yemen.

The Qasim-Barzani alliance was tested once again during the events of Kirkuk that coincided with the celebrations of the coup's first anniversary. The spark of unrest jumped off the strained communal relations between Kurds and Turkmen that had been building up over decades. Dozens of Turkmen were left dead in the streets. Qasim placed the blame on the Communists for exasperating tensions and inciting the bloodbath, and was resolved to do away with this cumbersome confederate, one which had its own designs on absolute power in Baghdad. However it was the Ba'athists that tried to assassinate Qasim the following October, an incident in which a young Saddam Hussein makes his first cameo on the historical stage before escaping to a Cairene exile. Qasim consequently held off on a clean break with the Communists on grounds of punishing them for Kirkuk. Yet the bad blood and mistrust congealed, and it indirectly gummed up his relationship with Mulla Mustafa. Qasim had granted a license to publish the KDP's official organ, *Khabat* ('The Struggle') and then allowed for the licensing of the party itself in February 1960. But the KDP and its newspaper were politically aligned with the Communists, a matter that was increasingly rankling Qasim. Its founding charter states that "the party seeks to represent the interests of the farmers and workers and artisans and intellectuals of Iraqi Kurdistan" and that it draws inspiration for its social aims from the 'scientific' theories of Marxist-Leninism. With the increasing tensions between the Qasim regime and the Communists, Mulla Mustafa found that he must marginalize the leftist wing of his party to appease Baghdad, and so undertook several steps to do so such as pushing out the leftist editorial board of *Khabat* that had taken Qasim to task for what it perceived to be his coddling of feudalists, especially after he reprieved the old Sufi rival of the Barzanis, Sheikh Rashid Lolan, who had joined with Kurdish tribal aghas against the land reforms that were being enacted by the republic.

But *Khabat* continued its campaign of at times not so subtle criticism, highlighting Qasim's tardiness in delivering on his promises to the Kurds, and at times calling for rescinding martial law. It demanded ending the transitional period by enacting a permanent constitution while setting a date for parliamentary elections. *Khabat* was making the case for the return of political life. By not delivering on that, as well as the other promises of the 'revolution', Qasim was setting himself up to look like a dictator.

Qasim was overly sensitive to criticism. He interpreted *Khabat's* campaign to be a leftist bid for power. He also had to assume that Mulla Mustafa was a willing accomplice, one who was likely still under the sway of the Soviets who had taken him in. Qasim went maximalist. He responded by calling for assimilation; that the ethnicities and secondary identities within the country must voluntarily dissolve themselves into a unified Iraqi identity, going as far in one of his speeches as to dispute the idea of a unique ethnic 'element' for the Kurds. This naturally

incensed the Kurds. *Khabat* continued its criticism, but a breaking point came when Iraqi authorities accused Ibrahim Ahmed Fattah, the paper's first publisher and the General Secretary of the KDP (who many years later would secede from Mulla Mustafa's leadership by forming the PUK—also, he was Hero's father), of murdering the chief of the Kurdish Khoshnaw tribe near Shaqlawa, one who had been aligned with Baghdad. The escalation of newspaper rhetoric continued when the state organ *Al-Thawra* published an article titled 'They Write Under the Darkness of Communists' suggesting that the new revolutionary regime had uncovered secret correspondence in the monarchy-era headquarters of the Baghdad Pact that exposed "hidden agents" in the service of colonialism and that it would be publishing these documents soon, strongly suggesting that one such agent was Mulla Mustafa himself.

And so Baghdad's astringent rhetoric against the Kurds escalated as the Qasim era unfolded, turning their ally into a facet of Western machinations aiming to subvert its authority, an authority that was seeking national glory by harassing the big international oil companies into making further concessions, as well as by demanding the return of Kuwait, that "stolen Iraqi sub-district" in the words of al-Bana' (the British had granted Kuwaitis independence in June 1961). The war of words came to a head when a twenty-eight year-old lawyer, an ambitious, rising star within the KDP called Jalal Talabani assumed a stage in Baghdad where he gave a speech meant to respond to *Al-Thawra* article and in which he alluded that Qasim himself was serving under a British officer when the previous royalist regime was conducting military operations against the Kurds, so if there were shame in such associations and actions, then the president should be the first to atone. Al-Bana' elaborates on this anecdote and tells us that Qasim had led an infantry platoon consisting of thirty soldiers in a nighttime raid against Barzani's forces in 1945, in the Mergasoor sector. Nothing wrong in that, per al-Bana's retelling, for it merely reinforces the Leader's heroism against the brigands.

Matters soon got out of hand following a Kurdish call for a general strike in September, with armed Peshmerga strutting out on display throughout many Kurdish areas, challenging the state's security apparatus. Qasim mobilized the army in retaliation. Here, Mulla Mustafa tried to tamp down the situation and to find a path back to negotiations; he sent Qasim what he believed was a reasonable set of demands as a blueprint for further talks. Qasim, however, responded harshly, a position he expounded on in a five and a half hour long speech in front of media outlets during which he placed the latest Kurdish actions as part of a grand conspiracy against the country, and that Mulla Mustafa was a British agent ever "since he was a postman in 1933". Qasim, sounding somewhat unhinged, further claimed that the British had bankrolled the Barzanis to the tune of half a million Iraqi dinars and that Iraq may shutter the British legation in retaliation. The forces arrayed against each other soon tipped over into fighting, and that young aforementioned attorney headed up to the mountains and began leading

guerilla bands against the Iraqi Army. Al-Bana's expresses the government's view that the fighting was expected and inevitable as it was designed by the Kurdish instigators and their shadowy foreign backers "to coincide with the talks being held with the oil companies, and at a time when the people are waging a crucial diplomatic battle to liberate Kuwait..."

The Communists had issued a statement framing the events as having "awakened a deep concern among the democratic forces keen on preserving national unity against colonialism given the sympathy and regard that the Barzanis enjoy among Kurdish and Arab populace equally." Al-Bana' responded to that by writing "communism looks favorably on Mulla Mustafa Barzani because the Soviet Union did too and gave him refuge". Here we can see the contradiction of accusing Barzani of being a Western agent while American and British intelligence outfits deemed him a "Soviet pawn". But there is no room for reflection on such contradictions when contriving a narrative to rile people up. Discord had advanced too far for any backtracking. Al-Bana' adds "the Leader has a long and beautiful patience, and his mind is radiant, and his will is iron, and he shall teach those a lesson after another, and he shall purify the Iraqi soil of their filth and sin and he shall destroy their nests and hideouts..." He then breathlessly informs us that the insurgency is nearly over, citing the commander of the 2nd Division who tells him that "the information we have shows that the treasonous Mulla was severely injured and has escaped with his brother, and most likely he will die", adding that "peace and security have returned to northern Iraq and the flag of the Iraqi republic flies over Zakho..."

Historians suggest that the demise of Qasim's alliance with Mulla Mustafa and the eruption of fighting weakened the regime and left Qasim vulnerable to the machinations of rightist officers, who would soon lead a coup against him. Barzani, meanwhile, seemingly survived his injuries, and survived Qasim too. Mulla Mustafa would soon enough have to contend with yet another regime in Baghdad that at first tried to make amends before matters took a turn for the worst, and this time the anti-Kurdish measures were indeed worse.

Al-Bana' concludes his book with reprinting telegrams that had been sent by Kurdish notables in support of Qasim, among them one from Rasheed Lolan who was pardoned by the former, calling upon him to "save us from those infidels and unbelievers" harkening back to the accusations that Lolan had made against the Barzani Sufi chiefs since the Ottoman era. There is another telegram from another longtime enemy of the Barzanis, Muhammad Faris Agha, the chief of the Zebaris, who accuse the Barzanis of undermining their feudal lordship for the past century. Like the Ottomans before them, the decision-makers in Baghdad were beginning to appreciate the usefulness of local Kurdish enemies of the Barzanis—they would soon put them on payroll, deck them out with rifles and cartridges, and set them on other Kurds.

The importance of the fourth book [A Spotlight on Northern Iraq](#) by Nu'man Mahir al-Kana'ani (1965) lies in describing that very inflection point: Baghdad's recruitment of Kurdish tribal auxiliaries to fight the secessionist movement. The book contains the portraits and names of dozens of Kurdish chieftains who would later become the first building blocks of what would be known officially as the Fursan ('Cavalry') or derogatorily as *juhoosh* ('mules'). They would number in the tens of thousands and would [play important roles](#) in stamping out the Kurdish rebellion, such as enabling the Iraqi army to mount the genocidal Anfal campaigns in the late 1980s. It shows that old centralizing forces can easily relapse to their old ways and habits, discredited as they may have been.

Al-Kana'ani (1919-2010) was an officer from Samarra who later in life turned to poetry. He had returned to power with the coup that brought down Qasim. The last position al-Kana'ani held was that of Deputy Minister of Culture, up until the 1968 Ba'athist coup that ended the 'Arifite era. His son provided me with a detailed biography after I first uploaded the book onto my blog a few years ago and labelled its tone "racist". He took umbrage and answered in the comments section: "while my father was a nationalist to an extreme degree, but if you revise the narrative you will not see a racist tone as you described it, but rather the events of today corroborate [my father's] account that the issue is one of power and interests and foreign affiliations that are not hidden to anyone." The son was echoing the rhetoric of his father's day: lay Kurds had been hoodwinked by the Barzani family's feint at achieving national dignity through independence, since the secessionists are motivated by "love of rule and control and no other" as the father had written. Again, Iraqi social media responded to the recent referendum by voicing those same old talking points. Granted, some of the objections against the Kurdish leadership are warranted, especially when it comes to corruption, stifling dissent, restricting travel by other Iraqis to the KRG, at times in a humiliating manner, as well as breaking political accords, but they still misunderstood the moment as a referendum on Masood's character and track record as a leader, rather than a genuine desire shared and cherished by millions of Kurds, and bled for by many thousands. Empathy by non-Kurdish, lay Iraqis towards those desires was always in short supply. The state's tightly controlled messaging centers certainly never intended to elucidate Kurdish intentions impartially to other Iraqis, neither was a timorous intellectual class disposed to questioning the official narrative, not even nowadays. While the willingness to show severity to incur subservience was vast, and enormously popular, and continues to be. To this day, most Iraqis will draw a blank if asked to specify the calendar date of the anniversary of the Halabja tragedy, while Kurds in Turkey, Syria and Iran are far more likely to provide the correct answer. Shared, inherited narratives and memories foster communal amity. Divergent narratives, or affected amnesia, will predictably separate peoples. (So will the newer phenomena of 'noise' and narrative entropy, currently assailing Iraq and the Middle East, but we will get to those later.)

Al-Kana'ani writes at length as to why the Kurds will never achieve independence. He coldly says that Kurds at the time constitute one million of Iraq's population, and that Iraqi Kurds comprise a fifth of all Kurds in the Middle East. Thus, they represent only 15.5 percent of the population and their areas add up to 1/9th of Iraq's territory. This territorial parcel produces less than 5 percent of Iraq's wealth if judged by agriculture and livestock. Al-Kana'ani cites these numbers and asks "what would the result be if the economy of the Kurdish region relied on itself without this complementary relationship with the general economy of [Iraq]?" meaning to say that if the Kurds proceed to independence under Barzani, then they will starve.

Al-Kana'ani then recites the state's narrative concerning Kurdish ingratitude and general boorishness in their relationship with it, saying "the participation of Kurds in cabinets was never neglected at any time, and even in the earliest cabinets in the modern history of Iraq, when it consisted of only eight posts, Kurds would have one or two, and when the number of posts increased their share increased too." Adding, "we find that the heads of [army] divisions at any time were in the majority Kurdish" and claims that at one point, ten out of fourteen governorships across the country were held by Kurds. Moreover he claims that "their percentage according to the most accurate statistics we have that have been revealed by the official registers is that 23 percent of all government jobs are held by Kurds, whereas the number of non-Kurds serving in Kurdish areas never exceeded 3 percent." Kurdish is the language officially applied in schools and in the courts. And Kurds get to wear their national costumes, and can reside in any part of Iraq. Al-Kana'ani then enumerates the completed projects and monies spent in the Kurdish areas, as well as the sums of compensation paid out for the damages done as a result of the military's 'northern maneuvers' against secessionists. These perks are "not enjoyed by the Kurd in the other countries he lives in..." avowing that the conditions for Kurds in Turkey and Iran are very different, for the worse. "If what has been achieved for Kurdish citizenship in a country like Iraq is not satisfactory then how will the Kurdish situation be addressed in the other countries that do not share Iraq's perspective on how to deal with Kurdish citizenship?" Al-Kana'ani concludes that the independence project is impossible given regional balances.

It's clear that the reasons that compelled the author to write the book were not solely the government's intent on presenting its point of view in its war with Mulla Mustafa to an Iraqi audience. It is also clear how sensitive they were to what foreign correspondents who were sympathetic to the Kurdish rebellion were writing at the time. This was a new dimension to Iraq's Kurdish dilemma: international attention and popular sympathy in Western capitals for Kurdish aspirations. So Baghdad's goal was to develop a counterargument to prevent the likelihood that the Kurdish issue would be internationalized in venues such as the United Nations, thereby infringing on Iraqi sovereignty by contesting its human rights record. The state kept seeing the "foreigner's hand" in Kurdish movements. As one piece of evidence, al-

Kana'ani cites a statement made by Jalal Talabani, Barzani's spokesman in Paris, where he says "it is my duty to clarify that the Kurds are the owners of the oil wells now located in the vicinity of Kirkuk and Ain Zaleh and in Khaniqin...and that despite us being the owners, others are reaping the resources." Al-Kana'ani interprets this statement to mean that the Kurdish mindset is that of a highway robber who expects to get shakedown money from the international oil companies paid out to him rather than the pockets of the central government. Al-Kana'ani then cites twenty five incidents of sabotage and robbery conducted by Barzani's partisans in the period of May 1964 until January 1965.

The government's new undertaking at the time was to mobilize the tribes that were resentful of the Barzanis, some of them had been seething for a century or so. Al-Kana'ani writes that "in northern Iraq there are Kurdish tribes and chiefs and religious leaders who hold a position more exalted than that of Barzani's either due to the peoples flocking to their banner or their belief in the reality of their shared existence with the Arabs of Iraq under a government that that been excessive in its generosity to the Kurds over the span of half a century..." The state found it convenient to rely on the Fursan as a quick fix to stem the expansion of the rebellion. But what effectively took place was that the state took sides in local tribal disputes, and the proclivity of these tribes towards the state did not fundamentally alter the average Kurd's understanding of his or her role within the Iraqi fabric, but rather what was evident was the state tipping the scales and setting one part of his people against another. The effort expanded into arming Arab tribes too, such as the 'Ubaid in Hamrin and Hawija, to confront the Kurds, further adding to communal volatility.

One such recipient of arms was the late Sheikh Ali al-Dahham. He was young man back then in the 1960s, and already the head of a subsection of the 'Ubaid. I met him in the run-up to the 2003 war, and we promptly began working together in preparation for Saddam's overthrow. In different circumstances, given his charm and raw political acumen, al-Dahham would have become a pillar of political life, a talented and capable negotiator on behalf of his tribe, his sect, and his milieu. I recognized at the time, when engaging him in our work against the Saddam regime, that he had the magic necessary to untangle a knot as agonizing as that of the legacy of Arabization within and around Kirkuk. But even though Saddam regime was overthrown al-Dahham lingered in Amman, far away from his kin. He still could not go back. He had been so effective as a Fursan commander, and so merciless, that Kurds still demanded his head in return for a plethora of blood feuds. Neither the Americans understood enough, nor did Baghdad care enough, to mediate a bargain for his return. Such was the legacy of those days in the mid-sixties when the state exploited talents such al-Dahham's for warfare rather than consensus. The village bearing his name in the Hamrin foothills is today haunted by the specter of jihadists, still on the prowl. Some misdeeds simply cannot be undone.

Here we need to revert back to what al-Sa'adoun had warned of in his speech at the 1924 Constituent Assembly when discussing the Kurdish issue. He said that one of the reasons of the collapse of the Ottoman state was its failure to address the aspirations of its ethnicities and sects and engaging them only through might and force. Al-Sa'adoun was prescient in his observation and contention that such solutions would not work. Such is the irony inherent in the very idea of the Fursan, nay even its name, since it was inspired fully by the Ottoman example of the Hamidiye Cavalry (Kurdish light horsemen) that Sultan Abdul Hamid II had formed to prop up his authority in 1891. The Hamidiye were originally modeled after the Tsarist Russian Cossacks who were observed by Marshall Ahmad Shakir Pasha Yozgatli Copanoglu (1838-1899) when he served as ambassador in St. Petersburg for eleven years prior to becoming the Sultan's aide in 1890. Shakir Pasha was a reformist (he once served as adjunct to Midhat Pasha in Baghdad) and he thought such formations will sort out several problems in the six Anatolian provinces, namely to counter Russian expansionism, to subjugate the Armenians, and to strengthen the bonds between the Kurdish tribes and the central authority especially after the previous model, subsidizing and relying on Sufi networks such as that of the aforementioned Sheikh Ubaidullah, had broken down. The decision portended many important and tragic changes across the Middle Eastern landscape, the least of which was the role played by the Hamidiye Cavalry, especially those under Ibrahim Pasha of the Milli tribes, in checking the expansion of 'Anizeh and Shammar into the Jezirah area, changing the demographics of northern Syria. At least some of those fissures explains today's tensions between Arabs and Kurds all along and to the east and west of the Syrian Euphrates.

Authority over the new formation was given to Marshall Zeki Pasha (1830-1924) the commander of the fourth Ottoman Army based in Erzincan, who served in that capacity for 21 years. (...he took over Baghdad as vali for seven months in 1912). But his tenure was marked by corruption: he was accused of drawing salaries for non-existing soldiers, while the cavalry consistently underperformed in martial exploits. But the biggest problem was unchecked aggression and greed against Armenians, as well as Kurdish and Alevi tribes that chose not to sign up to become part of the central state's latest bid for control. The cavalrymen took the lands and possessions of the weak and recalcitrant. This continued even after Abdul Hamid was deposed by the CUP; they were renamed the 'light tribal cavalry' and they took a lead in perpetrating massacres and genocide against Christian minorities during World War I. What in effect began as a reformist measure ended up very badly. And it did not sustain security or stability, rather these formations tinkered with demographics on a wide stretch of the map, turning minor infractions over water or grazing rights into state-sanctioned warfare. Barely forty years in existence, the Iraqi state reverted to the practices of its Ottoman predecessor. That was bad enough, but of course, we know where the story goes from here, through twists and turns, culminating in crimes such as Halabja.

As the book was heading for print, a curious development was taking place: long before Bafel Talabani's inclination to strike a deal with al-Muhandis, his father—the spokesman who had incurred al-Kana'ani ire with his talk of who owns the oil fields—had been attempting to find his own accommodation with Baghdad in 1965. Jalal was doing so in contravention of Mulla Mustafa's wishes, and this was to be the first step towards a full political break ten years later when Jalal would engineer the formation of the PUK. Much had been made by historians about the cleft between traditionalists and intellectuals within the KDP that eventually led to the split, even though the Barzanis are not the paragon of Kurdish tribal or religious traditionalism as we have seen, while Jalal was prepared for leadership due to his family's traditional authority among Kurds and non-Kurds. I tend to mull over a plainer, profounder reason for the fissures that manifested in the mid-1960s, for I cannot get over the scene that may have unfolded a decade earlier when a Jalal met Mulla Mustafa in Moscow. The former was part of a university student delegation from the Kingdom of Iraq participating in some youth conference hosted by the Soviet Union. The details are unclear to me, for we only have a couple of versions of the event, but whether it was auspicious or by design, an eager Jalal desperately wanted to meet that majestic eagle, that icon of the Kurdish resistance, Mulla Mustafa, and he succeeded in finding a way. The man he met, though, was living in reduced circumstances.

Sure, by post-war Soviet standards at the time, the apartment building at Novoslobodskaya 50-1/1, was a comfortable, even luxurious, living space, seeing how it was earmarked by the state to house political exiles enjoying its hospitality. Maybe befitting a leftist Indian journalist who ran afoul of his country's authorities, but certainly not commensurate with the stature of the leader of the Kurdish nation, Jalal may have sniffed. Mulla Mustafa, *sans* mustache and attendees, would have been wearing a drab, grey outfit suitable for a Soviet man in his fifties (he was born in 1903). He was eleven years into his exile, a great warrior fading away, forgotten by both the Iraqi and Soviet states—at one point during his Soviet sojourn he had been put to work as an accountant in a Central Asian *kolkhoz*. Things improved after Stalin died, but the best he could get after finding his way to the new higher ups at the Kremlin was this new apartment in Moscow and a lifting of the residency and education restrictions that had been placed on his men and their families—charity rather than renewed geostrategic relevance. Mulla Mustafa was wise to the world of men and he must have registered the disappointment, even pity, showing through his twenty-four year-old visitor's eyes. Jalal was a student of leadership. Every Talabani male gets to be called a sheikh due to that legacy of Abdel-Rahman's, the founder of a self-branded Sufi order. He could spot that Mulla Mustafa's leadership had gone creaky. It must have pained Mulla Mustafa to have gotten news of his daughter's betrothal to a relative whose family he detested from this effervescent sophomore. They met several times after that, to work out some party business, since Mulla Mustafa rarely

had a chance such as this one to send word back to his followers still in Iraq. But just as important for him, and telling too, was trying to work out the details of smuggling his youngest wife, and their son Masood, out of Iraq and to bring them to him. He was expecting his Moscow sojourn to be quite long. They parted, probably assuming that they would not see each other again, not knowing that Qasim's coup was right around the corner.

It is very difficult for men such as Mulla Mustafa and Jalal to get over their encounter. Jalal caught a whiff of the old man's weakness, sensing an opportunity to take the lead rather than allowing the old man to confer the top party posts to his sons. Mulla Mustafa would have always been mindful of Jalal's every phrase and gesture, lest they betray the insolence of someone who had seen him when he was down and vulnerable. Sterile, empirical portrayals of the dialectics of class struggles do not leave much room for such profoundly human and oblique inferences of what transpired between the two men in Moscow. We are back to the balancing of how much of what propels history can be attributed to individual human agency, and how much is due to the larger vectors casting a long shadow on the trajectories of men and women.

Jalal's final split in 1975 was ostensibly because the old man had missed a great opportunity for peace, or at least one that merited further tractability and exploration, rather opting for a disastrous war and a spell of geopolitical gambling that broke the back of the Kurdish struggle. The Ba'athists came to Mulla Mustafa bearing a great deal: full autonomy, a census followed by a referendum for Kirkuk, and a fulsome share of executive posts in Baghdad. But something was off about the Ba'athist who had showed up to his door bearing the details of this deal. Saddam Hussein was 33 at the time, and carried himself with supreme confidence and ebullience. He was the Vice-President of Iraq, while his distant cousin was serving as an increasingly figurehead president. All that Mulla Mustafa knew about him was that ten years ago, he was street thug and two-bit cutthroat, who had been elevated to the role of political assassin, a failed one at that, with Qasim being his target. There was also a stint as the underground facilitator and enforcer of the Ba'athists during the times when they laid low in the sixties. Yet now Saddam was standing center stage in Iraqi and world events, and Mulla Mustafa could easily discern the unbridled ambition soaked with the damp stench of insecurity that animated the man before him. Mulla Mustafa could not strike a deal with such a man. Several mysterious assassinations attempts directed at him and his son confirmed his suspicions that Saddam could not be trusted. Saddam had also balked when Mulla Mustafa suggested a Shi'a Kurd (a Fayli), the general secretary of the KDP at the time, to serve as Vice-President of the Iraqi republic, a position reserved for Kurds as part of a would-be deal; Saddam contemptuously dismissed the candidate as one of Iranian origin. The Iraqi state was at that time beginning to harass Faylis and Iraqis of Persian ancestry, assigning them the role previously reserved for the dwindling Jewish population as the foreign enemies' (in this case

the Shah's Iran) principal internal collaborators. Saddam personally took charge of the campaign. A man like this, with this sort of parochial fanaticism, will turn dangerous one day, Mulla Mustafa must have thought. Within five years, he did: 400-600,000 Iraqis of Persian or Fayli ancestry were evicted from Saddam's Iraq.

Jalal on the other hand, could not conceive of why Mulla Mustafa would even turn down Saddam when the latter came back with a final offer of sharing Kirkuk's resources fifty-fifty. Mulla Mustafa opted for war. But Baghdad this time had an 'RMA' up its sleeve: spanking new Soviet helicopter gunships. And Saddam was willing to drastically raise the cost of rebellion on lay Kurds. Much of the Kurdish experience with the Iraqi state since then revolves around these three men, and their progeny. Saddam's brood would probably have still been in the picture if not for the 2003 war—a war that would not have happened, in my opinion, if not for Chalabi's persistence. Individual human agency, again.

* * *

On January 9th, a Tuesday, Soleimani met with Abadi at the latter's residence. Soleimani arrived at the meeting alone, unaccompanied by his usual adjuncts al-Muhandis and al-Ameri. The Iranian general was seeking to assuage bruised egos. On Monday, the day before, Abadi had sat down with a PMU delegation, but the delegates were carrying themselves with self-importance and conceit, to Abadi's chagrin. They were offering the opportunity of an electoral alliance, yet they did so while making demands that Abadi took to be outlandish, such as, for example, reserving the slate's number one slot in every province but Baghdad for a PMU candidate. Abadi believed that he had the upper hand. The Americans had shown him polling numbers that had him ahead by wide margins, expecting a seat tally of 85-90 (out of 328, a 'landslide' win in an Iraqi parliamentary context) simply by virtue of his name headlining a slate. Never mind that the pollster's credibility had been under question for years for pulling stunts such as erasing past, erroneous predictions from his website. As far as Abadi was concerned, the Americans could not possibly get something as critical as this metric wrong, after all, it seemed to him that McGurk's career was essentially tied to his own. Abadi, in his own mind, was America's indispensable man in Iraq, albeit with one caveat: The Americans have a track record of being notoriously unreliable as patrons of Iraqi political contenders. Initially, they would work assiduously for their 'man', giving the impression that they would never let him sink, but they could also tire rather quickly if the effort to keep him afloat became too cumbersome. The Americans may then quickly normalize another candidate for

the prime minister's job, even one that seemed to be beholden to the Iranians. So Abadi needed another's assurance to secure a second term. He needed Iran's blessing.

All that was required for smooth sailing was to get on Soleimani's good side. Hitherto, Abadi thought he was all set: back in autumn 2017, a rumor went around the political gossip mills of Baghdad suggesting that Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah had delivered a message to Maliki, Abadi's main antagonist and Soleimani's perceived favorite, that Iran's Khamenei supported a second term for Abadi, and that Maliki should not contest the post as the Iranians would not endorse him. It was a cryptic story that left many scratching their heads. If I had to guess, it could have been released into the ether by the Iranians as a nod to Sistani's wishes that they would not interfere in the run-up to the Iraqi elections. A top Maliki aide confirmed to me that his boss had been in Beirut for a medical procedure during the same time frame as the story suggests but did not get back to me on whether Maliki thought that the message attributed to Khamenei was false or not, or whether it was even delivered at all. By early October, a following story had it that the Iranians had changed their minds, after the Kurdish referendum. Abadi was again scrambling for ways to endear himself to Soleimani. The operation to recapture Kirkuk brought them very close, but was it enough to get Soleimani to trust him? Abadi must have agonized over this question, leaving him susceptible to any lures, however paltry, coming from Soleimani's end. The British had been encouraging this relationship for months, cultivating what they believed to be several channels leading directly to Soleimani, all with the intent of circuitously selling him on Abadi. Monday's meeting, though, was a very bad start.

Even though he thought he was going to win big, Abadi wanted the PMUs on board so as to close any possible loopholes. This way he would be aligning with Soleimani's adjuncts, while throttling the off-chance that al-Ameri would get the top billing as prime minister. Abadi knew that if push came to shove, the Americans, and McGurk especially, would be willing to live with al-Ameri. He had heard that there was a faction in McGurk's team that believed that al-Ameri was not such a bad guy, and that he could be weaned off his dependence and devotion to the Iranians—a story placed [in the New York Times](#) right ahead of election day does a thorough job of summarizing that faction's phantasm. Abadi did not want to take any chances. He needed the PMUs, but their demands were a nonstarter.

Nonetheless, Soleimani could not have been friendlier when they met. He told Abadi not to worry about what had transpired in the meeting the day before. He explained the frayed nerves on display as a matter that had nothing to do with him, rather it was a problem that had been festering between al-Muhandis and al-Ameri for months as to who would be the public face of the electoral list. The delegation had taken its in-house acrimonies out on Abadi; he was the not the intended recipient, or so Soleimani reassured him. Furthermore, Soleimani told him that the PMUs would join Abadi with no prior conditions. Abadi would have full

discretion to pick rankings and distribute candidates among various provincial slates, and not only that, but the PMU candidates would join Abadi as individuals and not as party cadres. This way Abadi could maintain his campaign myth that his slate was the only one that had broken with political confessionalism while putting distance between it and the discredited parties that had been ruling Iraq since 2003. Abadi was elated. The following day, the PMUs signaled to Abadi that they would stick by Soleimani's offer. Abadi was so excited that he extended the projected alliance to the al-Hakim family's slate and the Fadhila Party too, the more the merrier, even though he had rejected their advances in late December. This way, almost all the Shia political forces would be running under him, effectively shunning and isolating Maliki, and stealing a march on al-Ameri's prospects (...or those of the second tier of candidates for that matter: Muhammad al-Sudani, Falih al-Fayyadh, Qasim al-'Araji, Qusay al-Suheil, etc.). It was an auspicious turn of events indeed.

So Maliki was left outside the tent, growling. He still had a card to play, to damage Abadi as well as the Da'awa Party cadres who had thrown in their lot with the latter. Maliki was the head of the party, as it was registered with the proper authorities. He aimed to run his slate under the Da'awa name, either forcing Abadi to resign from the party, or holding the latter culpable for officially splintering it. Here again, Soleimani reassured Abadi that he would sort it out. Soleimani had tried his hand at a resolution on January 2nd, but Maliki wouldn't budge. Soleimani sent word on January 13th, that he would be coming back to Baghdad to settle this matter once and for all. After realizing that Soleimani had worked out a deal with Abadi a few days earlier, Maliki relented. By the time Soleimani arrived in the evening, around 9:30, Maliki had already withdrawn the Da'awa Party from the running. His slate would be his own, rather than associated with the party. Soleimani only stayed in Baghdad for a couple of hours. He left just before midnight, after putting the final touches on the statement that would go out the following morning that Abadi and the PMUs would be running on a single slate. It was to be a short-lived alliance. By the early afternoon on January 14th, several PMU leaders, at the head of them Abu Ahmad al-Asadi—who has [vague links](#) to U.S. intelligence that I have not been able to get to the bottom of—were clamoring for breaking the deal because, by their rationale, Abadi had preceded them in doing so. By incorporating the Hakims and Fadhila in the deal, Abadi was seeking to dilute the PMU's expected seat gains, they argued. Al-Ameri, still bruising from his dust-up with al-Muhandis, did not put up enough of a counter. The deal fell apart a day before the official deadline for alliance registrations was to pass.

It was all very odd. One could almost, if Soleimani was removed from the picture, attribute the incident to the vagaries of bumbling politicians—something familiar and somewhat expected coming as it is from the Iraqi political class. But Soleimani was very much part of the picture, and in a role that was subtly different from his previous intrusions during critical decision-making junctures. This time around he was not a mere representative of the Islamic

Republic, or a messenger voicing Khamenei’s injunctions against this candidate for office or that. He was not a broker among the myriad of Iraqi political forces that seek to remain relevant or at least conciliatory to Iranian designs. This time Soleimani was representing an Iraqi faction—one that ultimately got the second highest seat allocation per election results; no small thing. He was negotiating on behalf of an Iraqi institution, the PMUs, which enjoys budget allocations and constituencies that are nominally independent of the Iranian state. Soleimani did not work through one of his cut-outs. He was performing this role himself. Many observers forget what a marked change this shows: in September 2011, when al-Muhandis was wistfully reminiscing and sharing pictures of the good old times under the title “From the fields of jihad” on his Facebook page, he Photoshopped out a visitor in what seemed to be a purposely clumsy manner. The visitor was almost certainly Soleimani (the only other person I can think of who would warrant such an effort may have been Imad Mughniyah, but he had already been dead — since 2008 — and his pictures were widely accessible at the time of al-Muhandis’ post). At the time, not many pictures were in circulation for the Iranian general. Al-Muhandis must have had many pictures taken over the years at Badr’s and the Qods Force’s Varamin training camp to Tehran’s southeast from which to choose to share online, ones that did not require alteration or editing for security concerns. But he seems to have purposefully doctored these particular mementos, impressing Soleimani’s omnipresence as a haunting, eerie specter.



Now it seems that Soleimani can’t get enough selfies, or enough emphasis on his manifest visibility such as negotiating directly with Abadi. Much like what happened in Kirkuk, few Iraq-watchers asked themselves “Why is he doing this?” Abadi too should have been asking the same question. Someone should have reported back to him what Soleimani had been saying to

anyone listening, that he did not believe that any one Shia political faction would break fifty seats on its own. His predictions were off by a handful of seats, but still far more accurate than the polls the Americans were brandishing. If Soleimani did not believe that Abadi would win by a landslide, then why invest the general's prestige in wooing him? Perhaps Soleimani wanted to diminish Abadi's popularity: right after the announcement of the alliance, Iraqi social media sites were denouncing Abadi's kowtowing to the militias, ones that he had only recently denounced, even going as far as implicitly accusing the PMUs of murdering their own 'accountant' to hide instances of corruption. Echoing the internet's uproar, Muqtada al-Sadr piped up with a very angry communique too.

Soleimani's first experiences with Abadi, back in September 2014, must have gnawed at the general's sense of decorum. Before then, I would hardly think that Abadi had registered with him, seeing how he was a second tier Da'awa Party apparatchik who came from its exiled London bench. Soleimani was busy facilitating Maliki's proposed third term, even after the fall of Mosul. Abadi's assigned role in the initial plan was to assume the position of second deputy speaker of parliament, a promotion over his tenure as chairman of that body's finance committee, one that had rubber-stamped all of Maliki's fiscal trickeries, such as the thoroughly unconstitutional absence of a budget for 2014. Abadi's failure to secure that vote was the first indicator that Maliki's re-investiture was in trouble, and unlikely. If he could not get Maliki through, Soleimani had a Plan B in the person of Maliki's former chief of staff, Tariq Najim, another second-tier Da'awa cadre. It was here that Abadi, exhibiting all the chivalry of a pickpocket, surprised Soleimani by turning on his comrade Maliki. Was Soleimani impressed by such a capacity for treachery, filing away this potential for later use? If Soleimani were a political animal, he may have. But he does not see himself that way. Besides Abadi's turncoat-ing embarrassed the general, showing him up as a man who was not in control of the situation, especially as things were falling apart on the security front. Could it be that Soleimani was now merely working towards returning the favor to Abadi, 'gallantly' stabbing him in the back as the latter did with Maliki? Or doctoring the choices so that Najim would become PM, as an acceptable alternative to Abadi? It just seems like meager pickings for a man such as Soleimani, who does not strike me as one who would be content with the nihilistic satisfaction of shit-stirring. Unless, of course, creating discord is a means to an end, which I believe is Soleimani's play here.

Soleimani has several options to choose from in arriving at that end, and he could now see the path ahead clearly. He could bleed out political life in Baghdad with a thousand cuts. He did not need to do much. The elections results would, whether by hook or crook, offer up an excellent opportunity to let the Iraqi political class hang itself. There was immense anger in a populace that was already deeply disillusioned with political life, reflected as it were with low voter turnouts and high-pitched popular gripe. Young Iraqis were coming untethered from the

bonds and balances that had given order to their societies: totalitarianism, wars, sanctions, followed by jarring upheavals such as incessant terror and sectarian convulsions, and a shock as massive as the Islamic State, had naturally taken their toll. All coming on top of serial mismanagement of their futures by the decision makers, who squandered the wealth and opportunities that Iraqi youth were supposed to inherit; a population boom whereby a million new Iraqis are being added to the rolls every year; ecological distress; the dizzying din of data toxification; and increasing talk of revolution—there are few authorities and norms whose legitimacy and supremacy Iraqi youth are willing to acknowledge, not their conventions, not their customs, not their elders, and certainly not their government. Historical memory runs shallow in emotive, maximalist times like these, and one finds many Iraqis youths yearning for a strongman or a military coup, as if they have learned nothing from their recent past; they cheerfully share rumors over messaging apps of American plots and preparations for a government in waiting, one that would efface the current ruling order. They may actually get their wish, but it will likely be Soleimani's dark horse or one of his fellow-travelling martial conspirators who would deliver the coup de grace to the political system at some point down the road. To get there, Soleimani would want Iraqi politics to implode from within, to collapse under the weight of its own perfidies and shallow-minded imprudence. And what better vehicle to trivialize and depreciate politics than Muqtada al-Sadr, who in Soleimani's opinion has the mental competence and disposition of a twelve and half year old brat? Al-Sadr now wants to be the *paternalis* sage of a 'newer' New Iraq. That must have sent Soleimani chuckling.

Al-Sadr was the biggest vote and seat earner. He could rely on a [reliable constituency](#) that elects its representatives with cult-like discipline and obedience. Like the Barzanis, al-Sadr's father managed to create a 'nation'. Al-Sadr *pere* sold his particular brand to them as one at variance with the 'foreigners' (whether Persian, Azeri, or Pakistani) and 'aristocrats' dominating the pseudo-ecclesiastical hierarchies of Najaf. His trademark was bred-in-the-bone Iraqi and 'a man of the people', of the impoverished and the downtrodden, even though his third cousin once removed served as an Iraqi prime minister, for a short while, under the monarchy, and presided over the Senate for long stretches. Even though another third cousin was married to Khomeini's son; her brother served as Iran's Deputy Prime Minister in the early days of the revolution. And yet another third cousin is married to former president Mohammad Khatami. Most of the Najaf establishment kept their distance from Muqtada's father not because of his pedigree or origins, which were just as aristocratic and transnational as theirs, but rather because they thought him to be off his rocker, suffering from a form of manic depressiveness that was widely-known to afflict the al-Sadr bloodline. But his followers took the cleric's eccentricities and sharp spikes of anger to be a touch of the divine. Muqtada inherited these masses, who were indeed historically downtrodden, and long overlooked by

Najaf due to their alms-poor returns: gypsies, the blacks of Basra, and the descendants of the Tigris clans of the Amara that had moved to the outskirts of large cities to populate sprawling slums, especially those of Baghdad's. The more excitable among them kiss the tires of the 4x4 Muqtada rides in, should his feet prove inaccessible. Their votes, hence, were dependable. Sure, there was some old-school and high-tech cheating going on, a little more than usual, but that goes for many other political forces (however I would not put the attempt to burn the ballot boxes in Baghdad's Rusafa past a Sadrist cover-up). Their seat share was further amplified by depressed turn-outs of a public-sector-job-wielding middle class that usually votes for the incumbent political order, Abadi's extended tenure in this most recent case, now in jeopardy.

Al-Sadr had an unusual and surprising trajectory over the last six years. On balance, it was a good development for the Iraqi body politic. Except for one essential reservation, gnawing at the soul of any well-wisher: Was al-Sadr ascending a learning curve towards statesmanship, or was this all akin to a Choose-Your-Own-Adventure game for him? I had hoped for the best, indirectly assisting the transition through intermediaries. But two years ago, after his dramatic incursion into the Green Zone, I concluded that al-Sadr was an unreliable agent of reform. He is a disruptor, and sometimes disruption is a positive, but in the Iraqi context, there was plenty of disruption going on already. What was needed was a dynamism that reinforces what little tethering grounded the youth, even if it were only the part of the population beholden to al-Sadr, and as that mass stabilizes, so too their example may calm down the general volatility. But there was no real way of influencing him constructively. I [wrote at the time](#):

What this crisis revealed to me is that no one—not Hassan Nasrallah, not Qasim Soleimani, not Ammar al-Hakim, not Sadr's nephew, not his chief aides (M. Ya'coubi, W. Zamili, W. Kreimawi, S. Obeidi), not the politburo of the Sadrist movement—has any unique insight into Sadr's thinking, or the means to influence it. His mind is quicksand, as Abadi soon discovered. That said, there are two sets of 'brakes' that Sadr acknowledges and responds to: Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, and Iranian Leader Ali Khamenei. They can make him stop, but they cannot steer him. And even when these brakes are applied, the skid marks that Sadr leaves in his wake are enough of a reminder that we are dealing with a person who lurches haphazardly to and fro, and his movements might as well be described as policy by divination.

Iraq's destiny now hung between a callous adventurer, who wants to destroy Iraqi politics, and an erratic scalawag with a pedestrian concept of reform. To Soleimani's mind, al-Sadr in

the political realm is a toxin, not a tonic—and he may prove to be right. Letting al-Sadr be al-Sadr will do enough damage as it is. Jingoism, and a sense that his last name is endowed with an eschatological mission, shape the cleric's pronouncements, which can vary dramatically from week to week. Building a broad alliance with such a man as its tent pole will prove exceedingly difficult. And to top things off, al-Sadr could be quite a double-dealer. Consider how he dealt with Baha al-'Araji, once his top political whizz. Al-'Araji performed several roles for al-Sadr, including serving as the head of the Sadrist parliamentary bloc, and for a time as the chairman of the integrity committee. He also became wealthy in concurrence with his expanded profile. This did not sit well with al-Sadr, not because of any scruples he may have held over a pissant growing rich on his hallowed family name, but seemingly because he wasn't kicking up a sizable enough cut to the boss. While Abadi was putting together his cabinet in 2014, one of the deputy prime minister slots was reserved for the Sadrists. Muqtada sold the position to al-'Araji for a large sum of money—a claim first made by Soleimani to several Iraqi political actors. However, when Abadi annulled the positions of deputy prime minister, as part of his cosmetic reforms a year into his tenure, al-'Araji was surprised when a short while later an armed detachment from al-Sadr's retinue arrived at his home and proceeded to slap him around, before 'arresting' him and bundling him off to Najaf. An antique jewelry dealer, who happened to be presenting his wares at al-'Araji's residence at the time of its storming, was severely beaten (and his merchandise pilfered). Al-'Araji spent several months imprisoned in a house within a stone's throw away from Muqtada's. The latter would actually offer visitors a tour to behold the incarcerated former deputy prime minister, as if he were showing off a caged pet. Ostensibly, there were corruption charges against al-'Araji that al-Sadr's staff claimed they were investigating. But what I think happened is that al-Sadr was shaking down his former star player, squeezing out as much monies as he could (...a foretaste of the Ritz-Carlton treatment administered by Bin Salman to Saudi princes and bigwigs). Now, al-Sadr is advocating for a technocratic, non-denominational, and fully independent cabinet that shall uphold Iraqi sovereignty and root out corruption. Soleimani has dealt long enough with Muqtada—including hosting him for long stints in Tehran—to know how this may end.

Al-Sadr antics, and the overall slow death of consensus politics, are likely to further compound governmental dysfunction and corruption, rather than addressing them. The extent of state mismanagement is tremendous; many anecdotes that should count as extreme scandals go unreported, not even in Western diplomatic or intelligence cables, let alone in the Iraqi or foreign press. For example, an international oil company walked away from a super-giant oil field after it was confronted with a 100-million-dollar shake-down, which the company suspects was orchestrated by the upper echelons of the Ministry of Oil, a ministry headed by a 'technocrat' ever since Abadi's prior attempts at reform. Granted the oil company was looking for ways to get out of its commitment, but the whole episode was handled so

sloppily and greedily that the foreign corporation gained all the advantage, threatening to reveal how it was being treated under the glare of international arbitration. Things took a ridiculous turn when the oil minister proposed that the Iraqi government would buy-out the company for the princely sum of 16 billion dollars—a sum the country certainly did not have—so that two other international companies could pick up the contract. Needless to say that it is deeply troubling that this is how Iraq's principal financial lifeline is being managed. Now imagine going down the line to how less glamorous mega-projects are being fleeced.

Abadi's biggest challenge was the bloated public sector, the many millions living off the government's dime and eating up the largest proportion of Iraq's oil revenues, a challenge exacerbated during the last few lean years. His big initiative on payroll was to draw up legislation offering a five year voluntary vacation for government employees, aiming to at least cut their perks and overhead expenses since he could not touch their salaries or pensions without incurring political backlash. Abadi was not able to get it passed in parliament, so the proposal was incorporated as a temporary budget amendment, on a trial basis, for the year 2017. The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank thought it was a great idea, deeming it a step in the right direction, however modest. Little did Abadi's team understand the mentality of the average Iraqi bureaucrat: they projected several hundred thousand would sign-up. Only 3,800 did. This is but one example of what counts as 'reform'. That the Iraqi dinar has not lost a third or half of its value is more miracle (or rather smoke-and-mirrors pseudo-accounting coupled with nifty PR) than sound fiscal policy. And now with high oil prices returning to international commodity markets, thus staving off the necessity of drastic austerity measures in oil-producing countries, one can reasonably expect the reform agenda would be put on the Green Zone's back-burner, again.

More money flowing back into the state coffers would dampen the anti-corruption thrust too, not that it was Abadi's strong point at any time. The case of Iraqi-British businessman Hamid al-Najjar attests to how absurdly it has been handled to date. Al-Najjar was arrested in Baghdad in November, taken away by a special security team off a flight arriving from Amman. His arrest sent shockwaves throughout the ranks of the Iraqi oligarchy, a conglomerate that had been responsible for one of the greatest larcenies, in dollar value, of state coffers in the history of mankind. Al-Najjar was no minor player. He was an associate fronting for Tariq al-Hassan, a mysterious billionaire of Palestinian or Syrian origin who was active in Iraq prior and after 2003, and who was exceptionally well plugged-in during both eras. The gossip mills had it that al-Najjar was arrested over an illegal withdrawal that was made in early 2015 to the tune of 140 million dollars, 'taken' from an Iraqi customs account at Rafidain Bank. The money was parked there as a result of a short-lived regulation whereby banks had to deposit eight percent of dues on some imported goods. Al-Najjar had no special claim to the money. It was supposed to be returned to the private banks that had issued letters of credit for the merchandise, but

pending a new set of regulations, it just sat there, in limbo. He managed to get the right number of sign-offs to get to it, a stunt he ostensibly pulled off with his partner, a former acolyte of Uday Saddam Hussein's, together with a deputy minister of finance (a Kurd later 'incarcerated' by Masood over some obscure corruption charges), with the fourth conspirator being the head of customs at that time, who was later killed in a suspicious car 'accident'.

It seems that al-Najjar initially thought that his arrest was the real deal; that the Abadi government was going to confront corruption seriously. The gossipers were sharing all sorts of leaks from the investigation. In the first two days, al-Najjar had plenty to tell his interrogators. He implicated many high profile names, with whom he was conducting business on behalf of al-Hassan, including two top aides close to Abadi, and a politician often touted as a potential prime minister. However, by the third day, he was allowed to use his personal cellphone from his prison cell. It seems he was told not to take what is happening seriously, and that he should walk things back. All sorts of heavy hitters intervened to secure his release. But it was a phone call from Najaf, from one of its highest profile public figures representing the *marji'iyya*, that clinched his emancipation. A couple of weeks later, and in what seems to be a face saving spin on the event lest anyone would think that al-Hassan was losing his influence, a set of talking points were released into the gossip dens of Baghdad: it was al-Hassan who had arranged to have al-Najjar arrested since the latter had turned uppity and was playing hardball when selling a few family properties to the former. Meanwhile, al-Najjar was posting pictures on social media of himself performing *'umra* in Mecca, offering thanks for his freedom.

Although short on details, most observers realize that the Iraqi state is in distress. Many argue that there has been some improvement, but their benchmark for that claim is to measure current conditions against what was going on four years ago, when ISIS took Mosul and much else. However, has governance improved enough to manage the newly acquired territories in Kirkuk and across the Disputed Territories (DTs)? And what would be the consequences if Baghdad's writ, suffering as it is from the twin maladies of dysfunction and corruption, is extended to such highly volatile flashpoints? What are the contingencies laid down by those whose job it is to think these matters through, and who have been, up to this point, advocates for Abadi's actions last October?

I would suggest that if one were to look for analogies as to what may happen in Kirkuk, then one should take a look at the city of Samarra and its environs as a case study, one that actually represents the best-case-scenario for Baghdad since Samarra never fell to the Islamic State—the largest Sunni Arab city not to—even though the jihadists tried to seize it in multiple ways. Taking Samarra held lots of prestige points for Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi; his family is from there. The city holds symbolic value as a onetime seat of the Abbasid caliphate, and holds local eschatological value as well whereby Sunni and Shia lore cross-pollinate to assign the city an important role in the end times. Displaced people from Anbar and elsewhere had

swelled its population by a half in late 2014. There were lots of strategic nodes around Samarra; ones that would put other areas near Baghdad in play. Its shrine, supremely holy to Shias and once a target, could spark widespread conflagration if targeted again. Thus, Samarra's importance to the jihadists made it very important for the central government too.

The Iraqi government found it expedient to allow the PMUs to hold and manage Samarra. Specifically, the PMU presence inside the city was mostly limited to Saraya al-Salam ('The Peace Companies')—al-Sadr's militia, in its latest incarnation. The people of Samarra welcomed them, seeing how al-Sadr had rebranded himself into a champion of Sunni rights. The Saraya, if compared to other militias, got the highest marks for discipline, and for their respectful treatment of residents as well. But things began to change for the worse by the end of 2016; the Saraya began drifting into 'warlord-ism' and there was very little the central state was willing to do to address that. For example, the Sadrists manage their own prison. The officer in charge of the Iraqi Army's Samarra Operations had no access to it, nor visibility as to its rolls. Families of detainees 'taken' by the Saraya are given the runaround, and shaken down. This is a familiar situation across Sunni Arab Iraq, but the difference here is the unique importance of this city.

Sadrists also set-up roving checkpoints within the city even though there are approximately four thousand Iraqi government security and military personnel serving there too. The PMUs are still garrisoned within schools and other important civilian infrastructure. Checkpoints administered jointly with Samarra Operations extort farmers bringing produce into town. Fishermen are allowed to fish in Tharthar Lake only after sharing proceeds with businesses fronting for the PMUs. Furthermore, there are restrictions on locals entering the shrine area, this being a touchy subject especially since the government has been forcing locals into selling their properties around the shrine. Many internally displaced persons from the Al-Jazira area near Samara are still not allowed to return for the most part. In the past, local notables have been cooperative and thankful to the Saraya for keeping the peace. But with a resentful populace harrying them to do something about the increasingly untenable situation, the notables find no recourse to the Iraqi state, rather, they take their complaints to al-Sadr. Saraya commanders, though, justify their heavy-handedness to him by asserting the presence of IS sleeper cells. Both sides are now caught in a descending loop. The cumulative effect of these defects allow the jihadists to find room to operate and mount attacks, which are increasing from week to week. The situation is likely to get worse; for example, the nearby village of Mteibeejeh is back under IS control. Needless to say that a successful jihadist attack on the shrine would unleash a cascade of unknowns for the central government.

One should also note that Baghdad still does not feel comfortable in trusting the task of maintaining order in Samarra fully to the Iraqi Army, or to contingents of local Sunni recruits. That, in itself, says much about the state's innate incapacity for stabilization. The PMUs have

made themselves indispensable to the central government's ability to project authority and power; they are a critical element of the security 'cocktail' which also comprises the Quick Reaction Force and the Counter Terrorism Units. Despite the official propagandist line, the delusion of a reconstituted Iraqi Army is not borne out by reality. The Army chronically needs a large dose of US air cover and French artillery barrages to fight. The PMUs may be restricted without air cover, but they have demonstrated that they can fight independently. Expecting that the Iraqi Army would restrain the PMUs, or substitute for them, is wishful thinking at this stage. So, the PMUs will likely remain in many of the most sensitive areas; expecting them to willingly forgo authority as well as access to illicit revenue streams, especially with the anticipated reconstruction windfall, is also wishful thinking. It should be noted too that Soleimani has cultivated and incorporated lots of influence and personnel within U.S. trained and subsidized special operations units, according to anecdotal observations made by officers who find the levels of infiltration distressing, and are powerless to undo it.

Samarra shows that even the best-case scenario and the best troops available, in an area of utmost importance to the state, would likely descend into undisciplined malice, with illegal economies being the norm. One can easily see the same playing out if those conditions are superimposed on Kirkuk and other DTs. It was no picnic being a non-Kurd living under KRG administered areas; there was systematic harassment of Arabs, Turkmen, Yezidis and Christians who chose to remain unaligned with Kurdish aspirations. But it was disciplined, guided malice. With the Iraqi Army and PMUs substituting for the Peshmerga, a new element has been added to the mix: lack of discipline when exercising malice and acting on decades-old hurts. The town of Tuz Khurmatu provided a preview of what that may look like in the days following the collapse of Kurdish forces. There were already festering ethnic and religious tensions, going back decades: since 2003, Kurdish homes made a point of flying their colors above their roofs, while the Turkmen answered with their own. In the days following the capture of Kirkuk by the central government, 210 Kurdish men were 'taken' off the streets of Tuz Khurmatu by the PMUs, especially by its Shia Turkmen component. Many of the disappeared did not have clear-cut political affiliations. Hundreds of homes and shops were looted then burned down. Three beheaded corpses were found. One young man, seemingly of Kurdish origin, uploaded a video of himself bad-mouthing Qais al-Khaza'ali, a PMU leader. A couple of days later, fighters loyal to al-Khaza'ali stormed the young man's home. He had fled by then, but they intimidated his father into disowning his son on tape, and then promptly uploaded that video too. Adventurers looking to start a fight in such conditions don't need to look far.

Happy talkers play up events such as the repair and reopening of the Altun Kupri Bridge two weeks ago. The American spokesman for Operation Inherent Resolve Col. Sean Ryan saccharinely tweeted that the bridge running over the Lower Zab River, historically linking

Kirkuk and Arbil, “enables citizens to visit friends and family during the important Eid al Adha holiday.” He even shared pictures of Iraqi Federal Police and Kurdish Security Forces officers walking together at the reopening, as if to suggest that all that had happened, including the act of blowing up the bridge to stop the Iraqi Army’s advance last October was, well, water under the bridge. I have a hard time believing that such photo-ops can actually bring about peace. With so many unresolved slights and hurts, there is much fighting to do, still. Will Masood’s and Kosrat’s Peshmerga do the fighting? Will a rebellion against Bafel and his cousins break out in Suleimaniya, with a new, militant Kurdish faction emerging from there? Maybe the old and grizzled revolutionaries are just that, old and tired. Maybe Kosrat worries more about his cut out of the Taqtaq oil field nowadays rather than hoisting a Kurdish flag over Kirkuk. Maybe the townspeople of Suleimaniya really do care about their salaries most of all. If so, who does the fighting?

I think the PKK would fit the bill. Still fresh from a fight in Syria and Turkey, they’ve already got blood in their teeth. And they may come to realize that the Kurds in Kirkuk and the DTs, left to the mercies of Baghdad, the PMUs, and the Turkmen, would be a natural constituency for those willing to keep fighting for Kurdish rights, a population that is up for grabs as the older, established Iraqi Kurdish parties fail to undo the disaster of October 15, 2017. For well over three decades, it was assumed that the PKK was not interested in expanding their recruiting footprint into Iraqi Kurdistan. The Kurds there were thought to be locked down for the KDP and PUK, and a host of smaller parties as well, ones that had been in the fight for decades before the PKK came into being. The PKK’s field of play was Anatolia, while picking up support in Northern Syria as a result of their practically overt, state-sanctioned presence there under the reign of the Asads, not to mention the historical ties linking Kurds across the Syrian-Turkish border—a majority of Kurds in Syria are relatively recent transplants from Anatolia themselves. The PKK used Iraqi territory as a sanctuary from Turkish wrath, holding down a few high-altitude bastions where they wiled away the time training, manning checkpoints, administering a dab of light indoctrination into the tenets of Marxism (substituted by the communal-confederal concepts of Murray Bookchin since the mid-2000s) to a bored shepherd, while cultivating honey and collecting milk thistle nuts as a side business. They would do their fighting, when needed, in Turkey proper, and occasionally would beat back or escape Turkish military incursions and air strikes. The PKK did find a political footing in Iraq though when the jihadists attacked the Yezidis: They sent in their fighters from the Syrian side of the border to aid the stricken peoples of Sinjar. But no one thought of them as a real contender; their intrusion into Iraq would be transient and marginal. Until recently, Baghdad’s Ministry of National Security was paying the salaries of the majority of the PKK fighters and their affiliates in Sinjar, probably as a way to irritate Masood, who had cultivated his own Yezidi acolytes.

Once I envisioned a scenario by which the PKK may find political and organizational ground in Iraq, I began asking questions, only to find that there is a significant disconnect between what the Iraqi and Kurdish security outfits think is happening, and what is being described to me, elliptically, by operatives who seem sympathetic to the PKK. A simple enough question such as “What is the proportion of Kurds from Iraqi territories who are with the PKK in Qandil Mountain?” elicits diametrically opposite answers. Other questions engender puzzlement among the security folks, such as “Why have the PKK focused on building out secret political and sleeper cells in Garmiyān?” “What secret cells?!” is what I get from some of them. One source acknowledged that PKK recruiting in Garmiyān had swelled their ranks in Qandil by as much as thirty percent over the last four years, making up for the cadres transferred to Rojava. The PKK even fielded a candidate from Garmiyān who operates under an officially licensed Iraqi party, managing to win a seat in the last election—she denies any affiliation with the PKK, but her social media accounts, rife as they are with pictures and adorations of Abdullah Ocalan, suggest otherwise. It should be noted that this party fronting for the PKK stood vocally against the independence referendum, a sign, sources suggest, that the PKK toes the Iranian line on several topics. Baghdad and the PUK may think that the PKK cannot become a problem since the Iranians have been coordinating with them on Syria for a while now, even though a PKK front ostensibly clashes with Iranian forces on the Iranian side of Kurdistan from time to time. The PKK needs Iran down the road as the Americans depart Syria and Assad extends a form of centralized control into Rojava or SDF-controlled territories, and that objective may contribute towards restraining their mischief and expansion in Iraqi territories if the Iranians ask them to play nice, or so goes that line of thinking. Masood may be thinking about this vexation in another way: if the PKK becomes a political and military contender in Kirkuk and the DTs, then that erodes the constituencies of his political rivals—no skin off his back. And if the PKK becomes too successful and too much of a problem, then he will be the only man standing who can fix it.

Conversely, it is difficult to gauge the PKK leaders’ thinking. They must be watching events with trepidation. Erdogan is on the warpath. He learned a lesson from what happened in Kirkuk too: there is room for adventurism at America’s expense, and consequently he attacked Afrin with the Americans offering next to nothing to their Syrian Kurdish allies. Erdogan is now building out a permanent military presence inside Iraq, expanding on his previous toe-holds in Bamirni and a few outposts yonder. The Turkish military seeks to smother the PKK in Qandil by laying a physical and electronic siege on the adversary, denying them their traditional margins for movement. Erdogan is also locked into a political marriage with virulently anti-Kurdish coalition partners in Ankara. So the PKK can expect another long bout of fighting; their bloodied fists are not coming down any time soon. As their options dwindle, and contrary to how many observers calculate these considerations, it may make sense for the

PKK to harass the Iranians in their Iraqi zone of influence, by targeting the Iraqi Army and the PMUs, in order to get concessions for Rojava's autonomy. Or the PKK may conclude that, in an atmosphere of unpredictability and anything-goes, it is their time to lay a bet on the table and to seriously work towards breaking off a chunk of Iraqi Kurdistan as their own, one with oil wealth that dwarfs the depleting wells of the Al-Omar field in Syria. I tend to think that revolutionaries always go big: just look at what the PKK did at the end of the Raqqa operation last October. By unfurling a giant banner with Ocalan's face on it along with screeching speeches about a 'new societal order' they were doing the exact opposite of what they were supposed to. But if one thinks of them as revolutionaries, come what may, then such a moment of 'screw you, imperialist swine' becomes all too predictable. Perplexingly, the US government looked away, choosing to un-see yet another sign of trouble ahead, much like how it responded to Kirkuk.

Like Soleimani, the PKK got this far in Syria mostly by sheer luck and partly due to serial U.S. misjudgments and unforced errors. That same level of mismanagement has concurrently given the PKK misgivings about America's reliability, that may yet compel them to strike upon a fate-changing geopolitical adventure in a post-IS order that is still supremely fluid, with no real signs of solidifying, or stabilizing. The PKK has amassed enough chips to stomach a few unlucky bets, thus raising the stakes for everyone involved. A dysfunctional and corrupt administration in Baghdad took charge of a charged situation like Kirkuk, while a radical group such as the PKK lurks waiting in the wings, standing in line behind roving jihadist squads, chauvinist Turkmen and their Turkish intel backers, whoever the 'White Flags' are supposed to be, crestfallen Peshmerga bent on revenge, grizzled men like Masood and Kosrat licking their wounds, and Shia militiamen who will fleece and abuse whomever passes their way. Again, who in Washington is doing the math of what that may look like? McGurk's shop? And who is supposed to be the political maestro who would subdue such riotous sparks and accommodate the reconcilables—Abadi? Muqtada?

* * *

A week after the optics of Soleimani doing a victory lap in Kirkuk, US policy makers saw fit to award Abadi yet another accolade: a photo-op with Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. The latter was attending the inaugural meeting of the Saudi-Iraqi Coordination Council in Riyadh, lending America's imprimatur to this budding relationship. Abadi stood there beaming, flanked by Tillerson and Saudi Arabia's King Salman. Clearly, the United States was demonstrating that whatever happened in Kirkuk, including the humiliation of its Kurdish

'allies', was of little consequence, while the newly formed council was very important since it "will in some ways counter some of the unproductive influences of Iran in Iraq," according to Tillerson. "Certainly, Iranian militias that are in Iraq, now that the fight against Daesh and ISIS is coming to a close, those militias need to go home," he added. I imagine that Soleimani found the whole spectacle in Riyadh very amusing.

The new council was the culmination of many efforts, spearheaded by McGurk, to make use of Mohammad Bin Salman's penchant for trying something new. Bin Salman got it into his head that he can wean Iraq off Iran, or at least neutralize Tehran's influence in Baghdad. The venture, though, got off to a bad start. The Saudis sent in their answer to Soleimani, a security officer named Thamir al-Sabhan, to be their first ambassador after reopening the Saudi Embassy in Baghdad towards the end of 2015. Al-Sabhan managed to alienate many very quickly with his caustic and unwise statements; he wasn't well-prepped, and seemingly not particularly bright. He would be eventually removed, to be promoted back in Riyadh, now tasked with impeding Soleimani across the region after having failed to do that in Iraq. McGurk kept trying and succeeded in arranging for the Saudi foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir to visit Baghdad in February of last year. Around this time, Bin Salman was encouraged by the willingness on the part of Sistani's people to establish a secret channel with the Saudi royals. Things progressed quickly after that. The Iraqi president was invited to the Islamic-American summit welcoming Trump to the Saudi capital in May, followed a month later by Abadi meeting King Salman in Jeddah. Muqtada al-Sadr came calling in July to meet the king (this was not a first for al-Sadr, having met with the late King Abdullah in January 2006, and exchanged many letters with him thereafter), and then the 'Ar'ar border crossing was reopened in September. Such was the lead-up to Abadi's second visit in October when the council was formalized.

The Americans were elated: this was geopolitical synergy at its finest, with two of their top bets—wagering on the individual human agencies of Bin Salman and Abadi—locking arms and facing down the challenges ahead. In practical terms that meant getting the Saudis and other Persian Gulf allies to pay for rebuilding the cinder block ruins of Ramadi, Raqqa, Mosul, etc. In return, the Saudis would gain a say and a dollop of geostrategic relevance when fashioning the future political trajectories of Baghdad and Damascus, which Washington was supposedly working on. This, however, is a slapdash, quick-fix deflection, not a serious plan at resolving challenges; it highlights America's unrealistic and unworkable vision for resolution of Iraq and Syria. The first part, concerning finances, has already come up short: the 'donor' conference held in Kuwait last February did not succeed in securing Saudi or other funds commensurate with the rebuilding effort needed to resurrect Iraq's cities. And no one was writing substantial checks for Raqqa, no matter how many times McGurk took al-Sabhan or any other Gulf official there to tour its devastations, until Trump nixed stabilization funds for Syria as a whole, and

only after he badgered the Saudis and Emiratis to pony up some coin, albeit with a fraction of what is needed. Furthermore, I project that Bin Salman will not be able to shape events where it matters across the region, and that al-Sabhan will prove no match for Soleimani. And that is mostly because they are unserious wags—dangerous to themselves, and to America as well, relying as it were on their imagined ‘prowess’ to sort out the nitty-gritty details on the ground, ground that has already been to all intents and purposes ceded to Soleimani over the last year, when *his* milestones for Deir Azzour, Kirkuk and now Dara’a were reached.

Thirteen years ago, I cited Nostradamus in [a tongue-in-cheek attempt](#) to highlight al-Zarqawi’s destructive agency. The intended quirkiness did not go down well in analytical and scholarly circles, but I got the predictive timeline down pat. I don’t remember the particular rabbit hole that took me, a few months ago, into the internet’s weirder corners, where Nostradamus’ other occult ‘predictions’ are hotly debated. But one thread caught my eye: it seems that there is to be a character called ‘Mabus’ whose death triggers a massive calamity. The interpretations of this quatrain vary, with some suggesting that it had already come to pass, or alternately that it was a hoax. Yet it is a bit striking that Mabus sounds a lot like ‘MBS’—Washington’s shorthand for Muhammad Bin Salman. I thought I was on to another sardonic inference but I was crestfallen to discover that other internet cranks had beaten me to this ‘revelation’. Yes, yes, I know this is ridiculous and detracts from the solemnness of the essay, but I would posit that if it does turn out that Bin Salman is not quite there, neither in the head nor within reach of his goals, then not enough people realize how seismically significant his fall from grace would be, for Saudi Arabia and for the region—so much so that its shockwaves would alert soothsayers of its coming five hundred years prior, if the tale were set to an ancient Greek stage. Twenty-seven years of war and mayhem would follow the death of Mabus, as one elucidation of Nostradamus’ mumbo-jumbo has it. I would not expect anything less than that if Bin Salman fumbles. For with his feverish actions, he is prolifically constructing one ‘station’ after another towards completing the black hole’s rim.

Kirkuk was a significant example of such a station, given the transnational aspect of Kurdishness. There are lots of other stations or proto-stations of varying sizes taking shape too across the Middle East, for instance Erdogan’s remodeling of the Turkish state’s hierarchies and identity, or the death rattles of Egypt’s economy. But Bin Salman is the one to watch. It is he, his person and individual agency, and the confidence with which America is investing in his prospects, by building out its strategy around him, whether it be stabilizing Abadi and Iraq, or bringing about Arab peace with Israel, or confronting Iran, that to my mind may incur the ‘event horizon’. It would be very difficult to predict what the Middle East would look like after it re-emerges at the other end of the black hole. One does hear a smattering of voices in Washington candidly cautioning against too close of an embrace of Bin Salman or buying wholeheartedly into what he represents, yet even they, those few not beholden to anti-Saudi

agendas, whether Qatari-financed or otherwise, are lacking imagination in explicating what the possibilities beyond Bin Salman's failure may occasion. The modalities of 'likely' and 'unlikely' are unknowable and unattainable by actuarial logic in such a vast expanse of possibility, when some half-forgotten menace from the past harkens, or something wholly novel unexpectedly emerges. The possibility that al-Zarqawi's revolution may come out victorious in Saudi Arabia is terrifying. And because it is a possibility that cannot be measured against quantifiable odds if or when Saudi Arabia dips into the folds of the black hole, then Bin Salman's tragically clumsy bungling of so many high-stakes gambits should elicit far more alarm than it does. For once it starts it will already be too late: given the atmospheric of the Middle East, and the pack of gamblers and adventurers at the ready, and what's at stake if a state like Saudi Arabia is up for grabs, then there will be no time to mitigate damage, or get a chance for a do-ever, when the tragic slip-up, that event horizon, catches us unawares.

Much has been written already about Bin Salman, after all he is one of the hottest stories emerging from the Middle East, and has been for well over two years, which is quite a feat considering how much else is going on. Dore Gold, Israel's former envoy to the United Nations, who once authored a virulently anti-Saudi book with the title *Hatred's Kingdom: How Saudi Arabia Supports the New Global Terrorism* (2003) but then went on to cultivate some of the first overt Israeli contacts with Saudi citizens, tweeted out a couple of months ago that Bin Salman "represents the best chance we have for pulling the Middle East as a whole out of violence and extremism that have afflicted it for too long." Every time Bin Salman does something thought-to-be-heretofore audacious, there is a collective gasp of relief afterwards breaking out from the onlookers in the bleachers when it turns out that he had carried the day and that his action did not lead to a disaster, much like the momentary reprieve of an uneventful 'click' during a duel of Russian roulette. But the game continues, although it has taken some quite bizarre turns, such as arresting those women activists then allowing Saudi media to level the charge of "high treason" against them, and more recently the spectacle of an anti-Canadian paroxysm. A well-greased public relations machine tells us all that the prince knows what he is doing. But what if he doesn't? What if what we are seeing is a manic 'weirdo' systematically unbolting the traditional brakes that, in a Saudi context, could curb the excesses of a would-be mad king? There is a mini-world of politics within the royal 'house', whose dynasts are numerous enough to warrant an upgraded term such a royal barrio. The institution of Saudi royalty can draw on a long, at times embittered, memory of fratricidal feuding, elegiac enough to reveal what pitfalls to avoid. Such was the inherited wisdom by which the kingdom's founder instituted a successional order to sustain his offspring for several generations. What comes next was to be mediated by family politics and consultation, involving multiple branches not only that of Ibn Saud's sons and their progeny, but of more distant cousins too. Bin Salman is often compared to his grandfather; his PR wizards have even

branded him ‘the second founder.’ But there is a big article missing from this narrative: like what Soleimani has been doing in Iraq, and in contravention to Ibn Saud’s wishes, Bin Salman finds politics, as little of it as exists in Saudi, to be an impediment. What we are watching is his bid to destroy that little space, to clear his path for absolute unencumbered governance. With the brakes gone, all one gets is the man and his instincts and reflexes at the wheel. And again, I think this particular individual is not altogether there.

Consider how novel it is to introduce the word ‘corruption’ into the Saudi lexicon of doing things as squads fanned out across Riyadh last November, arresting the high and mighty, then depositing them at the Ritz Carlton. With that action, the iron-cast lid of traditional norms—whereby corruption went by another name and was critical for regime coherence—has been completely removed from the Saudi pot. The contents beneath are opaque even to the best connected, and best informed. What is at stake has been amply described by observers already. Thousands if not tens of thousands of Saudis are connected to many of those arrested through patronage networks and familial bonds. These networks, within military, tribal, financial, religious frameworks, held Saudi rule together. Variations of this model run back three hundred years. By breaking the mold, Bin Salman is directing loyalty to his person. He is making a big bet on Saudi youth, and his ability to distract them with ‘quality of life’ escapes such as cinemas and internal tourism, as well as unleashing their entrepreneurial drive. Without the intermediary lid of a co-opted, well compensated elite, and given his alleged penchant to re-enact the Meiji Restoration that he had read up on during his Japanophile youth, then his bid can only go in one direction: totalitarianism. This is massive social, even psychological, engineering in Saudi Arabia at a time of uncertainty, internally and across the Middle East—after all, the arrests were justified as the need for drastic action during a time of financial duress. That the arrestees had to be squeezed for almost all that they had embezzled over decades during the previous times of plenty, to shore up the state coffers and to pay for Bin Salman’s futuristic plans, is akin to rummaging between the folds of a sofa looking for change. Bin Salman would argue that his steady hand, and his alone, setting a course to the future *is* what is best for his country precisely because of the prevailing conditions.

If so, then why the public humiliation of Prince Mit’eb bin Abdullah? What value would such spite have in charting a future for the country? If Bin Salman already knew that Mit’eb was no threat, as evidenced by the lack of reaction among what was thought to be Mit’eb’s constituency, especially among the National Guard, then why invite the suggestion of it? Why, earlier, did Bin Salman impugn Prince Muhammad Bin Nayif by implying to the Americans, who were invested in Bin Nayif’s handling of Saudi security for decades past, that their man was secretly aiding jihadist fighters in Syria and Iraq? It did not end there. Bin Salman was also telling leading members of the House of Saud that Bin Nayif’s shadowy adjuncts had collected compromising videos of them. He then went overboard with leaking allegations of Bin Nayif’s

drug abuse. It was distasteful, petty, mean and worst still, unnecessary. Wouldn't these character reveals, when read as a libretto, foretell a crescendo towards capriccio and madness?

Then there was the odd spectacle of sending Saad Hariri—a tragic character in his own right—out with a televised “we’ve had enough” tantrum, signaling a shot across the bow into Hezbollah’s battle lines. How ridiculous was that? Nine years had elapsed since Hezbollah emasculated Hariri politically. Hezbollah went on a rampage in Beirut in early May, 2008. That was Soleimani’s opening salvo, indicating that he was about to follow a new strategy in overpowering Iran’s regional foes and their American backers. The context was that the Sadrists, backed by Iran then, had just been defeated in Basra. Momentarily it seemed that Iranian influence was on the wane. Hezbollah was tasked with an overreaction, a flexing of geostrategic muscles. The alleged provocation came when Fouad Siniora, Hariri’s second, and Lebanon’s prime minister, took steps to curtail Hezbollah’s surveillance of Hariri International Airport. Siniora’s clampdown then expanded into dismantling Hezbollah’s secure landline communications. Two years had elapsed since Israel launched the 2006 war to cripple Hezbollah, and the prevailing thinking was that it was too weak to stand-up to official governmental authority. Siniora was gravely mistaken. Hezbollah reacted by unleashing its cadres, plus those of its allies: Amal along with pro-Syrian SSNP and Ba’athist militias. Hariri-related properties were smashed, with Hariri hunkering down in the family’s palatial residence at Qreitem, terrified for his life. The tantrum showed up America and the Saudis, who could not do anything to help him. The Bush administration did not have the bandwidth to respond, since it was an election year in the U.S., and SOFA negotiations were proceeding with Iraq. The Saudis would not move without America’s cover. Soleimani notched an easy victory.

Now suddenly, after all that had elapsed, Bin Salman thought he could arrange a rematch with the Iranians in Beirut. He would do that, it seems, by tossing Hariri to the frontlines. Bin Salman would also work to choke off Lebanon’s economy by withholding Saudi largesse. In effect, he would be cutting off his nose to spite his face; sacrificing his most valuable asset, humiliating those he wants to win over, and burning down his own tent just to show the enemy that he means business. A few years ago, I asked a Lebanese friend as to why a civil war hasn’t broken out yet. His answer was: “No one is paying for it.” I wonder to what extent Bin Salman thought he could push matters; to a rekindling of a civil war? The Lebanese proxies fighting for a Saudi flag would invariably be its Salafists—not a good look for Bin Salman in America’s eyes. Or did he think that he would push matters towards an all-out Israeli levelling of Hezbollah’s infrastructure and weapons arsenals as it did in 2006? Hezbollah’s rocket arsenal has expanded by tenfold since its last mauling by Israel. Contrary to Netanyahu’s rhetoric, it is unlikely that Israel would stomach another round; beating up Hezbollah is expensive, exhausting and ultimately futile without addressing Iran’s power projection, which would only replenish Hezbollah once more. More recently, I asked that same Lebanese friend:

“If Soleimani wanted to humiliate the United States and the Saudis in Lebanon, in a moment of clarity to show who was in charge, as he did in 2008, what would it look like nowadays?” He looked at me with a frown, “Why would he need to do that? That is the situation now.” According to him, it is already a done deal, save for the decorum of what passes as electorally contested Lebanese politics, such as the nothing-will-ever-change election back in May. U.S., French and other Western actors know what’s what: If you need to get anything done, then contact the Director of General Security Gen. Abbas Ibrahim, and he will take that request to Hezbollah and they will gladly oblige all those who have implicitly recognized their supreme authority by choosing this channel. Ibrahim can even run messenger errands to Damascus too. Western officials may meet Hariri for a photo-op and the occasional pronouncement on standing by Lebanese sovereignty. But he isn’t who they would call when there is serious business afoot.

Whatever Bin Salman was thinking, it is clear that he and his advisers were disconnected from Lebanese realities. But what allegedly happened next was even more worrisome: he bartered Hariri off to a power-projection hungry Emmanuel Macron, who in turn promised to reconfigure existing yet stalled French-Saudi arms deals away from rival clans within the House of Saud, especially those of the late King Abdullah’s and Prince Sultan’s, and channel France’s weapons procurement through Bin Salman’s own Saudi Arabian Military Industries outfit. It was too quick and paltry a lurch from thinking that he can turn Lebanon into a regional test of wills, to skimming off a weapons deal kickback.

Bin Salman employed detention tactics to apply pressure on another geostrategic concern: he had Sabih al-Masri arrested in Riyadh in mid-December. Al-Masri’s contractual work with the Saudi state and consequently his vulnerability on public sector corruption charges are negligible; though holding Saudi citizenship in addition to several others, al-Masri could not be vilified as an oligarch growing fat on the public dime as the Ritz Carlton detainees were. This was a geostrategic incarceration plain and simple: the al-Masri family of Nablus have fronted and invested Fatah (PLO) money for decades. Much of that financial infrastructure flowed and flows through the Arab Bank. Arresting Sabih al-Masri was a thinly veiled threat against the Fatah leadership, namely that of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas’. The Saudis were essentially telling him that they can get information on where the Fatah folks have been hiding the crown jewels, and that they can put the Arab Bank under reputation duress. Bin Salman may have thought that he was demonstrating usefulness to Jared Kushner and the latter’s drive to compel the Palestinians into agreeing to negotiate with the Israelis under new terms. Again, something significant was amiss: shaking the reputation of the Arab Bank would leave a bruise on the Jordanian economy and given how wobbly things are there, may even gut it. Maybe, at that time, Bin Salman did not view King Abdullah II of Jordan as an integral ally, or that Jordan mattered all that much. With the Saudis taking the lead on

Palestinian affairs, Jordan is mattering less and less for America's vision beyond being a training and logistical depot, and even that was petering out as the Coalition's campaigns against IS in Iraq and Syria were winding down. Thus, Jordan's viability could be a justifiable loss, should it come to that, had Bin Salman's overall gambit worked out, bringing Fatah to its knees, at the negotiating table. It should also be noted that Bin Salman is being advised by Palestinian-Jordanian Basem Awadallah, who has an axe to grind with the Jordanian elite, seeing how he was once the king's golden boy but was later discarded amid accusations of corruption and ineptitude. Awadallah, spurned by his country's ruling class, would have been fully aware of what al-Masri's arrest may portend, and may have been more than willing to see the Jordanian king, his previous patron, who had failed to protect him, experience a few palpitations. Be that as it may, Al-Masri was released a few days later. It is unclear as to why that happened, who intervened on his behalf, and what Bin Salman got out of it, if anything. A few months later, in yet another lurch, Bin Salman changed his opinion entirely on the topic: rather than neglecting Amman, Saudi Arabia would cover Jordan's budgetary deficits. That was yet another about-turn that was poorly thought out, and executed maladroitly. But he was on a roll.

Amidst the feverish month of high-drama in November, Bin Salman found time to host the Inaugural Meeting of the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC) Ministers of Defense Council. This too revealed a certain tone-deafness. He should have dropped this initiative, launched two years prior, and saved himself the embarrassment. The 'Islamic Alliance' was supposed to be the vehicle of Saudi power projection, especially into Syria. It was such a potential game-changer at the time of its announcement that even the 'caliph' Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi [was frazzled by it](#), suggesting that he understood such a muscular, warlike Saudi approach would effectively overtake the jihadists and nullify their message of resurrecting Sunni martial glory. Yet the alliance never managed to launch beyond a photo-op. Why would Bin Salman remind the Saudi population of an unmet promise, a humiliation in fact, by hosting the defense ministers and going through the motion and pretense that it is still in play?

The Islamic Alliance was a good idea, at least when it came to the optics of Saudi geostrategic virility, had it actually shown up to the fight. Now we know that it was George Nader's whimsy, having apparently suggested it to his boss the Emirati Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed, who suggested it to Bin Salman, his pupil in geostrategic affairs. Last year, in my [previous essay](#), I discussed that alliance and its missed opportunity at length. I added a screen-shot of a tweet, showing Bin Salman and Kushner sitting alongside the retired Pakistani General Raheel Sharif, who was supposed to lead the alliance. The picture was a clear manifestation of how central this idea was supposed to be to the overall revamping of the security landscape in the region when these matters were being discussed a little over a year

ago, geared as they were towards defeating the jihadists and rolling back Iranian influence. But I had missed a very important detail. Lingered behind the trio, almost fading into the faceless crowd of hangers-on and wait staff, was Nader himself. His appearance had changed since I had seen him last, well over a decade ago, chiefly because of those thick-framed spectacles. But even without the glasses, my mind would have never made the mental leap that it could be him. When news came out last January that Nader was in the thick of the Saudi-Emirati engagement with the Trump administration, my mouth was agape for a good thirty seconds, even though little surprises me these days. But this one was a biggie, for I had knowledge of Nader's backstory, mostly gossipy stuff, and if only a quarter of it were true then this had the makings of a major embarrassment for all involved.



Much of the gossip was verified by recent journalistic sleuthing; Nader had gotten caught in the headlights of the Mueller investigation, being one possible conduit tying the Kremlin to the Trump team, maybe to Trump himself, so he was a big news story, and the press wanted to know all it could about him. At that moment when I first read that he was meeting the Trump

team as an emissary of Bin Zayed's, I thought that there is no clearer sign of how much the Bin Salman story was a clown show. If Bin Zayed is supposed to be mentoring Bin Salman, then what caliber of a mentor would rely on Nader? It was surreally funny, then I realized what it macabrely portended.

Nader's business is brokering a meeting of minds. Part hustler, part self-starter, he has a knack for getting his foot through the door and talking the rest of his body in. There's a cheapness about how he does it, sure, but one cannot deny that he had been effective. And to be effective, one needs to be creative, to think quickly on one's feet, and to go in for the kill when it avails itself. Nader is a throwback to another era, to the ways Washington navigated the grey areas of the Middle East in the 1980s and 1990s. He was one of a cast of characters that made connections, struck arms deals, leaked stories, and willingly provided their reputations as scapegoats and alibis for security dons when espionage gambles went bust. He was a disposable 'agent', in the mold of Albert Hakim, Manucher Ghorbanifar, and Razah Raad of Iran-Contra fame, as well as the Beirut hostage negotiations of the 1980s, during which Nader managed to broker many releases, especially from the clutches of Hezbollah. But there was more. Hassan Nasrallah, in a recent interview, described how Nader visited him after 9-11, claiming to be an emissary from Vice President Dick Cheney, a claim he backed up with evidence. Nader channeling Cheney offered to facilitate Hezbollah's integration within Lebanese politics, to allow it to keep its light weaponry, and offered two billion dollars towards the reconstruction of southern Lebanon, to be disbursed directly by Nasrallah's people, all in return for no longer harassing Israel. Granted, Nasrallah is a bit of a gossip and a braggart, and his reminiscing serves to keep him current and newsy, but he was also fully aware of the question that he would be raising in people's mind: very few individuals get to meet Nasrallah, so how did Nader, with all those red flags undulating around him, get that far?

Nader was raised by a single mom in the northern Lebanese region of Koura, a Greek Orthodox bastion. He had a younger brother maimed as a child early on in the Lebanese Civil War, when a friend of his who was standing next to him reached for a booby-trapped device which detonated, killing the boy and amputating the brother's hand, or at least that is the story that Nader would tell and would cite as the formative experience compelling him to extinguish the flames of war in his homeland. Nader found his way to the United States as a teen, still unclear exactly how, just as the war got underway. He demonstrated a penchant for journalism, jumpstarting his own publication with a Middle Eastern focus. Being vocal in his call for an Arab reconciliation with Israel, he soon enough got someone's attention in Washington. Initially, Nader made himself useful in early efforts to normalize America's relationship with Muammar Qadhafi, the Libyan dictator being the first of many who would be enthralled by Nader's name dropping of all the powerful 'deep state' liaisons he had back in Washington, even with some in Israel. However, those efforts stalled in 1984 after a British

female police officer was killed outside Libya's embassy in London. Nader then turned his attention to Beirut. Within the world of Lebanese history, he left his mark on that country's trajectory by instigating Samir Gaegea's rebellion against the Gemayel leadership. He was also trying to find ways to get the Americans to talk to the Asad regime, and to the Iranians.

Who was Nader working for? That part is still not clear, and the fogginess is troubling. He had an early mentor in the person of Max Kampelman. Kampelman is remembered (d. 2013) as an attorney and a diplomat who served several administrations. His highest profile work was leading the U.S. negotiating team in nuclear arms accords with the Soviets. There isn't much tying him to the Middle East. But it seems he made lots of introductions for Nader. One of whom led Nader to the late Uri Lubrani, Israel's last head of mission in Tehran right before the Islamic Revolution, who worked on and off with Nader throughout the 1980s and 1990s it seems. At that time, Lubrani had become Israel's one-man brain trust on all things Shia in the Middle East, especially Hezbollah. Together, it seems that Lubrani and Nader explored the possibility of prompting a rift within it. In 1985, Nader began showing up at the doorstep of Muhammad Hussein Fadhlallah, often described as Hezbollah's spiritual guide albeit the relationship was slightly more complicated and tenuous. But it was enough of an association to compel American-backed operatives to bomb his compound a few months before Nader's visits. Bob Woodward maintained in his book *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA* (1987) that, subsequent to the bombing, the Saudis paid Fadhlallah two million dollars to get Hezbollah to cease and desist from attacking American targets, which the cleric accepted. All sides mentioned in Woodward's account have denied the incident. However, it is tantalizing to speculate whether Nader was part of this alleged deal, which would place his Saudi links way back in time.

Later, Fadhlallah vouched for Nader when the latter travelled to Tehran in February 1987. In Nader's retelling of his visit in a *Washington Post* Op-Ed, the Iranians even extended him the courtesy of an audience with Khomeini. Sure, it was one of those daily scenes whereby dozens get to gather at the Ayatollah's home for a round of sermonizing and afternoon pleasantries, with Nader's being one face among many. But bringing in an American journalist into such a setting, with several Hezbollah operatives also attending, and who may have recognized this fellow Lebanese or had recourse to ask around about him, would have required quite the 'pull' and gall to do so, despite it not being four months since details concerning the Iran-Contra scandal began pouring out. Whoever arranged for Nader to get those bragging rights, on display in that *WaPo* piece, surely knew how the optics would be interpreted, but also knew enough about Washington and how to manipulate that town. They were consciously elevating Nader's status, probably as a potential negotiator to keep the spirit of the Iran-Contra deal going. Therefore, security dons in Tehran would have been aware of Nader from the mid-1980s. I don't know how sophisticated the Iranian operation was in Washington

back then, so I don't know when they would have picked up on Nader's proclivity for pederasty, a charge that was first leveled against him in the courts in 1985, or it may have been something they had deduced from keeping watch over him in Beirut. The Iranians had a low opinion of their American interlocutors, deeming them suckers who showed up to their rendezvous with bizarre gifts such as a bible signed by Reagan, a bunch of handguns, and a key-shaped cake. So why wouldn't the Iranians playback Nader to the Americans? It should be added that Nader, even before word of the Iran-Contra deal made the headlines, seemed to be particularly well-briefed on its details when speaking to his associates in Washington and around the Middle East. However, I have not been able to place him conclusively within one of the three main channels through which American-Iranian negotiations were flowing.

As a testament to Nader's abilities, he even managed to draw-in Hafez al-Asad, a man famously known for his restraint and guile. Asad would have seen through any huckster brought before him, but with Nader, he chose to engage. Landing Asad was Nader's biggest coup, and he got there by name-dropping left and right. He first got to Lebanon's Minister of Defense, Muhsin Dalloul, who, thinking that Nader was indeed connected to the shadowy world government forever conspiring against the Arabs, took him to the Syrian Army's Chief of Staff General Hikmet al-Shehabi, a man who was of the same mind as to the role of wicked global forces, which he thought would have to be accommodated so that the Syrian regime could survive and prosper. Al-Shehabi then took Nader to Asad. Asad, of course, was no febrile conspiracy theorist, but he quickly figured out that Nader could open doors in Washington and Jerusalem that were hitherto closed to him. Armed now with the possibility of liaising directly with Asad, possibly leading to normalizing relations between the United States and Syria, and maybe even achieving peace with Israel, Nader would unsurprisingly find many suitors. Uri Lubrani came back into the picture, and so did pro-Israel American philanthropist Ron Lauder who took it upon himself to bankroll this channel during the 1990s. But all throughout, Nader kept trying to land that even more elusive deal that would have the Iranians sitting across from the Americans. He may even have thought, and he was probably right to, that a thaw on that front would make Asad's journey towards peace with Israel more assured, given the latter's alliance with Iran.

These connections to the Iranians matter in Nader's case. There are too many loose ends and open questions for comfort. And those connections could be germane to his new career as counselor extraordinaire for Gulf royals. Back in 2005, a mutual friend had asked me to help Nader out during the latter's trip to Washington, with Ammar al-Hakim in tow. Nader was now brokering relationships for the family headlining the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). The CIA and State Department had built-up a relationship with the Hakims in the short period preceding the 2003 war, again as a way to work around Chalabi, just as they had done with the Kurds. SCIRI was even designated as one of the recipients of

funds congressionally mandated under the ILA. But the Hakims wanted to interact with higher-ranked officials rather than Agency handlers, to sell Washington on the idea that they would be worthy of taking the prime minister's slot in Baghdad, and that they could also establish back channels to the highest rungs of the Iranian leadership. This is where Nader comes in. His relationship with the Hakims began in late 2004 after finding his way into the confidences of Adel Abdel-Mahdi, the Hakims' candidate for PM, then serving as Iraq's Finance Minister. Nader then broke through into the inner sanctum of the family through Abdel-Mahdi's recommendation, convincing them that he could deliver in America.

Naturally, in 2005, I was curious to see how far the Hakims would go, and I did owe my friend plenty of favors. But something about Nader was not right. One meets all sorts of people in this line of work, yet there was something more to Nader than just being one among many shady middlemen, taking starry-eyed Middle Eastern bumpkins for a ride up to Capitol Hill. He exuded the nervous energy of someone who was expecting the police to beat down the door at any moment. So I went asking. I didn't have to look for long before I got this shocking answer: "Nader was compromised by the Iranians, and he had been locked up in Prague for eight months for soliciting an underage boy." I had no way of knowing whether it were true or not, but the answer was delivered assertively enough by a source whom I trust, so I had to give it credence. Afterwards, I asked Ammar al-Hakim whether he thought that Nader was the best conduit to get introductions in town. I said this in passing, as I was heading out the door of his hotel room. The young Hakim blocked my exit, beseeching me, "Tell me more, please, since we don't know much about him." Taken back by their carelessness, I responded, "it's your job to vet him before bringing him in—" but I stopped there because I glimpsed Nader walking up the corridor, so I bid my hurried goodbyes. I mused to myself then that the Hakims would not go far with such mediocrities running the show. In recent months, the Prague angle (the arrest occurred in 2003) and other aspects of his pedophilia going back to the 1980s have been revealed by the American press. But his relationship with the Iranians hasn't been fully explored. At the time when I was told these alarming things, the point was specifically made about Nader's very cozy relationship in the 1990s with Sadiq Kharrazi, an Iranian diplomat stationed at his country's United Nations mission in New York City, who happens to be the brother of Kamal Kharrazi, the Iranian Foreign Minister at the time. It is not a reassuring combination to have someone who was deprived in that particular way working closely with bad actors who could, and most certainly would, leverage that depravity against him. That is probably where the conjecture of "compromised by the Iranians" had gotten into some peoples' heads.

At the time of the visit, the Hakims were still part and parcel of Iran's designs on Iraq. In late 2006, the Hakim compound in Baghdad was raided by U.S. forces and two IRGC officers were arrested on its premises. This action came not two weeks after Ammar's father, Abdul-

Aziz al-Hakim, had met President George W. Bush at the Oval Office. Furthermore, Ammar was detained and humiliated at the Iranian-Iraqi border two months later, ostensibly on grounds of an expired passport, but more likely this was a stern message from the U.S. military to the Hakims warning them that their close association with the Iranians was not unnoticed. With the Iranians so involved, could it be possible that they had missed the spectacle of Nader worming his way into the Hakims' graces? Wouldn't some of the Iranian spooks handling this file have gone back to the archives to see what else may turn up on Nader? Wouldn't they have been asking, what had changed about Nader's fortunes that he was now forced to scrounge around for some advisory work in Baghdad after he had lived the high life of a jet setting mover and shaker?

Nader was also billing Eric Prince, of Blackwater notoriety, for consultancy services in Baghdad. That too was a role with high visibility to the Iranians. Not only that, but as the years passed, Nader expanded his political portfolio beyond the Hakims (he kept consulting for them until a year ago, when he was detained by the Mueller team). In 2009 he was arranging meetings for Nechirvan Barzani with the Nahyans and others in the Emirates—after Prince had vouched for Nader to Bin Zayed. He was also offering to arrange high-level meetings for the Kurds in Riyadh with top Saudi princes. By 2012 Nader had gotten so far into the weeds of the Iraqi political class that he was [brokering arms deals in Moscow](#) for Nouri al-Maliki's son, Ahmed. Again, the Iranians would have picked up on his movements in such circles, some of which, such as the ins and outs of Maliki's office, they would have considered within their sphere of influence. Not only that, but press reports, as well as a parliamentary inquiry, suggest that Nader was brokering the Moscow deal in partnership with another Lebanese fellow, Ali Taan Fayad. Fayad would be later indicted in 2014 by a New York court on all sorts of charges, including fronting for Hezbollah, and conspiring to kill Americans. He was arrested by DEA agents in Prague that same year but the U.S. could not have him extradited because 'someone' had abducted five Czech citizens in Lebanon two years later and wanted to trade them for Fayad. The Czechs sent Fayad back to Beirut. It has been suggested that the Obama administration looked the other way so as not to endanger its Iran deal. Some have disputed that Fayad was working the original Russian arms deal together with Nader, stating that his involvement was solely concerned with another deal involving Ukrainian-made arms, since Fayad, if press reports are to be believed, was close to former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich. (Oddly, his lawyer stated that Fayad was in Prague at the time of his arrest in April 2014 to meet Maliki in his capacity as an official Ukrainian envoy, but the last time Maliki had visited the Czech Republic was in 2012.) However, the Iraqi parliamentary investigation studied those claims and decided to keep Fayad as part of the official narrative linking him to Nader and to what was going on in Moscow. Again, if this were true, how is it that a Hezbollah front man would feel so comfortable doing business with Nader?

With all these threads leading back to the worst elements of the Iranian regime, how could a man such as Nader end up in the same picture frame as Kushner and Bin Salman? How could the Emiratis ever imagine that it was acceptable to send such a thoroughly disreputable person as their customer-facing intermediary with the bigwigs of the incoming Trump administration? Did they not vet him properly? Were they comforted that former, highest-clearance-cleared U.S. officials were partnering on consultancy gigs with him, suggesting that America's counter intel did not deem him turned? Did no one take Bin Zayed aside to tell him that a cloud of scandals was possibly following Nader around? Or did they know but were so brash and untouchable as to think they could get away with such sloppiness? Even if Nader was useful, no one in their right minds would give him so visible and high-profile a role. Especially not when they had other capable fixers (for example, Tom Barrack and Ziad Abdelnour) eager to place Gulf clients deep into Trumpian circles.

It seems that Nader did a lot of highly sensitive work for the Emiratis, including some of the coordination for their campaign against the Houthis in Yemen. Bin Zayed even brought him into the confidences of Bin Salman, and that seems to have been the genesis of the Islamic Alliance. In any well managed effort at geostrategic domination, one would think that the mere suggestion of Nader's long history with the Iranians should have compartmentalized him away from all the sensitive discussions. But he seems to have been in the thick of it, even reporting back to an American partner that Bin Salman and bin Zayed secretly snicker at Kushner behind his back, [calling him 'the Clown Prince'](#).

As more details about Nader dribble out in the press, choosing him as their front-man may well have poisoned the Saudi and Emirati relationship with Trump. Trump went from asserting that the Saudis and Emiratis "know exactly what they are doing" a year ago to denying Bin Zayed the opportunity (so far) of an Oval Office meet-up, and then cruelly putting Bin Salman in his place during his most recent visit to Washington. Sitting in front of the cameras, Trump help up placards showing what weapons the Saudis would be buying. The way he foisted the placard upon the prince, and the way Bin Salman flinched at the perceived humiliation, was not merely a Middle Easterner's overly sensitive and honor-obsessed reaction to a transgression against decorum. That particular stanza of body language is understood in most cultures, and it was clear that Trump knew perfectly well what he was doing when treating the prince as a prop. I concede that I may be reading too much into it, but then again, Trump is very mindful of choreography as he meets foreign leaders. The whole scene cannot be chalked up to chance or carelessness, and if it isn't, then it's been quite the backslide in the relationship from the time when Trump chose Riyadh as his first overseas destination as president.

*

*

*

In an interview with an American journalist, held during his recent three-week long public relations trip to the United States advocating for investments in his country, which began with his meeting with the president, Bin Salman recast his family's history as a start-up mercantile venture that eventually expanded into a state:

“The first Saudi state, why was it established? After the Prophet Muhammad and the first four caliphs, the people of the Arabian Peninsula went back to fighting each other like they did for thousands of years. But our family, 600 years ago, established a town from scratch called Diriyah, and with this town came the first Saudi state. It became the most powerful economic part of the peninsula. They helped change reality. Most other towns, they fought over trade, hijacked trade, but our family said to two other tribes, “Instead of attacking the trade routes, why don't we hire you as guards for this area?” So trade grew, and the town grew. This was the method. Three hundred years later, this is still the way. The thought was always that you need all the great brains of the Arabian Peninsula—the generals, the tribal leaders, the scholars—working with you. One of them was Muhammad ibn abd al-Wahhab.

“But our project is based on the people, on economic interests, and not on expansionist ideological interests. Of course we have things in common. All of us are Muslim, all of us speak Arabic, we all have the same culture and the same interest. When people speak of Wahhabism, they don't know exactly what they are talking about. Abd al-Wahhab's family, the al-Sheikh family, is today very well known, but there are tens of thousands of important families in Saudi Arabia today. And you will find a Shiite in the cabinet, you will find Shiites in government, the most important university in Saudi Arabia is headed by a Shiite. So we believe that we are a mix of Muslim schools and sects.”

Many across the Middle East were asking themselves whether the Islamic State indeed reflected, with its actions, the true nature of Islam. Many were repulsed by what they saw. Bin Salman may have come to think that now was the appropriate time to make a push for a less stringent application of religiosity. He keeps insisting that Islam in Saudi Arabia took a turn to

the extreme only after 1979, after the Islamic Revolution in Iran, and after the takeover of Mecca by millenarian radicals, and all that he is trying to do with his program for social liberalization is to turn the clock back to a mellower time, after that turn four decades ago had progressed to its inevitable ends, the horrors of a modern-day caliphate. As such, one can count Bin Salman's '2030 Vision' as yet another reverberation of the Islamic State's singularity.

The Saudi state is in its third realm. Its first was stamped out by Egyptian forces acting in the name of orthodoxy, deeming 'Wahhabism' a dangerous fountainhead of sedition. Bin Salman's ancestors made a miraculous comeback to establish the second Saudi realm but this time around it fell apart due to intrafamilial feuds and power struggles. His grandfather resurrected the family's fortune in an audacious recapture of the town of Riyadh, in 1902, and within three decades managed to expand his writ to control most of the Arabian Peninsula, declaring a kingdom in 1932. The standard histories have it that the foundation of the various Saudi states came about as a result of a pact fostered between the 'book and the sword', with the Saudi clan providing muscle in conjunction with Ibn Abdul-Wahhab's teachings, later upheld by his progeny, known since as the family of the 'Sheikh'. For Bin Salman to cast Ibn Abdul-Wahhab as one of the "great brains" among many, and to dismiss the al-Sheikh family as simply one of "tens of thousands of important families in Saudi Arabia today" is as eyebrow-raising as claiming that the venture was embarked upon to increase trade and raise living standards. Bin Salman even glossed over the complicated twists and turns of his family's relationship to the Shias, both inside Saudi Arabia and elsewhere, for one of their earliest 'regional' exploits was to wage a sectarian raid against Karbala in Ottoman Iraq (1801), massacring thousands, and to subsidize a publishing industry of hatred against Shias throughout the late 1970s until today that [paved the way](#) for the likes of al-Zarqawi. This is a re-write of history on a grandly brazen scale. Still, Bin Salman may get away with it, after all, rewriting history is usually the prerogative of a victorious autocrat. Except, he does not stand in the arena alone.

Perhaps the Crown Prince's most daring action so far occurred in early July when he had Safar al-Hawali arrested. But Bin Salman had to do it. Al-Hawali, bedridden for well-over a decade with chronic encephalitis, had thrown down the gauntlet between the Salafists and Wahhabists on one end, and the House of Saud on the other. His latest book leaked onto the internet in its unedited, rough draft. Dealing with the topic of Islam and the West, and rambling on for three thousand pages, al-Hawali had included a 300-page appendix titled 'The Third Advice is to the House of Saud'. The content is repetitive in places, and seems to have been the transcribed version of multiple streams of consciousness that the sheikh, who is in his early sixties, had uttered. Mixed in are old papers on judicial reform that he had authored. Before the arrest, I would have assumed that he was dead. He was no longer making waves, and was not being mentioned when his colleague and collaborator of yesteryear, Salman al-

Audah, was arrested on Bin Salman's orders over a year ago. Back in the mid-1990s, al-Hawali and al-Audah were the faces and voices of the Sahwa ('Awakening') generation of Wahhabi scholars; they were firebrands demanding reforms, which to their mind meant a stricter application of Wahhabi doctrine, both internally and in foreign relations. They were released in 1999, after their threat to the regime seemed to subside, and while al-Audah mellowed, al-Hawali remained hardline and intransigent, but both were at least willing to side with the regime against Al-Qaeda's attempt to launch a jihad within Saudi Arabia proper. Al-Hawali would chime in from now and then to warn against embracing the Shias, but for the most part, his star had dulled. He was still very respected by the clerical and the more religiously-minded volunteer networks, such as that of the influential Salafist summer camps, but it was assumed that his sickness had triumphed over his will to fight. Yet with this book and this appendix, al-Hawali came back in fighting form, and although jumbled, the message is at once pleasantly conversational and approachable for a general Saudi audience, hitting all the right notes, sprinkling his screed with granular, gossipy allusions and asides that would be familiar to many young Saudis shooting the breeze, all the while delivering a powerfully adamant and vicious threat to the royals. Stylistically, it by far superior to any of the staid and formulaic diatribes that Al-Qaeda or, in more recent years, the Islamic State had to say about Saudi Arabia. With his words, al-Hawali had punched in the secret code triggering a countdown towards delegitimizing Saudi rule, as beheld by Salafism, and in a way that to my mind is creative and hard to counter. Bin Salman had to answer al-Hawali's challenge by putting him, and reportedly his four sons, in shackles, but in doing so, the Crown Prince alerted me and thousands others to al-Hawali's continuing legacy, and all but ensured that thousands more would be downloading and sharing that secret code.

Al-Hawali's first salvo when providing 'advice' in his book is to remind the Saudi royals as to where their authority derives from, but then he deviously offers an alternate history for the flourishing and endurance of Salafism, one that is not beholden to them:

"...they deceive you [by saying] that the reason for terrorism is Ibn Taymiyyah and Wahhabism, and they stressed the importance of forsaking Ibn Taymiyyah as the West forsook Augustine! But forsaking Ibn Taymiyyah means forsaking the Quran and the Sunnah, since the Sheikh of Islam was but a proselytizer for them. And they call upon you to forsake the call of Sheikh Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab that is the source of the legitimacy of your rule, claiming that it is extremist and takfiri, yet Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab was but a module of Ibn Taymiyyah's."

I thought I was fairly proficient about Saudi history, but al-Hawali proceeds to highlight the roles of Salafist characters that historians had largely overlooked, or written out of the official version. In doing so, al-Hawali is putting the second and third realms of the Saudi states under something of a shadow, downplaying their centrality in the Salafist saga. He is also downgrading how much gratitude should be owed by the Salafists to the land of Nejd, which the House of Saud and Ibn Abdul Wahhab hail from, and to Nejdīs in general. Al-Hawali makes the case that the call propagated by Ibn Abdul Wahhab, which he and his colleagues consider to be the only brand of Salafism, although the term was applied to a myriad of other schools of thought, survived the demise of the first realm because it was kept alive by a non-Nejdi authority, in a land closer to where al-Hawali was born, to the southwest of the Arabian Peninsula. Al-Hawali proceeds to introduce the reader to those keepers of the Salafist flame, the House of ‘Aidh and its allegiant tribes, spanning the territories from Ta’if to Aden, and extending into parts of western Nejd too. Not only was this authority non-Nejdi, it could claim an illustrious pedigree, going all the way back to the Umayyads and hence to Quraysh. There, in their court, Salafism endured throughout, even during the time of the comeback then demise of the second Saudi realm. It is clear that al-Hawali is making a play for the sentiments of this regional constituency that incorporates such isolated and impoverished parts of the Peninsula that the people in some villages, according to him, still call upon Allah to render the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II victorious since they have not received word of a legitimate ruler since. It is not clear whether he is being flippant or serious here, but he does play up the regional angle in its service of Salafism, even citing a local boy and a hero to the Salafists, Ibn Sahman (1851-1930), hailing from a village near al-Hawali’s own, who was “a one man media machine” answering the detractors of Salafism during its bleakest times, and that for all that illustrious service the people of that region have given, they live today in abject poverty and suffer disenfranchisement. Al-Hawali also introduces more heroes into the pantheon of Salafism from beyond the scope of the Arabian Peninsula, citing the [scholar Birgevi as well as the Kadizadelis](#) of the Ottoman realms, together with those who answered the Salafist call in its early dawn in lands as far away as Java and Nigeria, Morocco and the Sudan.

Then he makes a play for the sentiments of another constituency, that of the migrants to the Arabian Peninsula. Recently, xenophobia has become a significant factor in Saudi political, economic and social discourse. Whether it is ‘indigenous’ Hejazis chaffing at the sartorial intrusions brought in by ‘newcomers’ that are now taken to be authentically Hejazi dress items, or the rabid incitement against Lebanese salesmen and Turkish barbers, demanding that they vacate those professions for out-of-work young Saudis, the kingdom’s social media is abuzz with those declaiming [who is and who isn’t a real Saudi](#). The authorities seem to be fine with it. No actions have been taken to muzzle the more extreme ‘nationalists’, or whatever this emerging form of nativist pride is supposed to mean in a Saudi context, not a few of whom are

prominent newspaper columnists. Al-Hawali steps in to argue that the Arabian Peninsula cannot, actually, allow such sentiments to take root, since the privilege of encompassing Mecca and Medina means that the land should be open to any Muslim to settle and be a part of, should he or she choose to do so. Clearly, he could be alienating some, but he probably assumes that they are lost anyways to Bin Salman's new creed. In return, he shall be winning over the multitudes who themselves, or whose ancestors, have migrated from Africa, India, Indonesia, Yemen and elsewhere, to the Peninsula and who are now being told that they do not really belong. It should be noted that over the last three years, up to three million residents of Saudi Arabia—some there legally, most illegally—have been forced to leave. Consequently, this potential constituency opens up many other parts of the globe for Salafism as those who were forced out or deported find solace and restitution in al-Hawali's welcoming words.

Al-Hawali's second gambit is to subtly downplay the 'miraculous' success of Ibn Saud. He does that by introducing and highlighting the role of Abdul-Karim al-Darwish, whom he effectively describes as the ideological commissar and spiritual guide of the Ikhwan movement. In fact, al-Hawali suggests that the Ikhwan movement preceded Ibn Saud, whom historians usually credit with its founding. The secret code here is driving the point that the Ikhwan, whose subsequent suppression by Ibn Saud after having used then discarded them, have a story, nay an ideology that is unique to them. They made Ibn Saud rather than the other way round, al-Hawali seems to insinuate, and at the center of his thesis is the resurrection of al-Darwish as a key figure in the early history of the Arabian Peninsula's twentieth century.

Rummaging through what scant accounts exist of al-Darwish's biography, one would immediately find that chroniclers of early Saudi Arabia could not even agree on his name, with some rendering it al-Maghribi, or 'Khudairi', or al-Mosuli and so on. Al-Darwish ('the dervish'), who earned his title later in life as a signifier of his austerity and piety, was born in Afghanistan. An Arab descent is proclaimed for him, returning him to the Bani Khalid, and Bani Makhzum, and hence he too was a Qurayshite in this telling. There may be something to that, since four centuries before he was born Tamerlane did take some of the Bani Makhzum in bondage from the outskirts of Damascus and dispersed them to Central Asia, from where they could have migrated to the Hindu Kush. Al-Darwish lived in the land of his birth well into his early forties, but seems to have been forced to flee due to his adoption of a Salafist-like creed that was too inconveniencing to his religiously-lackadaisical neighbors and relatives who eventually grew tired of his reprimands and chased him away.

Al-Darwish made it all the way to Mosul, hence one of his later identifiers being 'al-Mosuli'. He then found employment as a religious figure with the Sa'aduns, the Sheikhs of the Muntafiq, one of whose progeny, Abdul-Muhsin, was the prime minister mentioned above, the

one who committed suicide due to Jiyawook's harangues. Al-Darwish's stint in southern Iraq was either preceded or followed by another under the Arab Sheikhs of modern day Khuzestan in Iran, where those demonstrations over the salinity of the drinking water are breaking out, again, as mentioned earlier. The only problem is that having a neo-Salafist sheikh operating in a Shia environment such as the domains of the Sa'aduns or in Khuzestan, would invariably invite trouble. His sojourn in southern Iraq mirrors that of Ibn Abdel-Wahhab's, but in the latter's day Shi'ism was an urban phenomenon, extending in some cases to the extramural orchards, but was not numerically dominating and rural in character. By the time of al-Darwish's visit a century and a half later, many newly-settled tribes, who were wholly or semi-nomadic not two generations ago, had adopted Najaf as their lodestar, thus achieving a Shia majority in lower Mesopotamia. As it stands, it seems that al-Darwish actively sought trouble, and he had to flee again after waiting in ambush for and then fatally stabbing a Shia preacher who spoke ill of some of Muhammad's companions, one of the usual bones picked between Sunnis and Shias. Al-Darwish made his way to Mecca and then turned to roaming all around the Peninsula, spending much time in Nejd, even taking two wives there. He seems to have killed again, this time unintentionally after casting his walking stick at a slave girl who was singing near a mosque in the town of Ha'il.

It was on his various itineraries as a proponent for Salafism that al-Darwish pulled off what was tantamount to a miracle: he brought the nomadic tribes of the Peninsula into the folds of the true faith, first by settling them into villages called *hujar*, and then by giving them a creed to fight for: militant, expansionist, revivalist Salafism. The wild tribal leaders, who as far as the religious authorities at the time were concerned had no faith whatsoever, succumbed to al-Darwish's admonitions where his relatives didn't, and they rested their heads against his lap as he set about cutting off their thick mustaches with scissors, as al-Hawali floridly describes the scene. The sheikhs gave up their turf, and invited all those who would answer the call to settle around the water wells that they had guarded jealously, and fought over, for centuries. Tribalism broke down then disappeared, and a new society of brothers, doing the hard work of tilling the soil under Allah's watch, were bonded in worship, and jihad. This almost seems like the 'nation' that the first Barzanis created in their lands, but there was an important twist: al-Darwish, according to al-Hawali, "was inspired by the Islamic society of Medina [created by Muhammad] and not the city of God as established by Calvin in Geneva, or suggested by Augustine..." The new society was designed to spawn, or rather to respawn an empire, much in the same vein as the Zaraqawists in Iraq cited the early Medinese society as their blueprint. Here too, al-Hawali makes a radical claim in contravention to the official account by asserting that the first *hujar*, in Artawiya, was established in the early 1890s by the sheikhs of the tribe of Harb, when Ibn Saud was still a refugee in Kuwait, awaiting his opportunity to recapture Riyadh. The *hujar* then multiplied like mushrooms, eventually running up to two hundred in

number, with al-Darwish guiding them and setting down their utopian ethos, which al-Hawali describes as one that was totally egalitarian, much like the 'Asharites in the time of Muhammad. Al-Darwish had succeeded where the Communists and Socialists had failed, but "kolkhozes and kibbutzim were not the only socialist farms that failed to create an ideological society living on equality..." for capitalist ventures to sedentarize the Bedouin also failed, such as those attempted by the British in Iraq, "because [they] sought to create farmers who worshiped the soil and not the lord of the sky and the earth, missing [to lay] the foundation which is Allah's faith!" Under his guidance, the inhabitants of those 'communes' were burning to cleanse Iraq of the Shias, finishing up that stabbing spree that al-Darwish had started, as well as ridding Palestine of "terrorist Jewish gangs".

Al-Hawali laments that such a wonderful society was destroyed and forgotten, bemoaning present times whereby "such is the breakdown and [intellectual] impoverishment that it is meant for the grandchildren of the *hujar* today should join the grandchildren of the kolkhozes in placing their faith in the new faith: globalization and market economies!" Adding "we were created for jihad, and for confrontation, and not hiding..." and that the people of the Arabian Peninsula were chosen by Allah and "given the task of guiding the world out of the darkness, and leading them to the happiness of the [home on earth and home in heaven] and to teach them real freedom, for man can attain happiness and feel free only through enslavement to the one God." Al-Hawali counsels the House of Saud that "we are not a beggarly nation in the market of global ideas, in fact we have a history and experiences that no other nation on earth possesses, and it is enough if we study it, not needing to copy anyone else's thought." The royals would be foolish to think that a nation that has been promised mastery of the entire world would "turn into a flock of softies, whose only concerns are supporting football teams, or watching channels, or novels, and newspapers and websites, that enflame lust and base instincts, [since] this is a failing policy and a bad bet." "[Ours] is a unique nation," al-Hawali states, and "our pride are those two *haramain* [the 'sanctuaries' of the Ka'aba in Mecca and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina] that have no match neither in the West nor the East, and the whole world needs Islam and we don't need another religion or a different culture," especially as the rest of the world is turning to religion during these times. The founders of the *hujar* did not fight alongside Ibn Saud to expand trade, and they certainly never meant for the type of social liberalization being spearheaded by his grandson these days.

Take some advice from a local guy rather than for-hire foreign advisors, such as McKinsey & Company, al-Hawali counsels the royals: "This advice I write to you while you are on the precipice of a massive social change, establishing the fourth Saudi realm...but Allah's vengeance will fall upon you if you join the vessel of secularism to placate America, Israel and the Emirates." Al-Hawali couches the current struggle as one between monotheism and polytheism, and "secular encroachment must be repelled with all force." The first stirrings of

the Ikhwan rebellion occurred the same year al-Darwish died, around his centenarian birthday, in 1926, when they ignored Ibn Saud's order and attacked an Iraqi border outpost in Bassiyeh south of Samawa (incidentally, this is the same stretch of barren desert where thousands of Barzani males were killed and buried in mass graves in 1983). There are several interpretations for what happened, and unfortunately the account as to the Ikhwan's thinking on these matters was not preserved or chronicled by their own, however, I think the Ikhwan were demonstrating that they intended to take their Salafist revolution further afield in the Middle East, and would not recognize these new borders divvying up the lands of Islam, assigning them to nation states. And for most of Saudi history since the founding of the Kingdom, the main peeves of the Ikhwan and later manifestations of their stringency, even the more recent jihadist challenges, was a dispute with the royals over foreign affairs and how to deal with foreigners. Local matters of interpretation, such as how to react to novelties like the telegraph, or television, or modern banking, and the process of legislating laws, and so on sparked a few flashes of wrath and disruption here and there. But never has the gulf between royals and clerics on local issues been tested as by the social engineering now underway, and this, the audacity—even having the temerity to question whether shops should be closed during prayer times—by which Bin Salman is reworking history and society, is what is incurring al-Hawali's ire, and why he had decided to write with such clear rebuke, even disdain to his rulers:

“The crux of the matter is that religion is the source of legitimacy for the Saudi regime, and those who established the Saudi state were not secularists or liberals or modernists or [Shias] or Isma'ilis, and there was no Christian or nationalist or modernist or cuckold [among them], but it was founded by the people of religion and it was said that the tribe that entered into authority had become religionized, for religion is the foundation and it is the unifier...and what will reform this state is what formed it at the beginning...”

Al-Hawali has plenty to say about what he thinks is wrong with Saudi foreign policy too, but interestingly, he couches his explanations in terms of the senility and decay of the royal house, citing Ibn Khaldun's cycles to suggest that this generation of Ibn Saud's grandchildren have reached the stage whereby dynasties wither, and become enfeebled, both mentally and physically. The Saudi royals are being taken for fools by President Trump, who deems them a “cow worthy for milking”. Ibn Saud, when striking a deal with the Americans, was acting wisely, for “America then, was as harmless as Norway today, [presenting] nothing to fear, for the Zionists had not infiltrated it to the degree as they have done today.” Al-Hawali believes

the Saudis need to cut off relations with the United States immediately because of the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act (JASTA), which he takes particular umbrage with. But the self-inflicted humiliations keep accruing, he argues: “The billions taken by Sisi did not budge him from a position of supporting Bashar [Asad], and not participating in the Arab Alliance, but even worse it has been verified that he sends weapons to the Houthis, and the same thing goes for the Lebanese Army that is controlled by the rejectionist Hezbollah, and you are wagering a losing bet on the Future Movement, and your policies in the Gulf too, for you have made Qatar, Kuwait and Oman leap into Iran’s bosom and now Iran’s main port is Dubai...You are bolstering Iranian policy and awarding [the Iranians] free gifts, especially when trying to normalize with Israel, whilst Iran’s slogan and that of its proxies is (Death to Israel, Victory for Islam) and that makes millions of Muslims believe them!” Al-Hawali is against placating the Shias in Iraq, “who tried to assassinate [Thamir] al-Sabhan”, while he wants Saudi foreign policy to turn conciliatory towards Hamas, Erdogan and the Muslim Brotherhood. His opinion of the Emiratis is disdainful and severe: “they are not your friends”. Saudi Arabia must quit Yemen, as well as the United Nations and the Arab League. The fight against Iran should be declared plainly as a fight against Shi’ism, and the Shias inside the Peninsula are not to be trusted as Saudi ‘citizens’ since there is no differentiation between Persian or Arab Shi’ism—both are equally despicable and treacherous. But mostly, al-Hawali aims to thwart any attempt to find common ground with the Israelis, even if such an ‘alliance’ was directed against Iran, since the Jews will forever be the enemy, one that needs to be fought by all means, and in the very least, there must be sympathy and support for the Palestinians, for “Are not the Arabs of Palestine the same as the Arabs of Ahvaz?” He even suggests that the kingdom needs to exercise its own innate martial destiny when proposing ventures such as the Islamic Alliance, since the “youth of these lands are more reliable than the mercenaries of Blackwater and importing armies from Egypt or Pakistan.”

Al-Hawali goes further, much further, even bordering on deliberate insolence. It is not enough that he discusses a taboo topic such as the feuds and embitterment within the royal house, but he even mentions in passing scandals such as Bander bin Sultan being considered an illegitimate child by other princes. It is neither enough that he proposes that the name of the state be changed to the ‘United Islamic Kingdom’ since a nation cannot be named after a family, with the uncomfortable suggestion that Ibn Saud illegitimately fathered anyone who calls himself a Saudi. He even places the decision to go with the name Saudi Arabia as one taken by a Druze, a member of a religious community of unbelievers as far as the Salafists are concerned. He goes on to argue that authority does not lie with the princes alone, but is shared by the princes in conjunction with the scholars. But all this needling is for naught, since al-Hawali dares to fundamentally undo Saudi legitimacy by pointing out that there are not descended from Quraysh, while in Islam rulership is confined to the Qurayshites. He even

muses that the Ottomans may have been Qurayshites, but the House of Saud clearly isn't. Now, if they want to avoid the pitfall of being branded Kharijites—the same moniker that Saudi propaganda wields against the jihadists, since the Kharijites did not acknowledge Qurayshite supremacy—then the House of Saud must abdicate the throne in favor of a Qurayshite contender, and there are many to choose from, but preferably the choice should fall upon one who is both a Qurayshite and a scholar. Al-Hawali reassures the House of Saud that he has no aspiration to rule in their stead, primarily since he was not a Qurayshite either.

Otherwise, the royals must declare that they are not Imams, so that the rules that instruct Muslims as to what to do in the absence of an imam can be enacted. Al-Hawali also introduces another little-known Qurayshite 'hero' from early Salafist history, Khalid bin Mansour Ibin Lu'ay al-'Abdali, who answered the Salafist call and fought against his own clan and their interests to uphold the true faith. From the general tone of his writing, I have a suspicion that al-Hawali already has a Qurayshite candidate who meets the requirements hoped-for in a future ruler of the 'United Islamic Kingdom'—this book was no mere kneejerk reaction through long-winded verbiage, there seems to have been more real-world planning to it. It should be noted here that the Islamic State's caliphate managed to bring the issue of Qurayshite descent back in vogue, by highlighting its own caliph's proper lineage and stressing the issue of legitimacy. A few decades ago, when Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi was penning a diatribe against the House of Saud, their non-Qurayshite handicap was hardly mentioned, but here we have al-Hawali making it the centerpiece of his argument. Yet another matter dredged up by the pull of the singularity.

What al-Hawali has done is absolutely risqué in a Saudi setting, and he knew perfectly well what beacon he was kindling with such disrespect. It was almost as if he was daring Bin Salman to arrest him, so that al-Hawali would bear the cross of Salafism, and go down in history either as its rejuvenator, or its martyr. I think Bin Salman has a big problem on his hands. Al-Hawali is no mere polemicist, or revisionist historian, or a has-been star preacher craving the limelight. He seems to be in the thick of an amorphous, little understood, yet highly influential network: a Salafist 'Internationale'. The last I had heard of him was his pronouncement, in 2007, that al-Zarqawi's heirs had gone too far with their proto-caliphal 'Islamic State of Iraq', and that they must be fought and defeated. Al-Hawali had been a vocal supporter of the jihad in Iraq, but he deemed that trying to jump-start the caliphate prematurely and startlingly as Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and his ilk had done would endanger the overall Salafist plan, and it would effectively "kill the objective by choosing such means," as he allegedly put it. His edict provided the clarity, gravitas and funds that other Salafist groups such as the Islamic Army, the Mujahidin Army, as well as segments of the Ansar al-Sunnah, needed to wage war against the Zarqawists in 2007-9, almost breaking their back.

There is not much in the public domain on this supra-Salafist network. I doubt that the various international and regional intelligence agencies involved have studied the evidence adequately either. The network presents itself within the blurry parts of the narrative that analysts use in describing the jihadist trajectory, in episodes that we still don't have good answers for, or sufficient lucidity about, such as exactly how did al-Zarqawi get to Iraq from Afghanistan, or what really went down when the jihadists abducted the Iranian Consul in Baghdad, or even who killed off Abdul-Aziz al-Qatari and threw his body down a well in northern Syria. I described the network in a [recent book review](#) as such:

Zarqawi's sojourn in Baghdad, as well as that of al-Muhajir's, prior to the advent of the war, and the establishment of the Rawah camp after it, suggest to me that a pan-Middle Eastern Salafist jihadist supra-network was seeding Iraq with jihadists. This network does not seem to be dogmatically or exclusively beholden to Al-Qaeda, and was open to working with any jihadist who came armed with references. It seems to have operated from several Gulf states. The network made introductions, provided funds and sent those jihadists to be absorbed by existing Salafist jihadist networks inside Iraq, for example, in Zarqawi's case, that constellation of Palestinian families in the Baladiyyat neighborhood. It is unclear to me whether this network acted strategically, assuming that Iraq would become a battleground for jihad after the Americans arrived, or whether its actions were premised on the convenience of having trusted networks within Baghdad that could provide sanctuary to jihadists on the run from regional intelligence agencies in the wake of 9/11. The added benefit seems to be that the Baghdad networks could operate or at least provide sanctuary without being exposed or harassed by the Iraqi regime's own security services, not by way of collaboration but rather because the regime was worrying about other threats, namely its imminent demise should a war erupt. This network would have acted as an 'angel investor' in the world of jihad, seeding the terrain with men and resources and seeing what sprouts later. Interestingly, this model seems to fit the manner by which Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's ISI, as well as Al-Qaeda and a multiplicity of other Salafist jihadist networks, behaved at the early onset of the Syrian uprising, placing many bets on disparate networks, then watching which one got ahead, as was the ISI's case with al-Nusra, and perhaps with al-Qatari's Jund al-Aqsa.

Whether this network existed or not represents a gap in the narrative. There isn't enough content in the public record at this point to confirm or dismiss the hypothesis. These sorts of gaps blur the prevailing narrative, and we can identify at least a dozen or so episodes of equal importance. The fact that this network is understudied, for example, casts a shadow on our understanding of how the jihad was jumpstarted in Iraq, and perhaps even in Syria. It may even tell us something about where next it shall place its seedlings in its next iteration.

Let's suppose that this network does exist, and that al-Hawali continues to be one of its pillars. If so, what message did it receive with the publication of his book, or his subsequent arrest? Did it signify to the Salafist Internationale that matters in Saudi Arabia have gone beyond redemption and that it is high time for action? What will it do about it? What resources can its facilitators marshal inside Saudi Arabia? The prospect that this network may put Saudi Arabia in play, seeding it with jihadist start-ups as it did in Iraq and Syria, while we have such limited visibility into its working, precisely because no one wanted to ask such uncomfortable questions in Riyadh, or Doha, or Kuwait City, or Abu Dhabi in the preceding decades, should be terrifying to those paying attention.

Saudi Arabia does not care whether Qatar bankrolls the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), or whether the Qataris provide the Brethren with a media platform. The Emiratis may worry about the local branch of the MB, but this matter was never of much concern to the Saudis. Maybe they played it up as a way of winning over the Israelis by beating up on Hamas. What the Saudis actually do care about, and what got them very worried at one point, was Qatar's persistent tinkering in the Salafist milieu, subsidizing them in places such as Egypt, Syria and Libya, after Salafism-for-export having been the exclusive enterprise of the Saudis for decades. Suddenly, the Salafists had an option for seeking sanctuary, funds and world-class logistics in Doha, and having not to rely as much on Riyadh. The Saudis began noticing how game-changing this shift had been, with them losing control over multiple Salafist networks, as happened with the advent of the Arab Spring. I suspect that the Salafist Internationale consciously took the Qataris up on their offer of assistance, in part to diversify their options, and as preparation for the day when the Salafists may make a bid for Saudi Arabia itself. I fear that with al-Hawali's beacon now lit, that process is actually underway. One can add them to the Al-Qaeda and IS jihadists who have been trying to kindle jihad in Saudi Arabia too. One wonders how much strain the system can take. One need no longer wonder, though, whether Bin Salman is up to the challenge, not after the track record he has had so far. I have a hunch that the story of this network, and what fate it decides for the Saudi royals, shall be a rather important one in the Middle East over the next few years.

*

*

*

“I just adore Sultan Abdul Hamid—he stood up to the Jews!” So proclaimed a precocious twelve year-old girl to me last December, in Baghdad. She was perched excitedly at the end of a sofa, mimicking the effusive and eloquent mannerisms of her father—a dear friend—who was sitting at the sofa’s other end, nodding approvingly at his daughter, more to her performance than opinion. Her ancestors had held the keys to the Ka’aba since before Muhammad’s time, a tradition that al-Hawali stresses in his treatise must remain inviolate, holding the House of Saud indirectly responsible for a ‘scandal’ that occurred back in 2013, when a Qatari rally driver, who is married to a famous Emirati singer, was invited to participate in the annual washing of Islam’s holiest structure, to the chagrin of the Salafists who considered that invitation a direct contravention of Muhammad’s decree that only the Bani Shaybeh are to be in sole control of custodial matters. When subsections of the Bani Shaybeh clan came to Iraq, they took over the custodianship of the Shia shrines, in some instances turning Shia too. The girl’s great-great-great-great-grandfather was also the great-grandfather of worldwide Shiism’s acknowledged Grand Ayatollah during the 1960s. Her great-grandfather had been one of the leaders of the *jihad* movement against the British as they crept up towards Baghdad from Basra during World War I. Three decades earlier he had managed to gain an audience with Abdul Hamid II in Istanbul where he argued that custodianship over the Kadhimain shrine should be withdrawn from his cousin and bestowed on him instead. A great-uncle, through her father’s maternal line, served as one of four Shias ever to hold the prime minister’s post during the monarchical era, and he did so as a moderate liberal. When the country’s urban society split between leftist and rightist camps in the 1950s and 1960s, her family veered right with some providing muscle for Arab Nationalist death squads. Her family lore, fond as it may have been of the circumstances by which their forbearer got his job, could have precipitated that adoring opinion of hers regarding the long dead sultan, but it would have been at odds with their latterly adopted ideology: schoolbooks across the Middle East, from Baghdad to Damascus to Beirut to Cairo, infused as they were with Arab Nationalism, had summarized the Ottoman era to generations of children as “four centuries of darkness and backwardness.” When Abdul Hamid II was mentioned in those pages, he was still cast in the same terms used by the coup conspirators who overthrew him: a murderous tyrant who had abrogated the constitution, and weakened the realm of Islam. But the girl was taking her historical cues from an alternate, newer source: she had been watching many Turkish soaps, some of which moved on in recent years from depicting family squabbles

amid hopelessly tragic romances, set against the opulent exquisiteness of Istanbul, to an exercise in historical revision, playing up Turkic and Ottoman munificence to the Islamic cause. It seems to be working.

She excitedly endorsed a new series about the life of Abdul Hamid, recommending that I should watch it. She had seen something online that indicated that the Turkish show would be dubbed into Arabic and broadcast on one of the more popular entertainment satellite channels, airing the show's first season in late February. I had read a piece about this show, *Payitaht* ('Capital City'), and how personally invested Erdogan had been in its production, but I did not give it much thought. However, my friend's daughter alerted me to how these altered historical perceptions were playing out in real time. Her father can (and does) regale her with hundreds of anecdotes from her family's history about the more subtle aspects of one's proximity to power, as well as its application. Hers is a rich tradition that theoretically mitigates against neatly packaged revisionist narratives. For example, it may alert her that there could be more of a backstory to the sultan's dealings with the 'Jews'. She was also smart and erudite (she was recounting incidents from Abdul Hamid's reign to the month and year; she even knew his mother's name!) so one would assume she can mediate between multiple narratives. But this was clearly not happening in this anecdotal case, and I suspect it is a much wider phenomenon: my friend's daughter is far more influenced by a soap opera than by her own family's precepts.

This tension between the new and the old is a perpetual condition. Running parallel to this condition is a process of mediation, keeping the peace, and more or less accommodating the new by reconfiguring parts of the old. During relatively stable times, the reconfigured old tales and the new ones would anchor the young in place, making their thoughts, reactions and actions predictable, or at least confining them within a certain radius, orbit or trajectory. Within that space, individuals and societies can interact with measured confidence, knowing where they came from and to where they can expect to go, thus ameliorating the zealotry and overreaction of the rootless and insecure. Soviet author Fazil Iskander, writing about his Abkhazian roots in *The Goatibex Constellation* (1966), put it succinctly so:

Even though I seldom visited my grandfather's house it helped me from afar by its very existence. The smoke from its hearth, the generous shade of its trees—everything about it made me bolder and more self-confident. I was almost invulnerable because a part of my life, my roots, lived and thrived in the mountains. And when a man is aware of his roots and has some sense of continuity in his life, he can direct it more wisely and generously. And it is harder to rob or deprive him, because not all of his wealth is carried on his person.

Yet at times the balance turns lopsided, and the parallel process that stabilizes societies cannot match the vortex of dislocation. New narratives take hold, some even re-inventing and re-imagining the past in ways that may at first seem ludicrous, but they eventually manage to disrupt and supplant the old, to attach themselves to the public's sense of self, and to inform. This is where it can get dangerous. The weaker the tethering in older narratives and norms—call it 'deep structures' or 'contained systems' or what have you; ranging from a faded echo of a cultural and societal remembrance, akin to that faded palimpsest; to an overt, established guild that still secures the livelihoods of a neighborhood but slowly giving way to an emerging competitor; to memories of a summer spent at the family's village home such as Iskander's—and the stronger the pull of the 'new', such as the jihadists' singularity that alerted other actors to the possibilities of terra incognita, the more emboldened all sorts of gamblers get. Those gamblers will make a go for it, almost concurrently, constructing new tales, and increasing narrative entropy. A cascade of adventurism ensues, with multiple dreamers striking out to pursue radical visions of 'new societies', taking all into the dense thickets of the unknown. I believe that this is the process roiling the Middle East today. This is the immediate future awaiting that precocious 12 year-old girl.

It just so happened that I was travelling back to Washington on a Turkish Airlines flight and one of the in-seat entertainment options were a dozen or so episodes of *Payitaht*. The episodes run to two hours, with two dozen per season, and the show is due for a third season. I have always regarded Abdul Hamid with a measure of sympathy. His loneliness—he would make a pretense of going to fake cafes on his palace grounds, and pay for his coffee as the establishment's solitary customer—his neuroses and paranoia, his relationship with Pertevniyal Sultan, the necromancy-obsessed 'witch' of the royal harem who had subsidized the Talabani *tekya*, his skills as a carpenter, all these traits serve to flesh out a character that was, arguably, the most important ruler of the Middle East in its last two and a half centuries. So much of what we see today in the region (save for Iran and its civilizational orbit) can be traced to events or disruptions concurrent with his thirty-three yearlong reign. Interesting as his personality and era were, the show, however, is radically licentious with that legacy—I was not prepared for what I watched unfold in the episodes that I picked at random.

Payitaht is a perfectly-concocted toxic cocktail of every conspiracy theory that has disconcerted the Middle East over the last century. I don't want to give away any spoilers, but one simply needs to consider a scene whereby Zionist leader Theodor Herzl, Greek-Russian arms dealer Basil Zaharoff, and Istanbul's Armenian Patriarch are orchestrating the takeover of the Ottoman Bank by Armenian 'terrorists' from their headquarters in a shabby, abandoned workshop. This scene is total fiction, without even the pretense of coloring within factual outlines. Herzl was likely spending his time between Munich and Paris on August 26, 1896,

when the takeover went down, and not at a hideout in the Ottoman imperial capital. But what if his diary entries for those days in August had been deliberately forged to mask his scheming ways, a conspiracy-divining sleuth may say? Add the shadowy Communist operator Alexander 'Parvus' Helphand to the mix, with a few takes of Queen Victoria succumbing to a powerful coma-inducing sedative administered by one of Abdul Hamid's agents, as well as the machinations of the French, the Freemasons, and the Vatican, one gets the sense of how deep the plot goes. Abdul Hamid comes off as a Middle Easterner's fantasy of a just, stern caliph, a perfect and pious strongman, yearning for resurrecting the glory of Islam in the face of a myriad of Western and internal forces seeking to undermine him. Yet nothing about his portrayal reflects what chroniclers, as well as tailored suits preserved under museum glass at Yildiz Palace, have told us about the real man's girth, height, features, or even his languorous drawl. Prince Sabahettin, the leader of the liberal opposition, whose mother was Abdul Hamid's half-sister, and to whose faction Jiyawook, the author of the *Tragedy of Barzan*, had gravitated while studying in Istanbul, is cast as the villain along with his father, another one of the conspirators meeting up at the workshop with Herzl *et al.* It was during Abdul Hamid's reign that the first vestige of political life, in a modern sense, had presented itself at the very beginning of his reign, and near its very end. But Abdul Hamid would brook no dissent, not even from his nephew. The show's producers glorify the model, that of the absolutist autocrat, one who succeeds in outflanking the traitors, the dissemblers, the cynics, the cowards, and the hypocrites, by sheer will and merciless tenacity, guided as he is by a divine and historical ordination. It is as if to say that politics allowed for those conspiratorial machinations, and that to end the chicanery seeking to damage one's sovereign realms, political space must be shut down. This is exactly the model strived for by Erdogan, along with Soleimani, and Bin Salman, and Masood, and many others. Only then can the real work begin, the work of building new, just societies. I was watching it and thinking to myself: this can't be countered. The audiences of the Middle East are already primed for so lascivious an orgy of historical retelling.

It was a small mercy that the Qatar crises spilled over to further strain Turkish relations with the Saudis and Emiratis, who in a fit of pique have discontinued running Turkish soaps on their channels, preventing *Payitaht* from being shown to Arabic-speaking audiences this year. The Turkish-Gulf harangues even veered into historical reconsiderations of the Ottoman era, such as the case of the empire's last governor in Medina, who was accused recently on Twitter of committing atrocities and looting antiquities a century ago, an accusation that irritated Erdogan, prompting him to retort, last December, that it was Arab betrayal that truly weakened the caliphal throne—a common Turkish lament. However, even though they have not been dubbed and aired, all the episodes of *Payitaht* are available on YouTube with well-written Arabic subtitles, and judging by the number of views accrued already, it seems that

they have reached a wide audience as it is. The series was further promoted to an Arabic-speaking audience through multiple interviews with one of its producers, a Syrian born and raised great-great grandson of Abdul Hamid's, speaking with a melodious Damascene accent.

The people of Baghdad had rejoiced when Abdul Hamid was overthrown, in no small measure because the officer leading the charge on the sultan's palace was born and raised among them. Abdul Hamid's network of spies, many of them Circassian refugees (Circassians still figure disproportionately in the intelligence services of Turkey and Jordan) should have kept better tabs on Mahmud Shawkat Pasha. Maybe he passed for a Circassian or a Chechen and was as such given a pass by sympathetic spies (he would later in life set up a charity for destitute Circassian and Chechen refugees). Yet there was too much about his background suggesting a motive for sedition. His grandfather had been a high level clerk in the service of the Georgian rulers of Baghdad. It is unclear whether he was himself Georgian or a Circassian, but his progeny identified with the Georgians, especially when the latter were defeated in 1831—after having ruled Baghdad for seventy years—as the Ottomans reasserted their authority and sought to centralize administration throughout all their realms, which led also to the quashing of the last Kurdish emirate as we had seen above. An Ottoman governor was appointed for Baghdad with the task of purging all the vestigial legacies of Georgian rule; Mahmud's grandfather and father were swept up by the purges and exiled. They ended up for a while in Diyarbakir, but the father, who later on takes up the pen as a historian, found employment as an administrator yet again in Baghdad, serving for a while under the aforementioned reformer Midhat Pasha. Mahmud joined his father as they tried their luck in Istanbul, especially with Midhat Pasha about to take charge of the empire as Grand Vizier. Mahmud enrolled in the capital's military academy in 1876. But two years later, his father was implicated in Ali Suavi's coup attempt against Abdul Hamid, and was exiled to Rhodes as part of the measures that put an end to the first constitutional period. The father later returned to Baghdad to write [several histories of the Georgians](#) in Iraq, as well as the first historical account of the Muntafiq federation that the al-Sa'aduns had dominated. Mahmud proceeded on to a military career, with stints in France and Germany, learning about the newest martial technologies, and getting assigned to various posts around the empire. He was serving as the commanding general of the Third Army when news came from Istanbul that reactionaries had revolted and put an end to the second constitutional period, and that Abdul Hamid was again ruling as an autocrat.

At some point, Mahmud Pasha gathered his men, consisting of regular military men and volunteers, and administered a sermon. I imagine the setting to be similar to that of Soleimani's pep talk at Albu Kamal. Mahmud said, "Payitaht is waiting for us, us the army, to assist it!" Adding that Abdul Hamid—"that Byzantine owl"—was a "human-like monster who stains the memory of the glorious 600 year old ancestry of this nation!" This homily was

rediscovered as an audio recording, capturing the general's gravelly voice, only a few years ago. The 111 year old recording can be listened to on YouTube too, but its viewership numbers are modest compared to *Payitaht*, and there is no Arabic translation of it. I do not know whether a young officer called Mustafa Kemal, later going by 'Ataturk', got to hear the speech firsthand. He was involved in the coup under Mahmud's command, albeit indirectly, and though he would play-up his role in later retellings, what is certain is that Ataturk was deeply influenced by what he was beholding then, and it would have demonstrated to him what one man can do, what one individual agency can accomplish, under the right circumstances, and with sufficient gumption, especially at a time of massive breakdown. It is doubtful whether there would be a 'Turkey' had it not been for those initial experiences. After deposing Abdul Hamid and installing the sultan's half-brother in his stead, Mahmud was made Minister of War, and then a few years later served at the highest rung of the state, as head of the imperial cabinet, for six months until he was assassinated. He has been credited with many reforms, including establishing an air force, and introducing the first automobile to the streets of Istanbul. He was riding in one of those automobiles when assassins surrounded his carriage with revolvers drawn and riddled it with bullet holes. The vehicle can be viewed at Istanbul's Military Museum today, parked in its own wing.

I doubt whether many twelve years girls and boys in Baghdad have ever heard of Mahmud Shawkat Pasha, the local boy who made it big in the capital city. Which is odd since his family remained prominent in the politics of monarchical Iraq; the reflected glory of their ancestry and the exploits of their menfolk kept them in political currency, and they kept marrying well. Certainly, one would have expected them to keep his memory current. Mahmud's younger brother even became prime minister for little less than a year in 1936, as a result of the Arab world's first military coup (conducted by a Kurdish officer, as described above). A niece married into a family of contested Circassian or Arab ancestry that had also been prominent during the Georgian interlude too. Her husband, whose grandfather was the commander of the Janissaries in Baghdad under the Georgians, was himself a member of the Ottoman parliament, representing Baghdad, when he died in 1915. Their three sons became some of the principal advocates for Arab Nationalism in Iraq, one of whom also became prime minister. Another, Sami Shawkat, a military officer and later Minister of Education, gave a famous speech titled 'The Industry of Death' in the early 1930s that described modeling proto-fascist 'scouts' along the lines of the *futuwwa*, a mystical and revivalist Baghdad-based brotherhood that flourished in the thirteenth century, to serve as the foot soldiers of an Arab national revival (his family's janissary roots may have instilled his penchant for such displays of militarism). These played an important role in the 1941 coup that nearly took Iraq fully into the Axis camp. Their esprit de corps carried into later radical Arab Nationalist groups such as some of the officers who finally tore down the monarchy, as well as the Ba'athists who came to

power in later coups. In many ways, the Shawkat family was as prominent a Baghdadi family, especially a Sunni and Arab Nationalist one, as one could find. Last May, Sami Shawkat's grandson ran as the fourth listed candidate on Muqtada al-Sadr's slate in Baghdad. That grandson, Mudhar Shawkat, is an eloquent man who can carry himself with a gangster's confident swagger. He can reflect the full trappings of leadership—especially the touch of 'strongman-ness' that usually impresses Iraqis—and has been saying some eye-brow raising stuff in favor of outright Sunni federalism over the last four years. He also has a PhD and had established several businesses in Canada to varying success. His name was bandied about as one of the most prominent Sunni figures during the opposition days, especially by the Agency and by State as a foil against Chalabi, until such time as Chalabi managed to win him over right before the war, and then had him fill in occasionally as his alternate on the Governing Council. He is also independently wealthy, having worked, early on after the Saddam regime fell, to find a foothold in the lucrative cell phone business—sometimes actually fighting for 'market share' with bullets and RPGs. Shawkat can dial-up a wide array of regional contacts; I remember how he came to Chalabi, hours after the pair had arrived in Baghdad at long last, still caked with dust from the journey up from Nassiriya, with a satellite phone in hand: the UAE's Mohammad Bin Zayed was on the line to be the first Arab leader to congratulate Chalabi on bringing down Saddam. Shawkat was now being featured notably as one of two prominent Sunnis on al-Sadr's slate, lending the imprint of post-sectarianism as much as including the Communists was supposed to convey. Yet he only garnered under two thousand votes. Why would Sunnis, especially those of Baghdad, hungry as they were for a credible and confident leadership, pass up on his candidacy, one propped up by familial legitimacy and an impressive political and professional CV? Why did that reflected glory that had sustained Mahmud Pasha's relatives for decades lose its luster?

We tried to prepare for the day after liberation. At least in the INC, we were cognizant that the new Iraq would have to win over the Sunnis, to entice them with buy-in, and make room for them and their views as political life got restarted in Baghdad. We went looking for men like Shawkat and Sheikh Ali al-Dahham, that 'Ubaid chieftain I mentioned. We compiled lists of the still-living scions of the leading families of Baghdad and Mosul. We studied the tribal and clan dynamics from Ramadi to Samara to Mahawil to Al-Mada'in to Khalis, the areas ringing Baghdad, trying to identify what was authentic, and hence to our mind enduring, and what had been fabricated as part of the ancien regime's tribal policies. We figured out who the 'clean' merchants, businessmen, contractors and industrialists still in operation were, to substitute for the regime's ethically-compromised nouveau riche as reconstruction got going. We drew up lists of the top civil servants who owed their rise to merit and not to an apparatchik's obedience and obsequiousness; we stapled those to yet more lists of Sufi sheikhs or mainstream clerics descended from the old learned families. And many of them

enthusiastically showed up to the Hunting Club, the INC's initial HQ, at the ready to be part of this new venture. Yet decades of totalitarian rule had taken its toll. These notables, on paper, or whose fathers and grandfathers had been notable, were notable no longer—they weren't even remembered. Saddam Hussein had made sure of it, slowly breaking down the old networks and linkages that held Sunni society together, that is, any part of the older structures that existed independent of his rule. He set about smashing every one of them, and what we found in 2003 was that he had thoroughly succeeded.

As part of the first cabinet formed under the auspices of the Governing Council, Chalabi got to suggest a candidate for the post of Minister of Finance. He chose Kamil al-Gailani, the grand-nephew of the man who led the 1941 pro-German coup, someone who had never left Iraq, who was also distantly related to the first Prime Minister of the country. The family had led the urban landscape of Sunni Baghdad for centuries from their stronghold, adjacent to their ancestor's tomb, which had also become one of the Kurdish neighborhoods of Baghdad, renamed to reflect the name of the saint (Bab al-Sheikh) rather than its historical name of Bab al-Azj. But that gesture of a ministerial appointment did not take. The first president picked for the new Iraq was a scion of the chieftains of the Shammar tribe near Mosul, who was close to the Saudi royals as well—that too did not take. It was very hard to figure out a formula by which to convince Sunnis that they were not being disenfranchised, that to be part of the new Iraq they can reinvigorate the social and patronage networks of yesteryear and use those to enter the new order, which they could then amend from within through the exercise of politics. We were not successful. Somehow many Sunnis just could not wrap their minds around a structure of government without Saddam or the Ba'ath, as if their history began only in 1968.

Then, something very strange happened. We had word that the Saudis had tried to bankroll the propagation of the Wahhabist dogma in the 1990s, to limited success. We knew of this phenomenon chiefly through our informants in the regime's security services, which were tasked with keeping tabs on these Wahhabists (for example, this [rundown of religious sheikhs](#) in Anbar). It was hard to believe that Wahhabism or Salafism would find a toehold in a Sufi-drenched, Shafi'ite and Hanefite Iraq. Hanbalism, the jurist school the Salafists are most comfortable with emulating, sprang from Baghdad, but the alleyway of the founder's tomb, 'rediscovered' in the last century, served as an out-of-the-way public urinal for the Old City's drunkards. Now Salafists do frown on the veneration of tombs, but peeing a few steps away from Ibn Hanbal's final enclosure was a step too far. That they could not do much about stopping it showed how weak their creed was in Iraq. However, from this starting point, and from this blind spot, and within a matter of a year after the fall of the regime, Iraq's Salafists were in a position to lead the insurgency, supplanting the Ba'athists. How did that happen?

In 2003, organized and networked Salafists probably counted for less than the number of votes earned by Shawkat. In their parlance, they call themselves the ‘third generation’ of Salafists. One would be forgiven to miss the emergence of the ‘first generation’, a mere blip, a historical footnote, in the midst of tumultuous events. And the beginnings were all so very arbitrary: it seems that around the 1830s, a Zaydi Shia from Yemen, from the Al-Wazir family, who was descended from Muhammad through his grandson Hassan, and whose relatives vied from time to time to lead the Imamate, broke off from his family, settled in Syria’s Hamah, and then relocated again, this time to Baghdad, to build a new life for himself and his family as a rug merchant in the same neighborhood as that of the al-Gailanis’. His grandson, Abdul Karim, would be swayed by Sunni Salafism, get himself associated with a weekly newspaper that was published in the late Ottoman period called *Al-Sa’iqah* (‘The Lightning Bolt’), and be known by the name Abdul Karim ‘Sa’iqah’ for the rest of his life. Sa’iqah holds the distinction of personifying the ‘first generation’—he was its sole member. His propagation of and education in Salafism would take him to India and to Mecca and to Aleppo, before settling down again in Baghdad, getting down to the work of instructing and graduating a crop of modern Salafists. He incubated Salafism in his person, marrying its Iraqi and Nejd variants, then passing on that spark to successive waves of his disciplines before his death in 1959. The second generation never found a footing in the 1960s and 1970s, namely because secular ideologies were paramount, and what political space there was for religion in Sunni Iraq was controlled by the MB, while the devotional space was still governed by Sufism and other deeper traditions that abhorred Salafism. One of Sa’iqah’s students did try to organize a secret Salafist faction, calling it Jund al-Rahman, but he died in mysterious circumstances, after falling to his death from a hotel window in Basra in 1976. Despite the impediments, the second generation still managed to pass on the torch to their students. For example, Sa’iqah’s star pupil would go on to influence and teach a younger kinsman, the Islamic State’s current caliph. The third generation would come to age in the 1990s, spending years in Ba’athist prisons, at times with Sadrists as their cell mates. Many were released under general amnesty right before the war, some of them joined others on the outside in northern Iraq, where al-Zarqawi was supposedly encamped. By 2003, enough of the old Sunni order had been untethered, allowing them space and material with which to create something new: an insurgency led by Salafist revolutionaries. Nothing about history would suggest that they would be the ones capturing headlines rather than the relatives of the al-Gailanis and Mahmud Pasha, but that is what happened. No one was prepared for that, or could be prepared.

Sa’iqah’s influence even extended beyond Iraq, with grave consequence. One of his Moroccan disciples translated the Quran into English, but with an extremist bent. This version was heavily subsidized and widely distributed by the Saudis, contributing to the radicalization of Muslim first generation migrants and converts in the Anglophone West. Another of his

students was Salih Sarriya. He was twelve years old when he arrived in Baghdad, a refugee from Palestine. Somehow, by his early twenties, he had made his way to one of the mosques that Sa'iqah would frequent and lecture at. That 'lightening bolt' left its mark: the young Sarriya would go on to become one of the founders of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), but later in life, while in Egypt, he would transform the sentiments of Qutbism (Seyyid Qutub's radicalizing strain within the Egyptian branch of the MB), marry it to Sa'iqah's Salafism, and establish the ideological and organizational framework for the first prototype of a modern jihadist organization. He was arrested and then executed in 1976, but those he had inspired, including a young Ayman al-Zawahiri, would go on. Who could have seen this chain reaction coming: that the grandson of a Shia Zaydi displaced to Iraq from Yemen, would instill in a lad, recently displaced by Zionism, ideas that would later ignite the Salafist-Jihadist bonfire?

The Yemen that Abdul Karim Sa'iqah's grandfather left behind two centuries ago remained largely unchanged until the mid-twentieth century. Yemen was a hold-out for the old patterns ordering societies. To outsiders, even to [Iraqis writing about it](#) in the 1940s, Yemen seemed stationary and unchanging. In the north, the Zaydi Imamate was an eleven century-old institution (albeit with two brief interruptions). The multiple cleavages, inherited through generations, were predictable in the range and extent of their tethering: Zaydis and Shafi'is, Zaydis and the dwindling numbers of Isma'ilis, Qahtanis and Seyyids, Upland tribes and the villages and plantations of Lower Yemen, coastal towns and inland towns, etc. Change could come, but the overall ordering, whereby inherited concepts of self and destiny limit one's imagination of the possible, remained firm. Aden, run by the British, was the second busiest port in the world at times (after New York City's), while some of the families of Hadhramut had travelled seeking fortune in places as far as Singapore and Indonesia. Coffee-growing was doing a brisk trade on international markets, keeping the western uplands and the few Red Sea ports busy, even though changing commercial and worldwide cultivation patterns had set it in decline by the mid eighteenth century. Yet these changes did not shake the deeper traditions. One would expect Aden to catch an ideological bug and incubate it (beginning with an anti-Semitic pogrom in 1949). Those seditious ideas may have spread to the port town's migrant labor, who had come from all parts of Yemen, and through them back to their home locales. Or the returning Hadhramis would bring back some dangerous ideas from overseas too. But the disruption, when it came, emerged from an unexpected source. The kingdoms of Iraq and Saudi Arabia saw in Yemen a kindred, traditionalist state, worthy of strengthening, especially as the Imamate was turning unabashedly hereditary and properly royal like the Saudi and Iraqi dynasties, contrary to the Zaydi tradition. They came up with a plan to train and modernize a Yemeni army. Iraq flew in Yemeni students and enrolled them in its military academy, while simultaneously sending a training mission to Yemen in 1940. But someone in Baghdad thought

it expedient to include Jamil Jamal, a young officer from Mosul, among its four members. This would prove to be a fateful decision.

Just four years earlier, Jamal was the aide-de-camp to the leader of the 1936 coup. He was directly implicated at the scene of the murder of the 'founder' of the Iraqi Army. However, after the coup withered and its leader killed, the authorities thought that they could rehabilitate Jamal. They sent him into career exile as an officer in the riverine police, but then somebody pulled some strings and had him attached to the training mission in Yemen; not a step up, but at least the young Jamal could redeem himself through performing this difficult task. The mission concluded in 1943, but Jamal decided to stay on in Yemen. Five years later, he would apply his coup-making skills to coincide with a plot to murder the ruling Imam. A new Imam was picked (a distant relative of Sa'iqa's it would seem!) who ruled in Sana'a for a few months before being overpowered by the slain Imam's son. Jamal would be promptly executed. But his disruption touched off a chain reaction that would embroil Yemen, both north and south, in very complicated local wars, financed and aided by regional benefactors, where the old cleavages blurred and combined in confusing contortions for two decades throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Even Aden, at its peak four times the size of Sana'a by population, lost its importance. The Arab-Israeli conflict blockaded the Suez Canal, rendering Aden largely pointless as a maritime destination. By the time the canal was reopened, newly made ships could travel for longer without restocking on supplies and refueling, making a stop at Aden unnecessary. By the late 1970s, a sizable proportion of Yemen's menfolk were working as migrant laborers in the Persian Gulf countries whose newfound oil wealth lured Yemenis to areas of the Peninsula that were thought to be provincial boondocks compared to Yemen's storied, ancient past. Their remittances were now the nation's principal earner, supplanting Aden and coffee growing. Many of what was rooted and ordered in Yemen came untethered indeed, and the dissolution of what had held out for so long proceeded surprisingly quickly, prompting many adventurers, such as the late President Saleh, to try his hand at remaking its destiny.

Ruling Yemen was like "dancing on the heads of snakes" Saleh had famously quipped. His jig had a particularly good run; in mid-2011 he even survived several rivets of shrapnel tearing into his chest, one lodging inches from his heart. Saleh would always manage to keep himself relevant, but swirling with the Houthis was to prove his last skip. Even he could not foresee the Houthi phenomenon coming. The many categories by which one can study Yemen, whether sectarian, geographical, tribal, economic, the relationship of peripheral areas to Sana'a, outside triggers such as Iranian or Saudi meddling, none of these alone, in combination, or in aggregate are sufficient to understand why the Houthis got as far as they did. The Houthis emerged as symptoms of unpredictability, filling widening vacuums as more of the old order came unfastened. Now, they are the drivers of that unpredictability, as Saleh

found out when he tried one last trick, by switching sides, only to be cut down by a sniper's bullet. The problem for Saleh was that there is no coherence to Houthism save a few slogans: it was a beast with no recognizable features, no points to grip at, making it difficult to tame, no less to slay.

The Saudis should know Yemen too. It is probably the place they've been most hands-on in since the 1960s, sometimes even with clandestine Israeli help. Saudi Arabia, after absorbing 'Asir in 1923, sought to make sense of its artificial demarcation line with the Imam's realm, running as it were through some Zaydi communities as well. It wanted to do that because socio-economically, the highlanders of 'Asir, where al-Hawali was born, were similar in temperament to the highlanders to their south, and just like them they weren't really under the thumb of previous authorities. Therefore the Saudis had a stake in the events and trends playing out across the border. Nothing about the policies it is following in its Yemen war today differs in essence from what it has done in Yemen in decades past. But they couldn't understand the Houthi phenomenon and its unique hybridization *because* it was so weird and 'new'. This is probably the reason why the Saudis are stymied in fighting them. That is the point al-Hawali was making, by counseling the royals that they should quit it now. Given the murky origins of the whole affair, the Saudis would protest incredulously, and somewhat justifiably so, at the idea that they had indirectly triggered Houthism, but there are few other convincing narratives as to how it all came about. And the story begins with an orphan.

That orphan boy, Muqbil Al-Wadi'i was born in Dammaj, a short drive away along a valley from the town of Sa'adah, where the Zaydi call found its grounding over a millennium ago. Nominally a Zaydi by birth, with both parents dead before his teenage years, he went off to seek employment in Saudi Arabia. Only later in life, in his early thirties, did he find the patronage that would subsidize his interests in Islamic studies, at times back in Yemen, at other times in Saudi Arabia, veering early on towards Hanbalism and Salafism. He could have ended up as one of the tens of thousands of clerics absorbed into the Saudi bureaucracy of Salafism, either staying in the kingdom or being delegated to lead one of its missions around the world. But being an alienated soul, his path crossed that of Juhaiman's, and with the suppression of the latter's insurrection at Mecca in late 1979, the Saudi authorities tracked down al-Wadi'i and jailed him for a number of months. Some of his teachers interceded on his behalf, citing that this orphan Zaydi boy may have been misled by the rebels, so the authorities released him back to Yemen. He returned to Dammaj, and there, in one of the unlikeliest places for success, began his little Salafist outpost, one that would go on to become a contender for the title of Salafism's most vibrant and prolific international centers, drawing in thousands of students from places like Sub-Saharan Africa and Indonesia. These students would loudly and boisterously heckle the Zaydi faithful, going about their lives and rituals nearby, castigating them for their creedal backwardness, and inviting them to turn Salafist.

Those plentiful provocations, real or perceived, touched off Zaydi pride, prompting a number of Zaydi youth to return the challenge. Theirs would be a revivalist movement too, even louder and more boisterous.

I don't know what compelled Hussain Badr al-Din al-Houthi to go to Sudan and then (allegedly) to Iran. He superficially studied the example of Hezbollah, and may have found some encouragement from mainstream Shia institutions, and then returned to his ancestral home near Sa'adah to preach for a new way of being Zaydi in the modern world, since the older models of his father's and grandfathers' were not holding up any more. Sure, there have been many attempts by analysts and academics to explain Houthism through reasonably valid socioeconomic parameters. But what if it were principally an unforeseen byproduct of the efforts of Saudi Salafist and Iranian Twelver Shia preachers seeding any promising fields with their narratives and seeing what sticks? It did not begin as geopolitics. It was missionary work—doctrinal engineering—scoping out to the geopolitical horizon as political and military vacuums emerged. There are *da'awa* institutions in both Saudi and Iran whose job is to win over converts to Salafism and Twelverism around the world, and the Zaydis were an unclaimed prize. The Salafists were always intrigued by the possibility of being able to convert Zaydis to their cause. They believed that Zaydism had within it the software allowing it to revert back to a 'restore' point that would look a lot like Salafism (this happened with Sheikh Muhammad al-Shawkani, in the early to mid-1800s). And here was a promising young and dogged student trying to plant the seeds of Salafism in Dammaj, despite his Juhaimanist tint. Why not go for it? The Salafists could even tell Saudi authorities that it would help with policing the border, providing them with on-the-ground eyes and ears. In the same way, Twelvers feel that Zaydism only needs a little prodding and it can progress to Twelverism proper. Here is a weirdo like Hussein al-Houthi mouthing off against Israel and wanting to sign on to the anti-Zionist struggle, so why not try? They have ample budgets for that sort of outreach, seeding the ground among the Nusayris in Syria, or in the Dara'a countryside, or along the Euphrates, or even experimentally in places like Tunisia and Nigeria. Zaydism is an even better bet. Out of this narrative confusion, with Salafists disconcertingly getting in their faces, propelled by the economic grievances of tribes in Sa'adah who could see that other tribes, ones whose sons rose up through officer corps, and who could control the nascent oil wealth pouring in, were doing far better than they, coupled with the populism of the Houthis, peddling as they were easy-to-recite slogans unencumbered by plodding ideologies, an ethereal cloud was spawned, precipitating multiple Houthi wars. Once the disruption succeeded in claiming ground, the spies seconded from Riyadh and Tehran took over from the proselytizers, pushing the disruption towards a geostrategic opportunity.

Tracking the severing of tethered narratives or how new ones can take shape out of the ether is more alchemy than science, more instinct than erudition. It does not lend itself to

classification within color-coded spreadsheets, as economic vectors do. Unlike ideologies or political demands or developmental deliverables, these concepts are difficult to summarize in power point form or over cocktail chitchat. And in academia, where such speculation is sometimes indulged, it can quickly veer into the absurd, towards the sophistry of whatever outrage is gripping the elder faculty that week. What do we call the tales and stories peoples tell themselves, whether expressed as political mobilization or through poetry, odes and the arts? Is this a definition of 'culture'? I would rather stay away from the pitfalls of categorization. I want to look specifically at the situation of abrupt disconnect between narratives, rather than their natural ebb and flow. Perhaps the discipline closest to our aim here—the study of the breakdown of 'ordering' narratives and the emergence of new ones—is the one that looks at how eschatology and messianic appeals overturn societies that had already come unmoored. Messiah-like figures believe that the stories previously in circulation lead up to themselves, and that such distinction validates their authorship of a whole new story. That sounds a lot like the individual human agency we have been considering throughout this essay. Now we need to look at just exactly what it is about narrative dissolution that makes the rise of the adventurers that much easier.

At what point should we consider a disruption to be more than a sign of a coming reordering, such as the events of the Middle East in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but rather a harbinger of upheaval on the scale of a journey down a black hole? What societies or geographies are more vulnerable to such flare-ups? And once upheavals begin, is there a formula for how long it would take to go through a black hole's worst? What distinguishes 'new' reforms that fail, such as Sultan Selim III's introduction of new military corps in eighteenth century Istanbul, or that may eventually fail like Bin Salman's today, from what we can consider a societal or civilizational breakdown? There comes a point where societies become so desperate, that they are willing to suspend disbelief and doubt, and to take those Messiah-like figures at their word, following them into the unknown. Changes brought on by pioneers, revolutionaries or innovators, throughout their various fields, whether political, philosophical, religious, technical or technological, are not always ominous and worrying—many have lifted the human condition for the better, considerably. Here we are not passing judgment on the type or end results of changes, rather we are trying to get a sense of their size, and specifically as it concerns the ordering of societies: we are exploring the distinction between revolutions or revolutionary times, events that can happen often even within the span of a single generation, as opposed to once-in-a-few-centuries black-hole-metaphor-worthy convulsions. This is the difference depicted by the 1963 movie *The Leopard*, set in Sicily of the early 1860s, where the old aristocratic classes are trying to find a seat for themselves at the new ruling order's dining table in the wake of Garibaldi's revolutionary unionism, by employing the usual set of political acrobatics such as marrying into the new regime, versus the world-

historic convulsion portrayed by the 2009 movie *Agora*, set in fourth century Alexandria as Christianity uproots paganism, with the semi-fictitious Parabalani Christian militia cast as the menacing, pagan-burning doppelgangers of the Mahdi Army, while accurately demonstrating the aristocratic classes' tendency to be the first to convert to the new victorious faith, in the same way as the Persian *dehqan* class of Sassanid Iraq converted to Islam. Is the latter category, that of a historic convulsion, really what we are witnessing across the region? I have tried to follow the conversations about the Middle East closely, whether they occur among watchers, scholars and analysts in Washington, and among the elite in capitals across the region, and I don't see such questions being asked. I tried to [put out an open](#) invitation two years ago to talk about such matters. I can't say that I have found many takers. I honestly do not think there is much to say at this moment, because we are well into it into the convulsion, and it is futile to hold a conversation between so divergent, mutually-negating viewpoints. However, there is still value in introducing clarity, in as much as 'alchemy' and instinct can provide it, as to what this moment actually is, at least from the side that senses that this is a unique moment in time. As usually happens when predictions come to pass, the other side, until recently dismissive of such warnings, will claim to have known it all along, then they will present color-coded spreadsheets of socioeconomic parameters and power-point presentations summarizing the ideological manifestos of the victors to explain why it happened.

Memories and family lore tend to fade. One can only remember so much about where a third cousin, once removed, used to live, or the name of a great-grandfather's business partner, or why one's clan married into a rival clan several generations past. But some memories do linger, in the form of proverbs, rituals, anecdotes, scandalous gossip, omens, blood-feuds, hand-me-down wisdoms, and so on. These provide a rudimentary ordering, a way to navigate the terrain of friend or foe, presumably because the 'other' is following his or her own lore too, and within that bounded tension both can find their place, and a measure of peace, and if not peace, then predictable order and security. That is why the past, history as it is imagined, remembered, or recorded, is usually the foundational koine, the center of gravity, around which narratives—personal, local and national—are assembled. But perhaps there comes a stretch of time when individuals choose to shed those memories by willingly inviting disorder into their midst. Such are the untethered individuals who would buy-in into a whole new selection of reconfigured, or totally reimagined memories. The aggregate of all those atomized choices, if too many, can break beyond the elastic limit and actually spur revolutionary times, which by their zeitgeist may destroy what few hold-outs of the old ways remain. Here we are less interested in why the old ways lost their hold and legitimacy—we have many diagnoses for that already across the Middle East—but rather we are focusing on process, scale and timing in figuring out what this is. While it is the duty of the activist historian to stave off as much of the untethering as possible as well as explaining the process, he or she must also be ready to admit

defeat, for through that concession one can behold, as clearly as possible, the majesty of epic changes underway. I believe many of the answers can be found in that untethering, one that tells us that this is heading towards mayhem rather than stabilization, and that it is at a scale unwitnessed for over five hundred years in the region. It is precisely at this moment separating the singularity from the event horizon, as we witness one station forming after another, in rapid succession, that we notice that our analytical tools, nay even our nomenclature, is no match for so enormous an event, so much so that we have to sheepishly reach to the discipline of astrophysics to convey magnitude.

Consider the story of how I tracked down al-Khasibi's alleged tomb in the city of Aleppo over a decade ago. To me, that was one of deepest insights I was afforded into the history and tensions of old and new Syria at the time. I [have written](#) about it [in the past](#), so I won't go into it again. However, there is a part that I didn't put in, and there has been an important, illuminating update to the story. Al-Khasibi should be considered the real founder of Nusayri-Alawism, both by deepening its creedal and esoteric dimensions, and also by transporting its call to inner Syria. That he would die and be buried in Aleppo makes historical sense, since its rulers during his lifetime would have been amenable to his cause. That the gravesite would survive the many regimes that followed, almost all hostile to Nusayri-Alawism, was another matter. After I had been given a rudimentary description of the general area where I should be directing my questions about the grave's location, I was dropped off by taxi at an eerie cemetery at dusk. The taxi driver had a hesitant look, as if wondering whether I really wanted to be left at that darkening, empty place, abutting the dead. But I pretended that I knew what I was doing as I clambered out of the car, even though I had just realized that I had misinterpreted a Syrian word for cemetery, *jabbaneh*, thinking that I was about to arrive at a cheese making factory (*jibin* is cheese in Arabic). I began walking around the periphery of the place, quickly deciding that I would necessarily have to come back the following day to be able to wade through the gravestones. As I had started to leave the area, I saw three men in their late forties sprawled out around a teapot. I decided to ask them if they knew what I was searching for. They thought over the question for a moment, then invited me to join them, to which I obliged. What followed was one of the most pleasant exchanges I ever had on my travels. In my notes, I had described them as adepts of the Rifa'iyya Sufi order. "One Nu'aymi, one Jumaili (both Iraqi looking) and the sheikh"—the latter seems to have gotten his name by virtue of his luxuriant beard rather than any formal religious standing. Their occupation had something to do with processing grain, either as seeds for cereal crops, or as chicken feed—I don't remember. There were mounds of it around us, having been left to dry in the sun. My question triggered a jog through a roster of nearby shrines. I do not think I am exaggerating their ability to go through—within half an hour—some three dozen potential candidates for this mysterious "al-Khasibi" whom I was asking about, a saint they had never heard of, even

though they were sure they knew all of them. Such erudition, such archaic knowledge, was rapidly disappearing around the Middle East, and it was a privilege to watch it displayed so effortlessly, confidently and naturally, without a hint of the angst or trepidation that would usually be warranted in this day and age as to why, among other things, a stranger, observed wandering around a cemetery at dusk time, would be asking such questions. It was their own little world, and they were masters of it—very little would phase them. Only towards the end, when the sheikh asked, “wait, do people from the coast go to him?” (‘people from the coast’ is the neutral term in fear-drenched Syria when describing the ruling Nusayri-Alawites), did he realize that I could be asking about “Sheikh Yabruq” who “isn’t visited by Sunnis.” Later, when I managed to get to it, I was told by the Nusayri-Alawite officer who has the keys to the tiny enclosure with an unmarked grey and white marble sarcophagus to keep misinforming people that it is Sheikh Yabruq who is buried there, not al-Khasibi. Even the exterior to the shrine bore no marking to suggest this was al-Khasibi’s grave, yet the Nusayri-Alawites preserved a memory of its location for generations, and tried keeping it a secret, even from some in the neighborhood who could name and locate almost every other saint, famous or obscure, within a five kilometer radius. The Syrian regime held on to the strategically-located Hannanu barracks, where the tomb lies, throughout the fighting that began in 2011, but just about. Al-Khasibi’s grave, and everything around it, were severely damaged.

Right after Aleppo was fully regained by the Asad regime towards the end of 2016, one of its more notorious battlefield commanders, Suheil al-Hassan, head of the Tiger Forces, arrived at the destroyed barracks to pay his respects to al-Khasibi. A few months ago, Nusayri-Alawite social media pages were joyously sharing the latest images from al-Khasibi’s shrine: now, thanks to al-Hassan’s philanthropy, the site has been significantly enlarged and turned into a gleaming black marble edifice with a wide, stone-paved courtyard; a marked difference from the time I visited, when one had to go around the back of a nineteenth century Ottoman mosque (built over an earlier structure enclosing the actual Sheikh Yabruq’s tomb and Sufi lodge), and then through a small, dilapidated backyard encompassing a mulberry tree, a pair of discarded socks, a kitten, and a crooked stool (one offering a magnificent view of Aleppo’s citadel) to get to the shrine’s nondescript entrance. I remember trying to furtively take pictures of the inside of the shrine, but it was hard to get a wide-enough angle because the space was very cramped, just enough for a couple of people to be in there at a time. The Nusayri-Alawites had another shrine that they would venerate outside the walls of the city, that of Ibn Abi Numayr in the Telet al-Sawda hilltop. In previous centuries, not only they, but other Muslims would visit the tomb, but somehow the saint’s hagiography got to be associated more and more with a heterodox narrative. When I went looking for it, I came upon a wheelchair-bound man in his fifties, flashing a crazed look in his eyes. He laughed hysterically as he told me that “in 1981, the grave went up, whoosh! Into the air! And it never came back

down!” The suggestion here was that the shrine was destroyed during the Islamist uprising against the regime in the late 1970s and early 80s. I did not venture to ask any more questions, since mention of those ‘events’ with strangers can get one in trouble under the Asad dictatorship. That neighborhood was one of the hardest hit by the recent fighting.

Al-Khasibi’s shrine could have easily gone the way of Ibn Abi Numayr’s had the battle of Aleppo gone differently. I do not know what happened to the three Sufis who graciously shared their tea and knowledge with me. Going by statistics, one or more of them is likely dead or displaced. I do not know how many of the shrines they counted during that evening survived the war, or how many of the stories they held about their neighborhood, amassed over generations, had transmuted to their young. That a heterodox shrine that was kept a secret, that was talked about in hushed tones, is now blaringly advertised and unapologetically visible for all to see in a place as orthodoxy-obsessed and long on memory as Aleppo is, would have seemed exceedingly odd, and provocative, to them and to their ancestors. But to the victor go the spoils, as well as the dominating narratives, until such time that another set of victors arrive with their own. Just as my quest for al-Khasibi had taught me a lot about Syria in concentrated form, this update as to his shrine’s status should inform us as to the monumental changes that have occurred there. Al-Hassan is signaling that the end of Syria’s civil war does not mean a return to Hafez Asad’s style of cautiously and delicately concealing and minimizing the provocations of Nusayri-Alawite dominance, a condition of historical aberration. Rather, al-Hassan believes that, in the new era, Sunnis must bow down and cower to an overt, almost deliberately humiliating manifestation of such dominance. This is not a mere disturbance, or one event among many that may be forgotten soon enough along with Ibn Abi Numayr’s shrine. This is a world—much of it until recently closed upon itself—turned upside down.

Aleppo had not witnessed changes of that scale for centuries, probably not since Tamerlane ransacked it in the early 1400s. But other places nearby did undergo very large fluctuations relatively recently, yet this distinction and its significance seem underappreciated by the region’s watchers. Consider too that, to my mind, I have not seen a comprehensive study mapping out zones of demographic dislocation across the Middle East over the last five hundred years, even though there are surprisingly many of them. Settling the lands of others is one way by which dislocation and inventiveness are brought into narratives, for there is something liberating although inherently unstable about starting anew far removed from the bones of one’s ancestors. A corollary study would look at whether there are remarkable attributes about the people pushing in, or the ones that had been pushed out, and what they have told their children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren that distinguishes them from other populations in a valley nearby that did not go through those experiences. I would wager that scholars conducting such studies may find interesting answers that would help

situate the conversation. I don't know what words of wisdom had trickled down to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis from his great-grandfather, who had to leave Bahrain for Basra. But something must have stuck: his father chose a Bahraini wife, and al-Muhandis chose one for himself too. Al-Muhandis claims descent from the Tamim tribe, but his affiliation with Bahrain sets him aside from other Tamimis in Basra, some of whose roots there go back right up to the Muslim conquest and the foundation of the city. Chroniclers tell us that some Persian cavalrymen subsumed their identities and became Tamimis fourteen centuries ago, and today's Tamimis may wince when someone brings up that record casting doubt on their Arabness, but al-Muhandis' family lore is not part of that story. His reaction would be different. Yet his distinct lore is a starting point in understanding the man and his motives in working with Soleimani, in the service of pan-regional Shi'ism, as we had described them above.

The migration of Shias from the eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula and from the islands of Bahrain to the environs of Basra left a mark on at least one of their progenies. The same can be inferred about the Druze migration from Lebanon and Aleppo's Jebel Al-Zawiya to Jebel Sweida in southern Syria three hundred years ago. Or the fundamental reordering of northern Syria over the past two centuries that brought in large numbers of Kurds. Or tribe pushing out tribe across the landscape of Iraq in the last three centuries, a byproduct of which was turning its rural south predominantly Shia. Or the resettling of Circassians on a north to south axis running east of Ankara to hold the westward-Kurdish migration in check some one hundred and fifty years ago. Anatolia, post its resettling by Tatars, Albanians, Bosnians and whoever was escaping the receding tide of empire; post the Armenian genocide; post the population transfers of 'Greeks' and 'Turks'; post the extermination of revolutionary tendencies in Dersim, was a jumble of newcomers disinterested with the tilting headstones of the land's past occupants. Wars, 'acts of god', and infectious diseases did their part in demographic re-engineering too: less than a fourth of Baghdad's residents survived or returned after the trio of an Ottoman siege, a breakout of the plague, and the flooding of the Tigris, came their way in 1831. Its suburb of Kadhimiya forever lost its older accent because, according to lore, out of four thousand inhabitants only thirty seven were left to rebuild.

The Middle East is a very old place, it is unremarkable that one would find a Roman coin under an olive tree in one's garden in Amman. There are patches where some families living there can demonstrate continuity of a blood line and property that extends a thousand years. Old Mosul was one such patch, same for its twin city Aleppo, and so is the third of Sunni Beirut that claims descent from the fleeing Moors of Andalusia. However, there are other patches where the 'indigenous' inhabitants can only boast a two century old heritage, if that. They are uncomfortable remembering those they displaced. In other cases, some places were left unpopulated for centuries, such as Amman, which was, according to lore, a Shia village five centuries ago before it was abandoned, and its Shi'ism forgotten. Salamiya in Syria was an

Ismaili bastion twelve centuries ago. Then it was abandoned too. Today it is their bastion again, but not because Ismailism held out there: the ancestors of today's inhabitants came back only a little over two centuries ago, leaving their mountain fortresses east of Homs due to internal rivalries and Nusayri-Alawite harassment. Nowadays the ones who ended up in Salamiya are being pushed out by Bedouins who started settling there thirty years ago. Despite its antiquity, many parts of the region are still percolating and in flux, giving one the sense that they are still unformed, still taking shape. Those loci of disorder can even coalesce and expand into nearby archipelagos of order. One can pick up on this tension when driving around the backroads, stopping here and there. Some villages respond ebulliently towards a stranger asking questions about what clans live there, and what the local histories say. Others are wary, even cagey. Some, allegedly, may even pelt you with stones, like that friend's ancestral village I wanted to visit near Mardin. By that measure, Jews pushing out the inhabitants of Palestine was essentially a later manifestation of a repeating pattern—it just happened on a grander scale, with a lot more attention paid to it, deservedly. And here, we haven't even gotten to enumerating the greatest expression of dislocation, one that had been ongoing for a century, and still is, as multitudes of peasants and pastoralists leave their old lands and livelihoods and their family legacies, for a variety of reasons, be it a drought or a dream, to camp out in shoddily-built homes at the periphery of the region's largest cities, such as Baghdad, Basra, Mosul, Aleppo, Damascus, Cairo, Tehran, and Istanbul, and in doing so overwhelming and subsuming the legacies of the urbanites that had been living there for generations. Thankfully, this latter phenomenon and its effects in the Middle East are better studied than the older, more obscure dislocations above.

None of this is unique to the Middle East, this disconnect between older narratives and new realities, these percolations of still-fluid identities. What is unique is timing, and the scale of the dissolution that is coming to the fore, as well as the number of new narratives edging in. I reckon that the 1970s did not end up with a wider breakdown of the old order because there was still much of it tethered down. But what had survived that turmoil was not refastened or strengthened over the past four decades. The narratives rooting down what remained, such as a citizen's stake in a nation or other associative linkages, have atrophied, wilted, and weakened, the bonds and gravitational pulls holding it together, giving it shape and coherence, have broken down too. 'Nations', whether they are the size of modern states or that of the Barzanis', come to discern their worth, and hence their destiny, through the stories they tell themselves. As the last of those stories detach from ever-worsening realities, the unmooring is complete, the paths ahead countless. That is why this time it is different. One major geostrategic fear hovering over the tragic episodes of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1989) was that it may spill over and take on a wider dimension throughout 'Greater Syria'—well, guess what? Look under: Aleppo, al-Khasibi, Omran Daqneesh, al-Hassan.

Also, narrative dissolution is happening at a much faster rate than in the past. This is partly because the tools by which one can discredit, repudiate or outright fabricate the old stories have changed dramatically with the advent of the internet. If the notion that the upheaval the region is about to experience is indeed similar to the changes that occurred five hundred years ago, then I would compare the maelstrom of the 1970s to the period spanning the Crusades to the Mongol invasions. Sure, there was plenty of destruction and upheaval accompanying both events—though much of the old structures, such as the canal networks of the Diyala plain whose crops fed the multitudes of Abbasid Baghdad, had rotted away already before Hulagu Khan ever showed up to lay waste to the empire’s capital—yet there was no permanence to the Crusading venture, while the Mongols did not completely eradicate what had gone before them; they quickly adapted and worked within what remained of the previous administrative systems. Similarly, I would count the Mameluke dynasties as an interregnum, carrying over much of the old. However, it was Tamerlane who was the singularity of his age, sweeping through the Middle East not two generations after the first outbreaks of the Black Death pandemic, which kept revisiting the region every few years. Beyond the spectacular and permanent scope of his destruction, including the near eradication of Eastern Christianity, one can map out the events and transformations, the ‘stations’ if you will, such as the adoption of gunpowder, that gave shape to the rim of the black hole that formed in Tamerlane’s wake. Two dynasties emerged beyond the black hole, the Ottomans and Safavids. They were destined to expand in each other’s direction as they filled up the spaces of the region, and to clash at several junctures, and in doing so tipping the balance in favor of one trend or another. Much of the region’s story since is a retelling of that dichotomy, reaching its penultimate chapter in the resurrectionist attempts of Abdul Hamid’s, and those of Naser al-Din Shah Qajar.

Some things made it through the black hole, and some didn’t. The Byzantines were forever gone, after having held out against Islamic onslaught and Frankish perfidy for about eight centuries. The spectacle of the last emperor fighting at the breach, as Constantinople was falling, constituted an event horizon. The Ottomans were no longer yet another Turkic clan having its perfunctory moment in the sun. They had survived defeat and humiliation at Tamerlane’s hand half a century earlier on a plain near Ankara, and the history books thought they were done for, but there, in the shadow of the Second Rome, on May 29, 1453, at that precise moment when their janissaries clambered over the ruined walls, the Ottomans transmuted from some ‘flash in the pan’ into *the* glorified Islamic army foretold by prophecy. A few decades later, Byzantine ‘princely’ blood, although by a different line, would flow into a newborn named Ismail, or so the myths have it. He will grow up to create another event horizon, recapturing the idea of an imperial and territorial ‘Iran’, finally ending the five-century long spillover of Turkic hordes from Central Asia, and, as importantly, tinging his new state with Shi’ism to boot. Twelver Shi’ism may have gone the way of Zaydism and Ibadism—

that is, provincial and isolated in some corner of Islamdom—if he hadn't. It may have never arrived at the form we recognize it today either. Or the Ottomans would have adopted it, their tendencies veering towards the 'Alid cause too early on. Or the Ottomans could have invented an Islamic-Christian synthesis had Mehmet the Conqueror found a more pliant Orthodox Church welcoming him after his first tour of the Aya Sofya. The possibilities were open ended, the forms they eventually took were never inevitable in those early decades. Even though the Ottomans, for example, copied elements of the Mameluke system, such as how to tax religious 'deviants' like the Nusayri-Alawites, they eventually did away with the Turkic hierarchy, which had propelled their military exploits, choosing to populate the ranks of the governing class with Balkan *devshirme*. The later Safavids did much of the same, except they substituted their Turkic chieftains with converted Georgians and forcibly-imported Armenians. A historian may be tempted to re-read the percolations and changed demographics of the Middle East as aftershocks of stabilization following the black hole, or as convulsions arising from the gravitational distortion of mankind's journey through other black holes, such as the circumnavigation of the Cape of Good Hope, or Europe's exploitation of the riches of the New World. Alternately, temptation may lead that historian to conclude that the new order failed to make itself work, to resolve the messiness of rebirth or the local contradictions whereby some of the old carried through along with the new, and remained in conflict with it. That exercise is likewise beyond our scope. However, if the conjecture presented here, that the last time we had spotted such an astonishing contortion of regional realities had occurred with the emergence of Ottomans and Safavids, then what interests me is the measure of time. Two centuries passed between the sacking of Baghdad and the conquest of Constantinople, which witnessed Tamerlane's singularity amassing between them. But time has sped up, or at least it is perceived to have. If the breakdown of older tethering narratives is the forerunner of singularities, and the accelerator of rim formation, then it is possible to form today with even more speed and wider penetration. Consequently, one wouldn't be surprised should the process proceed in under half a century, that is, the distance from the first rumblings, in the late 1970s, to the formation of the event horizon that we have yet to witness.

I could legitimately be taken to task by skeptics as to why would I count Tamerlane and the Zarqawist Islamic State as singularities, but not, for example, the suppression of the janissaries in 1826, or the Gulhane Edict and Imperial Rescript of Reform, of 1839 and 1856 respectively, that did away with much of the old, such as the subservience of non-Muslims to Muslims in the latter, thus incurring the wrath of reactionaries across the Middle East, showing up in acts small and big, such as the Aleppo (1850) and Damascus (1860) massacres, or the Armenian genocide later? Another contender for singularity could be the emergence of Russia, a would-be avenger and resuscitator of Byzantium, bleeding out both the Ottomans and Safavids, and later the Qajars, as it lumbered southwards, and contributing, to my mind, as the single most

plausible catalyst to the sense of Muslim decline, both materially and psychologically. For centuries, Muslims were aware of Europe's potential, especially as a threat. Their eyes were fixated on the routes by which the Crusaders had travelled to the east, across Thrace and Asia Minor, and over the Mediterranean. In their minds, Muscovy was a backward, barbaric land, a Tatar slaver's go-to poaching destination. Then all that began changing rapidly in the early eighteenth century, catching Islamdom by surprise. More parochially, what about Mahmud Shawkat's coup, and the rise of the CUP before and after? Or the electrifying news traveling throughout the region that an 'Asiatic' power, Japan, had defeated the Russians in 1905? What about the Constitutional Revolution in Iran? Or better yet the Babi rebellion, nominally an old messianic gene in Shi'ism that the Safavids and Qajars tried to subdue, but whose jolt paved the way for new ways of thinking and protest such as a demand for a constitution? Aren't those singularities, a skeptic may ask? What about Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk) abruptly putting an end to the caliphate, and then uprooting so much of the old, be it the script or headdress or even amending the call to prayer? What about the harshness employed by his copycat, Reza Shah, against the old order? Weren't the changes enacted by Muhammad Ali Pasha of Egypt, the forerunner of Middle Eastern cosmopolitanism, worthy of being counted a singularity of his time? Or Ibn Abdul Wahhab's puritanical counter-revolution, wouldn't that be in the running? Surely the West's pugnacious intrusion, through trade, espionage, patronage of minorities, wars, and then outright occupation, beginning with Egypt, and then most of the region after World War I, which broke down the old narratives rather quickly, and invented nation states where none had been before—all that seems on par with a proper black hole by my reasoning, right? Or the excitement of Naser's booming tirades carrying far over shortwave through *Voice of the Arabs* radio? Even Israel, showing up the Arab order, defeating it several times, and by its exploits sounding the death knell of Arab Nationalism must be considered a contender by its very endurance, *nakhon*? Such questions just about take us up to the 1970s, and then, as we have seen, the ride through Middle Eastern history gets even loopier.

No, I say to those skeptics. Those are at best mini-singularities, false contractions like the Iraq-Iran War, occurring along a continuum. I stand by my claim from last year: that the last several centuries led up to, and into, the Islamic State of the Zarqawists. It is woefully inadequate to go back to 2013, or 2006, or 2003, or 2001, or 1991, or 1979, or even 1924 to understand how al-Zarqawi pulled off his audacious gamble. Just like *Payitaht* exemplifies a perfection of the conspiratorial outlook, the Islamic State was 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 perverse intellectual dotage accumulated over centuries in that part of the world." For most of its story arc up to 2014, the Islamic State was seen as no more than a counter-terrorism problem—the

attention it got, in analytical circles as well as the press was a tenth, if that, of Al-Qaeda's coverage, so much so that it was wrongly interpreted as an extension of the latter. Now that its existence looks wrapped up, many policy-makers and region-watchers are reverting back to that approach. There has been a systemic unwillingness to understand the phenomenon as one that was civilizational in scope, spiking up shockingly along the aforementioned continuum of events. One need look no further than the narrative entropy accompanying the phenomenon to understand it as such; this is indeed unprecedented in its intensity and portend, a veritable singularity. Another measure of the singularity is how it shapes events, or what I have called stations, occurring in its wake, such as Kirkuk, whether it was Masood's decision to go ahead with a referendum or Soleimani's countermove, as well as Bin Salman's bumbling measures. And there will certainly be more stations to come. The truest measure, though, is the event horizon, which we have yet to see, and as of now can only speculate as to how or when or where it may occur. So that leaves the debate between the critics and me unsettled until such time that happens, if it happens at all. But that is an unsatisfying cop-out. I predict that we will be seeing the event horizon as soon as 2019. It is that wobbly out there, at least to my eyes.

A better question to ask is whether Aleppo and Mosul indicate that the descent through the black hole has already begun? This question does indeed stump me. However, black holes are not only about piles of the dead heaped over among piles of stones. Black holes are about massive transformations over large swaths of territory; a fundamental reworking of society and civilization. I think there is more coming, even for nations as traumatized as those of Syria's and Iraq's. Hence the ruining of those two cities of the northern Fertile Crescent merely indicates, to me, the singularity's occurrence.

Do not mistake a ceasefire for peace. Running garbage trucks on a schedule, sinking water wells in lieu of shattered piping, is not stabilization. There can be no peace until you stabilize the narratives. And that is near impossible to do at the present time. For one, there is precious little political space where the old is acknowledged, and the new is co-opted. What remains of that space is quickly dissipating, even in once promising venues such as Baghdad. Then there's the noise—an incessant din of nihilistic heckling and new, hostile, absolutist narratives—that is amplified by the internet and new media, making it exceedingly difficult to convene and maintain a conversation. Under such conditions, for example, the axiom, often repeated by Kurds and those who write about them, that they have “no friends but the mountains” cannot be genially challenged by indicating that, actually, many doors were open to them across the region throughout most of recorded time, as we have seen above.

*

*

*

A couple of years ago, I was dropping by a friend's office in Basra. He is a prominent tribal sheikh with a significant standing throughout the province. But he was running late with other matters. He signaled to his aide that I should be let in so that I can witness firsthand what was holding him up. I walked in and greeted the gathered men. The atmospherics were too tense for a tribal meeting, even the ones held to settle differences. Those usually have a distinct choreography, with the participants, being tribal elders, theatrically going through the motions that they had gone through dozens of times. But this meeting was different. Gathered before my friend were the top local leadership of one of the nastier militias. I quickly realized that I was a prop in this scene when the sheikh asked, "What news of America?" He was deliberately provoking his visitors. He was showing them that they do not intimidate him, and he is comfortable with them seeing him in the company of 'American' friends. And they picked up on it, which in turn put them in an uncomfortable and unfamiliar terrain, as it was meant to. They were there to ask a simple question: a week prior, a firefight had erupted between some of their men, who had recently 'assumed' control of a date plantation to the south of the city, with three other men working on the adjacent plantation. Two critical injuries resulted, one from each side. At first, it looked as if the militia man was going to die, but then he stabilized, and at the moment of the meeting it seemed it was the farmer's turn to expire. The militiamen were Shia. Their opposite number were Sunni. It would have been easy for the militiamen to beat up on the Sunnis in Basra if that were the extent of the affair, no matter its outcome. But the Sunnis claimed that their titular sheikh, my friend, who heads a predominately Shia tribe, was their protector. Any negotiations on outcomes, whether settling the land dispute, or paying out blood money, would have to go through him. That complicated matters for the militia, since he was no easy pushover.

The meeting was supposed to determine whether those three Sunni men had in fact historically claimed allegiance to my friend's tribe. The sheikh gave the militiamen the runaround, confronting them with a fait accompli: whatever arrangements were made in the past were unimportant, for the farmers were now claiming protection, and he can only oblige. Again, he would not be intimidated; this round went to him. The militiamen shuffled out, humbled, glancing at me sideways. The sheikh boomed out laughing: "once they ask about your name, their heads will explode! They had just sat down with an American agent!"—that being how my activism from the opposition days is described in polemical shorthand. I of course was not ecstatic about being used as a prop, or drawing this militia's attention to me while in Basra. It turns out that the sheikh really did not know whether all of the three men's families, including the man lying in a critical state, were appended to his tribe at some time in the past. Yet he felt an obligation to defend "us Basrans" and their old order against these

‘strangers’ of unknown roots who had just left. See, the subtext of what was going on were the changing demographics of Basra, and the tensions and frictions herein.

I often think back to that scene at the sheikh’s office when following the spate of demonstrations breaking out in Basra in recent months, which spread on to other cities in southern Iraq, many with tribal sheikhs at the forefront. “We the people of Basra demand...” But who is “we”? The numbers of protesters, despite the hyping, are still modest. Given how bad things are, many multiples of those numbers should be out in the streets. The issues in a place like Basra have changed little in five years; electricity production, public sector employment, resentment at international oil companies and oil services companies bringing in foreign labor and managers, and even the salinity of drinking water—all these issues have festered for some time, even back in the years of plenty before the price of oil fell in 2015. Every summer brings with it the realization that the electrical grid is still a mess, too feeble to power up round-the-clock air conditioners. No matter how many changes occur in the seating order of the Provincial Council, or whoever is picked to be governor, the whiff of the local government’s corruption hangs heavy and unmoved. The menacing phantom of organized crime, whether under the guise of militias or particularly rowdy clans, would still make one think twice about opening a new shop or, in the case presented above, standing up for one’s property rights. Yet for five years, at least, Basrans have been unable to organize and mobilize effectively. There are constitutional and legislative aims that they can coalesce around, should they desire, such as declaring their province a federal region, and running it along autonomous lines as the Kurds do in the KRG, keeping a more substantial share of the oil wealth to themselves. For years now, analysis on conditions in Basra seem to rehash the usual socioeconomic triggers ad nauseam, yet little consideration is given to the fluidity and frothiness of communal influence. Many Basrans were displaced, in some cases for years, during the worst of the fighting with Iran, when its artillery was in range of the city’s cornice. After 2003, a sense of free-for-all drew in hundreds of thousands of destitute migrants from nearby provinces like Nasiriya and Amara, thus ballooning the proportion of ‘outsiders’ such as those militiamen, whose presence in ‘their’ city was resented by nativists like the sheikh. The limp-wristed authority of the British, tasked with managing so critical a portion of Iraqi real estate, exasperated the trend as they were loath to push back against squatters and the first stirrings of organized crime. The ‘original’ people of Basra now number less than forty percent of the population, not only of the city itself, but of the province as a whole. This has led to, among other things, the dilution of the percentage of Sunnis in the province, who as they got weaker and more vulnerable as a community, found security by leaving to other places in Iraq. A town like Zubeir was almost exclusively Sunni, and Nejd, forty years ago. Many returned to their ancestral lands in Nejd when conditions in Saudi Arabia improved, while Iraq withered. Today the Nejdīs constitute less than ten percent of the town.

Those who count themselves to be ‘Basran’ run the gamut of remnants of the ‘Abbasid dynasty, to Arab tribes that had settled there back in early Islamic times, to offshoot Shia sects escaping Wahhabi encroachment against their towns and villages in the eastern Arabian Peninsula, to those whose ancestors migrated there in the late eighteenth century as the port town boomed again. Being a port also meant that all sorts of overseas bloodlines ended up there too, from Portuguese traders to East African slaves to Indians and even a few of the British who opted to stay behind and make a life for themselves there after the first of their occupations of the town had receded; [Basra’s soccer team](#) in the 1950s had players with names such as Percy Godwin Beaufort Lynsdale (his father was a former British officer who married the daughter of an Iraqi jurist and parliamentarian) and Michael Stanley (the product of an Anglo-Indian and Iraqi marriage). Directories from the [1940s](#) and [1950s](#) tell the tale of a city confidently ascendant, not solely by Iraqi or regional metrics, but internationally too: Baghdad the capital was considered staid and conservative, while Basra was cosmopolitan and free-spirited. It is that nostalgia that infers the dreams of the nativists, they feel that they [were the natural fit](#) for the role that came to be played by Dubai in the Persian Gulf. Now if only they could get their act together by making use of the political space available to them, they may actually catch up, or so they imagine. But they are prevented from doing so, they reason, because ‘real’ Basrans have been subsumed by raggedy carpetbaggers who skew the vote tallies away from particularistic and local agendas. Right now, it is exceedingly difficult to build up a local authority exuding the legitimacy necessary to give shape and direction for Basran aspirations, one that would, through politics, mediate between the old and the new. In some ways it is a good thing: al-Muhandis, being a Basran, tried to float his own name as the city’s political boss three years ago, but it went nowhere, precisely because such authorities would be built on sand. Maybe that is one reason why he wants to forgo the burdens of politicking for the clarity of autocracy. However, one wonders where Basra would go if political space were still prevailing in a decade’s time. I watched the federalist cause go from a bored shrug [when proselytized to Basrans](#) seven years ago, to a magical moment in December 2014 when some random fellow designed a would-be flag for a federated Basra—one that had no aesthetical grounding in anything to do with Basran history. It just came out of nowhere, emerging as a Facebook post, and was adopted by federalism’s few believers. Nowadays, one sees pictures online of households hoisting this flag on rooftops. The provincial council has also taken up the cause of federalism, and enacted steps towards it, however it is not known as of yet whether this is genuine, or a feint to get Baghdad to release some monies, as had been the case with similar saber rattling in the past.

As such, am I announcing defeat too soon? Aren’t there enough forces gathering to counteract the breakdown, men with residual authority and sway like my friend the sheikh,

and others like that flag's mysterious designer, who can still turn things around, who won't go down without a fight?

Even if politics was left in place, and even if it were somehow possible to work around the fracturing of societal authority towards the goal of anchoring a Basran's sense of self, there is one more complicating and seemingly unsurmountable element: multiple authorship of narratives—a very new development, one that is not unique to Basra or Iraq, but rather is a sign of the times. Rewriting history on the scale and opulence of *Payitaht* usually carries expensive production values. But designing a flag and spreading it virally doesn't. Whether well-meaning or mendacious, the multiplicity of narratives, propagated over the internet, without a set of authoritative bodies to mediate between them, without political space, merely serves to increase the noise rather than giving coherence to a new identity. Some observers may argue that the trend in Iraq today is one of Iraqi patriotism, superseding regional or parochial particularism. But the same obstacles and centrifugal forces applying stress on older parochial narratives, and impeding the emergence of new ones, would likewise impede the emergence of wider 'patriotic' narratives. Some others may give right of place to the *marji'yya* in providing guidance and coherence to the protests, thus by its legitimacy and relevance overwhelming the noise, giving shape to a newly stabilizing narrative. But they are missing how much of the *marji'yya*'s authority has withered too, and although still substantial, it is an open question whether what remains of it is enough to fundamentally alter the country's course and discourse given the amount of untethering and noise. I also would question its ability to regain lost ground on the field of political and executive legitimacy, since the tools, conditions and 'technicians' that gradually and artificially created this *terra firma* in 2003-2004 are no longer available.

I personally had high hopes, expressed throughout the essays I've written, for a favorable narrative coalescing around the still-undefined concept of *madanniya*, a term, a brand, that had been gaining wide circulation in Iraq's political vernacular, to the point of over-circulation. What was missing were the intellectual underpinnings of its definition, and the failure to do that will remain a blot on Iraqi intellectual life. Moreover, the term has become cheapened and trivialized through overuse by a multitude of political opportunists, each promising to exemplify its tenets, while a serious undertaking to give meaning to the term was hardly attempted. *Madanniya*'s deflationary apotheosis arrived when Hamad al-Musawi, a banker widely recognized as one of Iraq's worst offending corrupters and oligarchs, and probably serving as a front for the Maliki family's ill-begotten wealth, submitted his application to license the 'Madani' Party, evermore besmirching the brand, in my eyes as well as in the eyes of many. Showing how absurdist affairs had turned, al-Musawi even managed to convince enough voters of his bona fides to win a seat in the last election at a time when fighting corruption was supposedly of paramount interest to them.

Within the swirl of competing, raucous narratives, we find that some take Basran particularism to the extreme, arguing that they should breakaway from Iraq and form their own Persian Gulf statelet. Others have signed petitions addressed to Sistani demanding that Iraq's next prime minister must be a Basran or else "the federalist project is inevitably coming within two months." Others still have tried to make the case that all Iraqi southerners, Basrans among them, are descendants of the Sumerians, not merely by civilizational or geographical deductions, but rather based on slanted readings of DNA studies, hence their new sense of themselves should reflect their five thousand year old legacy. I don't know how the Sumer association applies to Basra though, for at the time when Sumer flourished much of Basra Province was under seawater; the salinity of its waters then was similar to its salinity now. Creative minds continue to come up with new narratives. The internet is their laboratory, their playhouse, their *Voice of the Arabs*-like shortwave broadcaster. Messaging Apps are their hideouts, where they plot tomorrow's disruptions. The noise they cumulatively create is dangerous, leaving stabilizing narratives that may grow organically out of the political horizon, unformed, and stunted. No wonder the government's first response to the protests was to shut down the internet. Normally I would find that loathsome. But these are not normal times.

In recent months I have experienced two situations that, although arcane at first sight, give one a fascinating and terrifying insight as to what we are up against, as historians and others, seeking to mediate between old and new narratives. The first involved a run-in, one that I instigated, with pop-thought celebrity Nicholas Nassim Taleb, taking him to task over his dismissal of a historian as cogent and brilliant as Lebanon's late Kamal Salibi because the latter had made a scholarly case, decades ago, which conflicts with Taleb's new bouncy advocacy for a 'genetic' Levant-ism. The second was discovered purely accidentally, where one claim made on the Wikipedia page of Iraq's King Faisal II, specifically the list of ladies he was betrothed to, led me down a rabbit hole of astounding and perplexing granularity, that upon closer study comes out completely fabricated: someone went to extraordinary lengths concocting multiple genealogies, really intricate and convincing ones, for an alleged fiancée of the king's, one he had never met or even knew about.

I once thought Taleb would have interesting things to say about the Middle East, seeing how he is originally from there and had found an intellectual niche writing about disorder, framed around his concepts of unexpected 'black swans', the 'antifragility' of the gamblers who thrive on chaos, and what markets and societies can do to mitigate the damage from both by getting into the mindset of 'skin in the game'—it all seemed exciting and potentially useful at first. Maybe, I thought, his methods can explain what had been happening in the region, and what was coming its way. Much of Taleb's output proved quite disappointing upon further study, or at least as it furthers my own avenues of inquiry and application, and I will leave it at that. However, it was Taleb's quibbling with and belittling of Salibi's argument in *A House of*

Many Mansions (1988)—that Lebanese demographics today are more ‘inland’ Syrian (implication being that many have Arab roots or Arab-linked genealogies) than Mediterranean or ‘Phoenician’ or Mardaite or somehow Carolingian or what have you, and that their migrations into Lebanon would have been relatively recent—that compelled me to respond over Twitter. Taleb attempts to refute Salibi’s thesis by marshalling DNA, facial features, linguistics and cuisine to argue for a Lebanese ancestry distinct from Arabness. If he had stuck to linguistics, I would let it go since the topic of dialects is simply one of those that won’t be resolved. Had Taleb likewise made a cultural case for neo-Levantinism, or whatever we’re supposed to call it, then again, all power to him. But Taleb chose to build his thesis of Levantine distinctiveness upon genetic and physiognomic deduction while obnoxiously poo-pooing serious scholarship such as Salibi’s, a onetime student of the late and great Bernard Lewis’, and since it would be especially easy to cut him down to size, well, I could not pass up the opportunity of upbraiding him. And it was easy because, once I learned that he’s a Greek Orthodox Christian from northern Lebanon, I knew that his own family history would likely provide an outlier to his reasoning, and a vindication of Salibi’s.

I reckoned that part of his origin would have involved a migration from inland Syria, and since he had shared the names of some of his illustrious ancestors, then that made tracking down their genealogies a breeze. In fact, it merely took me the time to open a book and look through its index. That book, *Dawani al-qutuf fi tarih bani al-ma’aluf*, published in 1908 by Isa Iskander al-Ma’aluf (d. 1956), is a record of manuscripts, oral histories and genealogies of Greek Orthodox families from the Koura area, situated to Lebanon’s north (Koura encompasses Amion, Taleb’s ancestral village), who had arrived there as part of waves of migration principally from the Hawran area abutting the Syrian desert over the past 500 years. The author painstakingly put together twelve volumes of genealogies for those families, doing so over the course of decades, in order to be able to write this book. One could even say he had ‘skin in the game’, for doing so at the turn of the last century, when the roads to remote hamlets were uneven and unsafe, was no easy task. Taleb believes that such stories and narratives are made up, or at least liable to manipulation and distortion. But something like a migration within the last five hundred years cannot be easily pegged as imagined lore. I don’t know with scientific certitude the factors that may have driven the Greek Orthodox to migrate from Hawran and to eventually find their footing in Koura—even records such as al-Ma’aluf’s cannot answer such questions with the precision of a straightforward laboratory experiment. Their first major migratory waves coincided with the Ottoman occupation of the littoral Levant and inland Syria. Maybe they were displaced by raiding Bedouins, or maybe they were pulled in by the opportunity to settle better lands. Or maybe the rains would not come for far longer than what they were prepared for. But migrate they did, including the men and women Taleb claims descent from, and that part of the tale is difficult to dispute.

In al-Ma'aluf's book, both Taleb's paternal and maternal genealogies are traced back to Hawran. On his paternal side, one finds a mention of Asa'ad son of Ibrahim Taleb al-Nabbout. Asa'ad's 'originator' ancestor was from the Arab tribe of Sa'ab, who moved to Hawran from somewhere else, probably the Arabian Peninsula. Some of his descendants went to Adhra' (probably the same as modern-day Ezra'a near the city of Dera'a, which would mean that Taleb's ancestors would have passed the relatives of Ibn Taymiyyah's star pupil on their way to offering alms at the 'grave' of Saint George in that village, one of the oldest Christian houses of worship in Syria, built upon the ruins of a pagan temple, per its dedication—oddly enough, one source claims that nearby Bedouins would habitually call this village 'Azerbaijan'), and then they left Hawran "for reasons"—al-Ma'aluf doesn't elaborate—coming upon the village of Karak Nooh in Lebanon's Beka'a Valley, an important Shia seat of learning six centuries ago, moving on from there to the provincial center in the town of Baalbek. It seems that their migration from Hawran to Amion spanned several generations, with one of Taleb's ancestors serving as a clerk for the Shia feudal house of Harfush. On his mother's side, we find that his grandfather Fouad son of Nikola Ghosn can too be traced back to Hawrani and Ma'alufi roots too according to oral history. Interestingly, Taleb would turn out to be professor Salibi's distant cousin through this maternal line. The Salibis were also Greek Orthodox from Bani al-Ma'aluf (although Prof. Salibi would be raised Protestant), and their eponymous ancestor moved to Amion with his clan, where he was nicknamed Saliba because he was Christian, signifying that the indigenous people living there were not. Even though the evidence is scant, it seems that the Greek Orthodox settling Koura were displacing Shias. I don't know what the Ottoman tax registers say about all this, but it did suit the localized 'geopolitics' of the time: for example, we have the case of the Turkmen princes of Kisrawan who encouraged Maronite migration to their domain in order to displace the Shias and Nusayri-Alawites. The displacement of prior settlers from Kisrawan was almost total, turning it into the 'Citadel of the Maronites' in more recent popular vernacular, and so was the one from Koura, though there is one outlying Shia hamlet remaining nearby to the latter: Zgherta al-Matawilah. On a brief stopover many years ago, two villagers did not seem too preoccupied with the thought that 'Matawilah' had become a derogatory word for Shias. Such recorded and remembered granularity, with place names, a log of forbearers, and dates, cannot all be made up.

The connection is relevant to Taleb's thesis since Hawran cannot be thought of as part of the Mediterranean 'unit'. Hawran is too far inland, its crops and trade served the cities of Syria's interior, primarily Damascus, and the deserts to the south and east. It lies near one of the main trade and migration highways leading out of the northern Arabian Peninsula. Most Hawranis, including the families mentioned in al-Ma'aluf's book, trace their origins to Yemeni tribes. Those migrations from Yemen allegedly occurred in the 3rd century AD. Some, fancifully, connect themselves to the Ghassanids, the pagan then Jacobite vassals of the

Romans, also of Yemeni roots, who had come to control much of the deserts abutting the Roman provinces in Syria and present-day Jordan in the centuries preceding the advent of Islam. Such sorts of connections are harder to pinpoint for the records get scantly and foggier that far back, but that doesn't seem to stop some Maronite and Greek Orthodox families in Lebanon today claiming royal descent from the House of Ghassan. Even before those arrivals made it to Hawran from Yemen though, the Romans considered this territory, the main breadbasket of the Decapolis, as being 'Arab' or Saracen. Hence, Emperor Philip the Arab, who was born in Hawran (early 200s AD), was assumed to be 'Arab' and named so. No one called him the 'Levantine' or the 'of the Mediterranean'. Furthermore, the earliest Muslims would have thought of the Hawranis they encountered as 'Arabs', and linguistically it would have been one of the earliest Arabized places outside the northwestern Peninsula. That is why Muhammad's encounter with the monk Bahira, as described in Islamic lore, was set in Hawran at the city of Busra al-Sham during one of the prophet's business trips. Both their native languages, if the story is to be believed, would have been mutually intelligible accents of Arabic. That Hawran existed within an Arab civilizational and cultural milieu, from antiquity till today, is also indisputable. Such cultural supremacy and clarity stands despite genetic variety. The area was heavily and expensively built-up during Roman and Byzantine times—the Druze in Suweida nowadays not only re-use the anciently cut and dressed stones, but are actually living within the hulls of finely-constructed ancient houses—indicating the arrival of settlers, maybe even Hellenic or Hellenized ones, along with Roman power. In many villages, we can trace how the Druze displaced the Greek Orthodox who had lived in those houses before them, who had stayed behind for a while as the first of their co-religionists made their way to Koura. Hawran still has wholly or mixed Christian villages and towns indicating that the displacement was gradual and ultimately incomplete, spanning centuries. What we can't know for certain is whether the ancestors of those Greek Orthodox had built those olden homes themselves, or they too had displaced, as the Druze did, their previous residents. Here is where the record breaks down. But that does not change the impression that their mannerisms and lifestyle would have been described as 'Arab' by outsiders for well over a thousand years before they sold their livestock and bundled their things for that initial migratory wave towards the Lebanon.

Hawranis likely served *mansaf* (lamb boiled in sheep's milk, heaped on mounds of rice) when honoring a passing visitor, likewise at weddings and funerals, rather than sour cherry stew (an Aleppine, southern Anatolian, delicacy). They probably used sesame oil rather than olive oil; even though olives were cultivated nearby in what is today Suweida, and wild olive trees abounded around the Ajloun forests, sesame was just easier to grow in the areas spanning the 'desert and the sown', and still is in Hawran. Taleb's ancestors could not conceptualize a dish consisting of squid ink pasta, which Taleb keeps acclaiming on his

Twitter feed, as if to say that it is the quintessential Mediterranean culinary offering. On features, there is a high incidence among 'original' Hawranis, both those who are Muslim and also the few remaining Christians, of a particularly handsome, and distinct facial type for both sexes. Based on anecdotal observation in Syria and Jordan (Hawran extends into al-Husn and al-Ramtha, for example), one can spot a higher incidence of reddish brown skin, arched eyebrows, large round black eyes, and full lips. The other, differing facial features to be seen today in Hawran can be attributed to the relatively recently arriving Druze, who as we mentioned earlier, settled Suweida within the last four centuries; Twelver Shias from Jabal 'Amil in Lebanon, arriving over the last century; Circassians from the Caucasus and defeated Arab tribes displaced from Mosul's countryside, both of whom settled in the Golan in the last one hundred and fifty years, later to be displaced eastwards to Hawran by Israel's occupation of their villages in the 1967 war; and of course the slow, constant migration of pastoralist Arabs along the Wadi Sarhan from northern Arabia. Throughout the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Wahhabis followed the same *wadi*, harassing Hawranis old and 'new', on their sporadic raids towards Damascus. (Those older traumas should give context to the one led by Islamic State jihadists, materializing out the desert, against the Druze not a few weeks ago.)

Moreover, I find Taleb's paternal last name, al-Nabbout (...could mean 'cudgel'), to be of some interest. There is a Muslim clan that calls itself by derivatives of that surname: Nababteh, Nabbouti, Abu Nabbout, etc. Their dispersal in Jordan, Palestine and Hawran suggests a common Hawrani origin. One myth those other Nabbouts tell about themselves is that they have a famous ancestor, a Mameluke (probably of Georgian origin) who ruled Jaffa some two hundred years ago, mainly because he was known by the same name and implement, although in this case, a cudgel might just be a cudgel. Alternately, a family tree they possess traces them back to Muhammad through his grandson Hussein bin Ali. The originator for that Hashemite descent, according to a manuscript they reference, is a man who came to Palestine or Transjordan from Hejaz some four hundred years ago. But it looks dubious, with two names, Shehadeh and Muslih, who gave ancestry to the Nabbouts, inserted as his progeny by another hand on the document. The name Shehadeh occurs often in Taleb's ancestry too. There are, of course, Christian families (mostly Maronite) in Lebanon who can claim a somewhat plausible descent from Hussein and Hassan, sons of Ali, but this isn't the case here. I'd bet that if Taleb's al-Nabbout surname is one his family held since their migration from Hawran (...there is a hamlet called Nabbout in Mt. Lebanon, though likely unrelated to our case) then a DNA test would reveal affinity with those 'Arab' Muslim Nababteh still in Dera'a. But Taleb is unconvinced, contrary to all what came above, that his family has anything to do with Hawran. Rather, per his assertion, they have always been connected to the Mediterranean, and that they are ethnically and genetically Greek.

Taleb tweeted out, in response to my Twitter thread, that his father's "hobby was scientific genealogy via blood markers". He added that his father's research had found that the "Koura valley was heavily Macedonian/Western Cypriot". Taleb accused me of "inventing origins FOR ME and the Greek-Orthodox of the Koura Valley using bogus oral history, when DNA shows no Hawran stock in Koura & in MY OWN DNA", adding that "Historians are convinced they can contest paternity tests with tone [sic] of verbal BS". He cut off the discussion with "let me say it in one sentence: One single DNA test offsets 12 hours of b***ting. Gabish?"

Taleb's Hawrani forbearers wouldn't have said "Gabish" or even had the slightest inkling of what it meant. Though the Damascene merchants they sold their grains and sheepskins to may have understood it, because they would have passed off some of those wares to the Venetians working the ports of the Levantine coast. And if Taleb wants to find 'proper' ethnic Greeks in al-Koura's vicinity, he should travel north, cross the Lebanese-Syrian border, and then stop over at the first town he finds, that of Hamidiyeh (named, you guessed it, after the Ottoman Sultan we've been focusing on). On the right side of the road, he will find Nusayri-Alawite households set against the hills to the east, whose families moved there in the last few decades. To the left side of the road he will find Muslims displaced after the Ottomans lost the island of Crete in the late nineteenth century, living in homes a stone's throw away from the surf. They are accustomed to curious souls stopping over, asking questions, and they would indulge them by sharing phrases in Greek, the language many still speak among each other. Nothing about their story would overlap with the stories told by Taleb's ancestors though. Those Muslim Greeks of Hamidiyeh have more in common with those celebrating the resolution of the naming dispute between Greece and Macedonia than Taleb does. Some of them have [found sanctuary back in Crete](#) after escaping Syria's war. More likely, Taleb's blood relatives were recently displaced, subjugated or liberated (depends on whom one asks) by the Syrian regime's advances in Dera'a and the rest of Hawran in recent weeks.

Taleb's refusal to consider the stories told by his own family, because they conflict with what he would like to believe about himself, or the research conducted by his father, is yet another sign of narrative entropy. Taleb is doing nothing new in pushing his own interpretation of the origins of his people; he is following a long-line of identity reinvention, his only improvisation is the use of DNA, much like those 'Sumerians' in Basra. Salibi wrote his book in order to refute many of those re-inventions. Unfortunately, there will be more to come: a deluge of concocted myths courtesy of the febrile minds inhabiting the internet. Salibi, not Taleb, was the controversial one, working against the grain, debunking the many stories the Lebanese wanted to hear about themselves. Salibi's whole career was marked by provocation and intellectual bravery, such as the series of studies he published on the origins of the Jews, placing them nearer to al-Hawali's birthplace than to the Levant littoral. If his thesis had merit, then that would make the story of the Jews one of mankind's grandest

reinventions of self. (As an interesting side note, al-Hawali relays that the early Salafists propagating their call in those lands were surprised to find the remote villages they travelled through were uncharacteristically and deeply monotheistic, in contravention to the rest of Arabia. Could that phenomenon be a remnant of what spawned the Jews' post-'Sinaian' monotheism too, that of Jethro's adopted by Moses? Perhaps, for Jethro's people, the Cainites, made it all the way to the twentieth century, as reflected by the lifestyle and rituals of the Sulubba, who taught the early Jews plenty about willful disorder, and still have much to teach us. But let's leave this particular fascination of mine for another day.)

I've long thought that the migration and dislocation described in *Dawani al-qutuf* is somehow connected to the overrepresentation of Greek Orthodox Christians at the forefront of Arab Nationalist discourse in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The case is usually made that Uniate Melchites (Greek Catholics) discovered and played-up their 'Arabness' or 'Syrian-ness' when restoring their church to their community rather than let it be managed by the ethnic Greeks of Istanbul, and in later generations manifesting this Arab impulse or that of Syrian distinctness in the writings of their intellectuals such as Ibrahim al-Yaziji and George Samne. The other way of looking at it was that the earlier contacts made by Middle Eastern Christians with Europeans, whether they were pilgrims, merchants, missionaries or colonialists, helped transfer new concepts about nationalism and identity to the region, and to some before others, and *that* may explain the phenomenon. While modern anti-Semitism in the Middle East certainly found its first local adherents and proponents through those channels, I feel that it is not enough of an explanation for the question at hand. I propose that more emphasis should be given to the act of migration itself and how that can touch off explorations and inventions in identity. Starting anew, in new lands, with a pioneering spirit that is unencumbered with the past, may have enthused the descendants of those Hawranis to try out new ideas for size. Such new ideas, and a new way of thinking, may have broken out in the newly settled lands in al-Koura and Palestine and then infected other more established Greek Orthodox enclaves, such as those in the Syrian and Jordanian interior, more so than a familiarity with Western traders, missionaries, or schooling. Those Greek Orthodox certainly left their [imprint on the trajectory of ideas](#) across the Middle East: In Egypt, they founded the new press, leaving us legacies such as that of *al-Ahram*'s. Constantin Zurayk and George Antonius fleshed out a notion of Arabian revival; Antun Saadah, a Levantinist way ahead of Taleb's time, whose skin-in-the-game led him to a scaffold, introduced concepts such as the economic and cultural continuity of the Fertile Crescent; a second generation of Arab Nationalists such as Michel 'Aflaq gave us the Ba'ath Party; while various Palestinian hyper-leftist organizations were founded and led by the likes of George Habash and Wadie Haddad. Some of Habash's Iranian students would go on to lay the foundations of the Revolutionary Guard, thus an echo of the migration from Hawran may have

reached as unlikely a recipient as Qasim Soleimani. In that sense, Taleb's spirit of reinvention is true to his people's tradition.

Historical distortion, though, is the most egregious form of narrative entropy, for it poisons the well around which societies and nations can gather in the first place. One would hope that conditions would allow, now and in the future, for such a gathering to occur, to jumpstart politics and the process of negotiation. But clearly that will become harder and harder to do in the confused narrative environment we find ourselves in. History's potential in creating communal coherence was put best by Salibi, and although he was discussing it in the context of Lebanon, it can be extended to the rest of the Middle East:

For any people to develop and maintain a sense of political community, it is necessary that they share a common vision of their past. In communities having a natural solidarity, fictionalized history often suffices for this purpose...For a historical fiction to serve a political purpose, however, it must be generally accepted. While this acceptance may be common in societies which have a high degree of homogeneity at more than one level, and where differences at other levels are of a minimum, it is more difficult to achieve in societies which are heterogeneous in structure, and which happen to exist mainly because circumstances somehow brought their different component elements together...

In short, historical self-deception is a luxury which only societies confident of their unity and solidarity can afford. Such societies, having an ample fund of common sentiment and shared interests to rely on, can easily escape with cherishing fictional or fictionalized versions of their past, the more flattering the better, leaving proper history for the historians. Divided societies, on the other hand, cannot afford such fanciful indulgence. To gain the degree of solidarity that is needed to maintain viability, their best chance lies in getting to know and understand the full truth of their past, and to accommodate to its realities. Factual history, in cases of this kind, had often to be forcibly extracted from the privacy of the historian's study, and thrown undressed and disheveled into the open, for all to see it as it is and learn to accept and live with it as best they can.

Facts, and factual histories, are of course relative things that are open to interpretation. While I do appreciate and adopt Salibi's prescription for the role to be played by the activist

historian, I differ with his remedy, in this case, playing up Lebanon's Arabness. However, I do not doubt his scholarly authority nor his motivations. He is, after all, in 1988, trying to put out the flames of a civil war that had so devastated the land he clearly adores. But that is neither here nor there: I imagine that Salibi (d. 2011) would be flummoxed and exasperated by the noise today. What is one to do when the activist historian will not be given a hearing in the first place? When history, as accurately and scrupulously retold as possible, and nakedly exposed for all, won't merit a second glance by the rushing passersby?

The hubbub of Taleb's tweets, trumpeting the breakthroughs of DNA Levantism, will inevitably disrupt any competing narratives such as that of Salibi's or what I tried to do, that attempt to tether down the current discourse in more reasonable explanations. There is a role for DNA studies, of course, one that is concomitant with a historian's exegesis of available records, especially as the sample sizes increase and better interpretation methods are developed. But my sense is that there is too much noise, and too little recognition and respect left for Salibi's painstaking studies or al-Ma'aluf's tribulations in gathering the records in the first place. The internet has made the propagation of new narratives incredibly easy, and the easier and more straightforward the narrative, the farther it shall carry, especially if the audience is primed for it, and desires hearing it. That has been the case throughout time, but the variable today is how much noisier it is—this in unprecedented in mankind's experience. The noise makes it harder for Taleb to push his agenda too, but the levels of granularity and reflection needed to think through some more complicated narratives, such as that of Salibi's, immediately preclude it from running in such a race. Al-Zarqawi and his heirs realized early what the new media terrain would look like. They understood that pretty soon they will not require a state sponsor, or a sympathetic satellite channel like *Al-Jazeera*, to get word of their feats and exploits out. They also understood how to [manipulate a primed audience with faux historicity](#). And they fathomed that the process by which narratives 'take' with an audience are now exceedingly fast, shallow, and brittle. Consider how early Christianity would depict simplified scenes from the Testaments on painted murals or in mosaic, as visual aids for priests explaining to an illiterate faithful who those characters were and what sagas they endured. Now, streaming video, a decade-old technology that is readily accessible on multiple platforms, has enabled the propagation of narratives in ways previously unseen. That actors, such as the Zarqawists, have figured out what to do with these new tools as quickly as the corporations that developed them, is not a reassuring thought. Henceforth, well-endowed institutions cannot be expected to handily outperform instrument-poor revolutionaries in the contests of hoopla and indoctrination. Practically, it means that Bin Salman has no unique advantage against al-Hawali. Neither do Najaf and Qum versus Soleimani.

Moreover, there is a new facet of how narratives are borne out of the new tools of the internet that should worry us even more: the outright fabrication of history and historical

records. 'Fake news', hoaxes, and myth-making have always been around; they are as old as the first tales. But with the breakdown of authorities, and the amplification of noise, it will be harder and harder keeping track of newer, outright fabrications, while attempting to mitigate their effect. Societies around the world are afflicted with this situation, but it is likely to afflict some more than others. Particularly vulnerable are those societies that did not develop a widespread culture of modern historiography and critical thinking in the last two centuries, such as that of the Middle East's. It is not the specter of hoodwinked laypeople and wrathful street mobs that worries me, although a lot of that is likely too. I worry about the elite of these vulnerable societies, whether mercantile, intellectual, and martial or what have you, who are unprepared and untrained for what is coming. The unwise decisions they may take, the frivolous, provocative pronouncements they may utter, based on such fakes, will bring more damage, deeper in nature and longer in term, to their societies than the rampage of a few young nihilists burning down the local post office.

I once entertained the notion that one can fight back, that 'fact-checking' if done well, and compellingly, will carry the day. A few years ago, I was quite pleased with my [take down](#) of an Iraqi Facebook celebrity, who was falsely claiming to be the grandson of an important Jewish notable and philanthropist, and whose opinions were being taken seriously, and shared profusely, by several of the country's intelligentsia. More recently I [pushed back](#) at the adoption, by nationalist Kurds, of a picture of an old man with a haggard look and handsome face—one that is even sold in stalls in Arbil—that they take to be iconic of Kurdish suffering and patience. However, I found a resource that accorded that man's name, religious affiliation, occupation, residence, and date of birth. By heritage and choice, he is a Turkman, not a Kurd. I proceeded to make all that clear through a Twitter thread, directing my revelations at Kurdish accounts that use the old man's visage as their profile picture. I was hoping to shake their certainties, instill doubt, and through doubt guide them to a thoughtful consideration of how identities and myths are formed, sometimes even arbitrarily, and that that insight should tamp down their zealous departures—but it only made them angrier. Yet it still felt like a tiny victory, because I knew that the seed of doubt had been planted.

Nevertheless, a few months ago, I saw the future of fakeness, and it was both mystifying and exhilarating at once. I don't remember how I veered into the topic of King Faisal II's betrothals. I had looked into one specific claim made on his affections by a French-American grifter who successfully sued in New York City to gain access to the king's bank accounts there, presenting herself as 'Queen Genevieve of Iraq'. I discussed that claim during a [weekly YouTube show](#) that I was uploading over a year's time. The show was to be a reflection on Iraq's history, and how to approach certain topics with a critical, revisionist eye. The presentation would at times launch off into tangents, one of which followed up on other love interests attributed to the king. That is how I came upon a certain Kiyemet, whom he either

married for a while, or was engaged to, according to his Wikipedia page. After mentioning it in passing, I began to look into this Kiyet, aided by a viewer of the show who also took an interest. Over a week's time, we would compare notes, in what turned out to be a dizzying, ad hoc research project. According to the Wikipedia entry, Kiyet had an illustrious pedigree, one that would naturally be expected in a young lady who was about to become a queen. However, upon closer inspection, by diving into the deeper bowels of the internet, it turns out that Kiyet has at least five distinct pedigrees—all of which are definitely illustrious and absolutely fake. What made this case mystifying is the amount of obscure detail the author of this particular narrative went to, and the inexplicable motives he had. At least with the supposed scion of the Jewish notable one could determine that the fellow was interested in getting a significant cut of the man's inheritance, more or less saying so openly on a blog devoted to his life story. But in the case of Kiyet and her grandmother Fehimeh—the experience of discovery came to be called in my mind 'The Affair of the Five Fehimehs'—there seemed to be no pathway to a payoff and nothing to be gained by this effort. What made the case exhilarating is that the author, in diversifying the backgrounds of the Fehimehs, managed to touch upon many of the obscurer stories of the Middle East, a tour de force through the legacy of Ottomanism, spanning the Balkans, North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Whereas an activist historian could reliably turn to the authority of the historical 'record', in this case I was witnessing a ground level forgery of the record, done with such artistry as to mimic the most convincing of the art world's forgeries.

I will spare the reader all the details, just know that they are exquisitely intricate. For example, one of the Fehimehs is supposed to be the daughter of Prince Mahmud Jalaeddin, son of Ottoman sultan Abdul Aziz by his second wife (...the sultan was Pertevniyal's son, the aforementioned 'witch'). Prince Mahmud, according to this story, had married Sharifa Shams, the daughter of Sharif Sultan bin Muhammad, of Mecca. Their daughter Fehimeh would live until 1971. Her daughter Khadijia (d. 2000) would bear Kiyet, the king's alleged fiancée, in 1938. Behold how spectacular this tale is: I did find a record for Sharif Sultan bin Muhammad, who died a young man at the age of twenty four, in Mecca, in 1866, leaving behind a daughter. Try as I may, I could not find a name for the daughter. Now, a royal wedding between the Sharifs of Mecca and a son of a sultan would have been big news, to the Meccans at least. So I asked a friend to reach out to King Faisal's surviving aunt, and to his second cousin too, asking all sorts of questions about the five Fehimehs, Kiyet and this 'Shams' the daughter of Sharif Sultan. "Total rubbish" and "I have no idea who any of these people are" were the responses I got back. The current crop of Hashemites, who are descended from the same Sharifs of Mecca, have no recollection of such a marriage, or of that girl's name. The Ottoman records, for their part, tell us that Prince Mahmud never married.

A second Fehimeh was supposedly the daughter of Sultan Murad V, Abdul Hamid's brother and predecessor. Her mother was a Georgian. The records tell us a lot about this particular Fehimeh, who was very well educated and a patron of the arts. However, they tell us that Fehimeh's second marriage did not produce any children contrary to the tale told about this Fehimeh's daughter, also Khadija, also dying in 2000, and bearing Kiymet in 1938. And just in case the record keepers got the order of marriages wrong, her first marriage did not bear offspring either. The third Fehimeh is allegedly the granddaughter of Dawud Pasha, the last of the Georgian rulers of Baghdad, through his son Abdul Karim. She married Muhammad Ali Pasha Karakoc, who was descended from a Georgian general in the service of the Ottomans. The fourth Fehimeh was supposedly born in Bulgaria, the daughter of one of the grandchildren of a famed Ottoman general in the Balkans. She married a man of the princely house of Tunis (Ali son of Muhammad Taher) whose mother was a princess of the Egyptian royal house, specifically a granddaughter of Ibrahim Pasha's through his son Mustafa Fazil Pasha. Their daughter Khadija married a Bulgarian Turk who was descended from Princess Saliha, the daughter of Sultan Mahmud II. However, the records tell us very different things about the union of the Tunisian and Egyptian houses, as well as the progeny of Princess Saliha. The fifth Fehimeh is allegedly the daughter of Amineh, another daughter of Sultan Abdul Aziz's. This Fehimeh married a Tatar prince. The records, though, tell us that Amineh had no issue, though one source claims that she did have a daughter, but her name was Hamideh and not Fehimeh. Then there is a whole different genre of what genealogies Kiymet's father had, with one returning him to a great-great-grandmother who was the daughter of Sharif Ghalib of Mecca, and with one of his grandmothers being a cousin of Prince Sabahettin, the liberal opponent to Abdul Hamid II.

One may have gone cross-eyed reading that preceding paragraph, but I simply summarized much of what I had accrued. There are tens of other tangents that I did not relate here. Needless to say, given how many fabrications of Fehimeh's ancestry there were, some of which one had to retrieve from internet archives that the author had thought were deleted, one must deduce that this stuff is indeed "total rubbish." One of the deleted entries, however, holds a fascinating explanation as to how the author came into such levels of detail: Kiymet's paternal grandmother worked as a maid in the household of Prince Abdul Halim, a grandson of Sultan Abdel Mecid I. The grandmother left her children behind, one of whom was Kiymet's father, when her employer went into exile to Paris after the Ottoman house was overthrown. The father was raised by an uncle, and hence many of the names of all those princes and princesses that he would have heard about from his mother may have passed on to his daughter Kiymet, who may have imagined herself to be one of them, and a contender for Faisal's heart too. It seems that all those entries were made by Kiymet's nephew living now near Stuttgart. He was born in Germany to a German-Hungarian Jewish mother. I tried contacting him through

multiple ways, but he has not written back. I just want to know why he went to such extraordinary lengths to plot out fake narratives and genealogies for his aunt. I would also very much like to know how he came into such a treasure trove of obscure, somewhat plausible, connections. These don't exist in a single resource or reference book. They had to be gathered from a multitude of sources; for example, the record on the death of Sharif Sultan exists only in a bulletin published in the Hejaz in the mid-1860s.

Faking genealogies has been going on for a very long time; that is why we have ridiculously large numbers of Hashemites and Qurayshites. And debunking even recently made claims, such that as that of "Princess Doctor" Nesrine, who emerged in 2003 asserting that she was the granddaughter of Iraq's first king through a completely fictitious son, and who was visiting schoolchildren in Beirut while dressed as a fairytale princess as recently as 2012, seems to do little to deter such fakes. That single sentence about Kiymet, casually inserted into Faisal II's Wikipedia page, took me and my associate a whole week to track down, and to figure out that it was bogus. My background in the histories being marshalled by the forger, whether Ottoman, Arabian, Egyptian, and Balkan, would have prepared me to a certain extent to discern the cracks in the narrative, and to know where I can test the claims against existing, acknowledged records. I didn't mind wasting my time on this; it was a fascinating journey. Yet that sentence still stands on the Wikipedia page, and it has been and will be repeated dozens of times in articles, in Arabic, about Faisal II's life. Those bogus genealogies for Kiymet are still floating around discussion forums and comments sections, in English, German and Turkish, infecting storylines across the Middle East. And to think that all this damage, this edifice of fake news, was done by one man! Now imagine if ten, or a hundred, or a thousand such ventures are launched. Imagine if this were done on an industrial level, in troll farms, or by 'electronic armies', or by revolutionaries such as the jihadists who understand the value of poisoning the wells of established sourcing. I keep reading that we are entering the era of 'deepfakes', one in which someone's face can be believably superimposed on a pornographic act of bestiality. One way to deepfake a book, let's say the memoirs of some important world figure, would be to amend its contents to include outrageous claims, and then have it circulating in PDF format on the internet. These claims would be repeated numerous times, all credibly citing the 'book'. Then we would have fakes citing fakes citing fakes, a veritable genealogy of fakery. How then is the audience to take a historian's assurance at face value, that the record he is citing is not a fake of a fake of a fake?

Narrative coherence firms up reliability and authority, while narrative entropy destroys such intellectual cachets. The latter condition is manifestly ascendant; the world will come to know many more Kiykets. It would have been difficult to rebuild authority and regain legitimacy even if political space were available, and even if a transcendental human agency emerged with a desire to work within that space and preserve it. Now, with the accelerated

breakdown of tethering, we find ourselves in a unique moment, one of abysmal failure of the traditionally authoritative influences on society; my friend, that sheikh in Basra, one who can cow ascending warlords, is a rarity, a relic from a bygone era. There'll be fewer of his example moving forward. This is why it is unreminiscent of the end of the 1970s, nor the turbulence of last quarter of a millennium. It should be a sobering revelation, yet many choose to look away.

* * *

How transformative can a black hole be? Surely, given that the Middle East is such an old place, many things will carry through to the other side, one may suppose. Not necessarily so. The transmogrification can be truly breathtaking in its grotesquely destructive breadth. The example of the Jews of Iraq, a relatively recent one, can tell us much about how sudden and severe change can be. The breakdown of the old narratives was lightning quick, coming from the unlikeliest of origins. Valiant attempts to replace the old with new, kindly narratives did not take. The outcome—the displacement of this ancient community—was almost, except for a handful, absolute. And it wasn't even a black hole indigenous to the region.



[N. Kazimi, *Civil War 4*, 2014, 30" x 60"]

While the world around him was engrossed with the latest news of World War II, whose sparks had even singed his country, Iraqi educator and journalist Ezra Heskell Haddad (1903-1972) was busy translating an eight hundred year old travelogue.

Haddad was a headmaster and a renowned man of letters, and was counted as one of the leading lights of the cultural verve animating the Baghdad of the thirties and forties. However, in the summer of 1941, he assumed another duty, serving within a committee that oversaw the burial of about 180 corpses believed to belong to the Jewish victims of a riot that came to be known, for the history books, as the “Farhud”. According to testimony Haddad gave at the beginning of the sixties, after his emigration along with almost all of his people to Israel, he asserted that it was difficult to accurately account for the number of bodies since some of the remains consigned to the committee amounted to a severed hand here, a dismembered foot there. The victims were buried within a mass grave at Baghdad’s old Jewish cemetery, located within the city’s former walls, where the ancestors of the Jews had been burying their dead for over a millennium. An elongated half cylinder of brickwork was built over the grave, not dissimilar in design to those arched plastic houses used in agriculture. That uninspired structure came to be the only ‘monument’ bearing witness to what had occurred in those first two days of June. In the mid-sixties though, this monument was leveled along with all the other headstones, and the remaining Jews were given a deadline by which to transport their dead relatives, and the odd saint or two, to a new plot of land allocated for that purpose that is adjacent to what is now Sadr City. Since most of the community was absent, and could not return because their Iraqi citizenships had been rescinded, most of the remains stayed put, including those odd assortments of mismatched limbs. They were, and still are, entombed under a thick layer of asphalt, as the old cemetery was turned into the capital’s transportation hub, the macabrely-named Al-Nahdha (‘Renaissance’) Public Garage, from which taxis and buses run out to points north and south of the country.

Maybe Haddad sensed that his people’s time on this land—one that the Jews called Shina’ar, and their sojourn in the city of Baghdad, whose environs they populated even before it was established, and which they later nicknamed *Adina*, alternatively meaning the elegant and refined one, the gentle one, the coddled one, the noble one—was coming to a close. Maybe he sensed that the life he knew, that vibrant life of the mind, where he counted other luminaries of the age, such as Abbas Azzawi, Yaqub Sarkis, Korkis Awwad, Mustafa Jawad, and Yousif al-Muhami—intellectuals who laid the foundations of Iraqi humanities and law—as his hang-out chums, was undergoing a slow, inevitable death. Or maybe he hoped that by translating the travels of Benjamin of Tudela he would break through the insanity descending around him, reminding one and all that the Jews were of this land, had always been, and that an event like the Farhud was a temporary setback, one that echoed the outside world’s turmoil, an alien world’s convulsions, and that pretty soon things will go back to what they used to be.

Haddad explains to us that the account of Benjamin’s trip, which spanned eight years from 1165 until 1173, and which Haddad had translated from a Hebrew original, upon which he

expanded with clarifications and context, and had [published in Baghdad in 1945](#), was important because it provides “general information on the conditions of the Jews in every city he visited, describing their numbers and situations and their livelihoods and their social and educational standing, and their relationship with the environment that surrounds them.” Haddad subtly introduced his motivations for undertaking the translation, for he wrote that “Benjamin was particularly impressed by what he saw in Mesopotamia, where Jewish groups were in those days experiencing security and prosperity under the comforting shade of the Islamic caliphate, at an age when the Jews of Europe knew only exhaustion and religious and economic persecution.” The land of Iraq had a special significance for the Jews, Haddad added, “for the Euphrates was the gushing spring from which Talmud flowed...that still to this day guides the Jews as to their laws and the rituals of their religion and their history and myths.” It should be noted that the travelogue had been translated multiple times into several European languages ever since the sixteenth century, but its text was never published in any of the languages of the Middle East, other than Hebrew that is, until Haddad did so.

Benjamin of Tudela headed east at a time marked by turbulence much in the same way as it afflicted the times Haddad was living through. Benjamin had been born in a Spanish city that was regained by Christendom from the Muslims only a few years before. On his travels, he followed a route through Southern Europe that took him by Marseilles and through Rome, onto Constantinople, then still ruled by the Byzantines, beyond which he traversed the Crusader principalities until he reached Jerusalem, where the Franks had been reigning for about seventy years. This was all before crossing over to the land of Islam, passing through Damascus and Aleppo, Mosul and Baghdad and Basra, then onwards to Persia and Central Asia, and further into India, even claiming to have visited China. He returned via the Persian Gulf, alighting at the Peninsula and Yemen, before finding his way to Cairo and Alexandria. Those Islamic lands followed different banners too, some under the shadow of a caliph in Baghdad, another under the Seljuks, and others still took their cue from a Fatimid potentate. Some pockets were patrolled by Assassin sectarians, while others answered to a warlord huddled up in a local castle. Haddad could not arrive as to a motive that would compel Benjamin to wade through adversity in order to reach the destinations enumerated above. However, Benjamin’s account was indeed unique, as Haddad explained, for it preceded Ibn Jubayr’s travelogue by seventeen years, and Marco Polo’s by over a century, and Ibn Battuta’s by a hundred and sixty years.

It is also unclear why Benjamin went to such lengths to contrast the differing conditions experienced by Jews under Christian and Islamic rule—would that not get him in trouble back in his Spanish hometown, to which he returned? In Rome, he found only two hundred Jews, descending from the older bloodlines that settled there after the Romans had devastated their state. There were about 2500 Jews, of several sects, living in Constantinople, working in the

tanning and ship-building industries, as well as silk weaving, but “a severe injury befalls them from the rest of the population, for riding horses is forbidden to them, exempting Rabbi Solomon the Egyptian, who is the king’s private physician. The physician has some standing with the king, and by his influence the Jews enjoy some benefits within the upsurge of persecution inclosing them.” As for Jerusalem, he only found two hundred Jews working the tanneries, given that multiple Crusading massacres had greatly depleted their numbers. He pointed out that Jewish cemeteries there were once extensive “but the Franks destroy those graves and use their stones to build their houses.”

This decrepit state he finds his people in changes dramatically once he moves on to a city like Palmyra in the Syrian desert, for example, where he finds two thousand warlike Jews who “aid their neighbors the Muslims and Arabs who follow Nureddin in their war against the invading Christians.” This would be Nureddin Zengi, the Turkish *atabeg* of Aleppo, whom the jihadists of the Islamic State revere and whose history they play up. Palmyra would also be part of Hawran’s commercial matrix, and would have loomed large in the geospatial sensibilities of Taleb’s Christian ancestors. The numbers of the Jews keep increasing as he stops by Damascus (3000 Jews) and Aleppo (1500 Jews) and then Mosul (7000 Jews). The numbers climb exponentially thereafter, counting 7000 in Jaziret Ibn ‘Umar, 7000 in Kufa (near Najaf), and 10000 in each of Basra and Wasit, with another 25000 inhabiting the city of Amadiya and its environs, which include the region of Barzan. In fact, this travelogue is the earliest record that has come down to us of the Jewish messianic uprising that had occurred in the latter city just a few years before Benjamin got there.

Even before reaching Baghdad, he counted 15000 Jews living in some of its satellite towns such as ‘Akbara. While in the capital, he reckoned that the number of his religious kin was somewhere around forty thousand “living in security and dignity and prosperity under the shade of the Prince of the Faithful, the caliph”—that being the ‘Abbasid caliph al-Mustanjid Billah at that time.

Benjamin caught Baghdad at a moment during its long, drawn-out decline, but for him, it was still the glorious world capital of the Jews, during their exile. They had ten important seminaries there, dozens of synagogues, many shrines dedicated to their prophets and saints, and it was the headquarters of the Galut (‘community’) that was presided over by a descendant of David’s, whose writ extended over the Jews “in Iraq, Iran, Yemen, the Arabian Peninsula, the Caucasus, Siberia and Central Asia, Samarkand, Tibet and the Indian domains.” Benjamin added that “it is customary that both Jews and Muslims and all the other subjects must stand and salute the head of the Galut [the Exilarch] as he passes, and whoever does not do so will receive a hundred lashes.” Benjamin then describes the multitudes who throng towards Ezekiel’s tomb near Hillah on his holy days, where the tents of the pilgrims extend to twenty two miles.

Haddad's translation was dedicated to Ezra Menahim Salih Danial, the same man that the imposter that I had uncovered was claiming as his grandfather. Danial was a Jewish notable of Baghdad's, whose family wealth extended back to the time of the Georgian Mamelukes. The Danials had come along with the Georgians from the Caucasus and were tasked by them with financial duties, administering agricultural taxation and other concerns. That is how the family came to be in possession of many lands, and came to represent the Jews of Mesopotamia to the Ottoman parliament in the decades following Georgian defeat and the return of centralized Ottoman rule. This relationship with authority continued through the formation of modern Iraq, with the Danials vacating one of their homes so that King Faisal I could move in until such time as the new royal residence was completed. The family had also endowed several charities that benefited both Jews and non-Jews in Iraq. Ezra Danial was a member of the Senate at the time of the translation's publication, and he chose to stay behind after the Jewish exodus, dying a year later in 1952. His wish to be buried next to Ezekiel was honored. Maybe Haddad, by choosing such a man for the dedication, was also trying to show that the Jews had been loyal and constructive towards the new state, the one that was, at the time, seemingly pushing them out.

Much mystery envelops the events of the Farhud still. Even the term itself is subject to dissenting interpretations. It may be an old local term, of indeterminate linguistic provenance, describing a sudden swelling and engorgement of the Tigris following an especially copious rainfall, then its subsequent overflow into a destructive torrent. At a later stage, it came to describe a soldiery's mutiny, probably that of the janissaries, should their salaries get held up; their riot would extend out of a local barracks, bringing ruin to lives and property. The modern reader knows little of the details of those two days in June, even though the Iraqi government appointed an investigative committee to assess the damages and identify the guilty. Too many interests aligned to put those findings away, to peg the whole affair as an unfortunate aberration. Was the Farhud spontaneous or instigated, or both? The early skirmishes began spontaneously, it seems, as the returning soldiers, who had just been defeated by the British at Habbaniya, took umbrage at the sight of Jewish celebrations of Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks. The Jews were decked out in their best, heading out to visit the shrines of their saints. Those heading to the city's westernmost shrines, such as that of Joshua Cohen Gadol ('The High Priest') near the train terminal, the final stop of the Berlin-Baghdad railway, which had only been completed a few weeks before, would have been the first throngs bypassing columns of angry, returning soldiers, in a city otherwise empty with trepidation, awaiting the advent of the British forces that had reached its outskirts. Whereas many were worried or angry, the Jews had another reason to be happy besides celebrating their holiday: the pro-Axis regime of al-Gailani's was about to collapse; Nazism's writ would not extend out into their lives.

We still do not know why the British commanders decided to idle away outside of the capital following their rout of al-Gailani's loyalists, even after receiving reports of widespread violence and mayhem breaking out. And did the rightist gangs, such as the *futuwwa* that Shawkat's father had advocated for, as well as the militias of Younis al-Saba'awi (Minister of Economy in al-Gailani's cabinet, and one of three executed later over the events of the Farhud), appear in a coordinated manner at nightfall to begin attacking Jewish neighborhoods? What of the reports of hundreds of non-Jewish protesters and rioters who perished as order was enforced on the city? Who were they, what were their names and backgrounds? Why did the investigative committee certify that Jewish victims numbered only 110 persons, among them 28 women, and that rape cases did not exceed three, even though Jewish notables believed that those numbers should have been much higher and that many of the bodies dumped into the Tigris went uncounted? All these questions remain unanswered.

Nevertheless, what we can ascertain is that a man like Haddad would have never imagined things going this wrong. For the Jews of Baghdad were not themselves a distinct target of a 'Farhud' ever since the events of 1291 and 1333 and 1334; their overall situation during all the preceding eras spanned many gradations of discrimination and injustice but never amounted to the levels of persecution visited upon European Jews, or those living under the Byzantines and Crusaders. What calamities the Jews of Mesopotamia witnessed, whether plagues or Mongol invasions, were shared with the other nations and faiths crowding that land.

Maybe Haddad believed that the Farhud resulted from the systemic propaganda campaigns waged and funded against the Jews by the German Embassy from the mid-thirties onwards. But if Haddad thought back to the mid-twenties he would have discovered that first seed of modern anti-Semitism delivered freshly from Russia, its principal nursery heretofore, to be planted in the alluvial plains of Iraq at the same time as it was being planted across the world. Haddad should have made the connection, for he was personally involved: he had traded barbs with another Iraqi writer who had just published his memoirs of what he saw in Russia right before and after the Bolshevik Revolution.

The publication of the [*Memoirs of Saddeeq Pasha al-Qadiri*](#) in 1924 coincided with the emergence of two newspapers that same year: one, *Al-Misbah*, was an Arabic language periodical platforming the views of Iraq's Jewish intelligentsia, while the other, *Al-Alem Al-Arabi*, was owned by Christian journalist Saleem Hassoun, and it veered to the far right, so much so that at a later date it was directly financed by the German ambassador in Baghdad and was the first to serialize, during the thirties, Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* in Arabic to an Iraqi audience. Haddad and others took to the pages of *Al-Misbah* to defend their community from al-Qadiri's slander, while al-Qadiri responded through *Al-Alem Al-Arabi*. Maybe Haddad thought that that was the extent of the matter, not realizing at the time the damage that al-Qadiri's book would be doing.

I had never heard of this book or the author. A bookseller in Mutannabi Street, the same one who pushed *Tragedy of Barzan* on me, was counseling that I really needed to buy al-Qadiri's memoirs. His urgency here was not because the author is Kurdish (he was) but rather because the bookseller wanted my help in contacting al-Qadiri's surviving heirs. His specific interest was whether al-Qadiri's papers can reveal anything about an incident that allegedly occurred in 1930, when a young, handsome and pale skinned man in his late twenties without any documentation arrived in Baghdad, recounting his travails in traveling through Russia and Persia, to lay claim to the authorities that he was none other than Alexei Nikolaevich, Tsarevich of Russia. The Egyptian magazine that ran the story at the time, a clipping of which was kept by the bookseller, added that members of the White Russian émigré community in the Iraqi capital (contemporaneous census records number them in the few dozens) recognized the claimant and took him in. Al-Qadiri, having been fighting alongside the Whites, the bookseller reasoned, would have certainly jotted down some thoughts on the affair. I however found something else of interest in al-Qadiri's memoir: it was one of the earliest importations of Protocols-of-the-Elders-of-Zion-grade anti-Semitism entering into the Arabic language, and given how briskly the *Protocols* continue to sell across the Middle East, this was quite a find.

There were many stages to how anti-Semitism developed in Europe that are beyond our scope here. However, a critical one, especially in terms of constructing a coherent and malicious narrative as well as the extensiveness of dissemination, was the notion that there was a hidden Jewish conspiracy secretly managing world events. That notion found a vehicle in the publication of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Historians have tracked down the provenance of this fabrication from its origins in late nineteenth-century Paris until it took the form of an appendix in a book released by a little known Swiss-Russian writer in 1905. The intent of that text was to link the spread and success of leftist movements in Europe and Russia to a Jewish plot, pegging even Russia's defeat by the Japanese on this ignoble lot. However, the largest propagation of this notion came with the outbreak of the Bolshevik Revolution, with the White Russians who were battling the Reds embracing those myths and expanding their reach. Then, after their counterrevolution was defeated, thereby dispersing the Whites throughout the world, the Protocols found new audiences as they sang their laments to whoever would listen. Unfortunately, those ideas spread to Arabic-reading audiences rather quickly after 'General' Saddeeq al-Qadiri released his memoirs, to disastrous effect.

Fate had it that al-Qadiri (1894-1970) would escape the bucolic nothingness of the Bazian Valley, intersecting the road from Suleimaniya to Kirkuk, to live out the high geopolitical drama of the Russian civil war. His ancestors of the Hamawand tribe were few in numbers—at the height of their notoriety, no more than a thousand fighting men—yet prolific in mischief.

They had been a perennial thorn in the side of both the Qajars and the Ottomans. In many ways, they were the last of the 'original' Kurds: pastoralist, rebellious, predatory, chivalrous, hard as nails. For their part, the Ottomans tried almost everything to subdue them, eventually deciding that the one way to do so was by exiling the Hamawand to the far corners of the empire, to places like the island of Rhodes, and to Benghazi, in Libya. One of my favorite stories about the Middle East was how the Hamawand wound their way back to their valley, sometimes colluding with pirates, at other times just walking eastwards. But al-Qadiri's father had powerful, well-connected in-laws who interceded on his behalf, facilitating his entrance into the service of the central state, thereby dodging the measures enacted against his fellow tribesmen. His father's work took the young al-Qadiri to Baghdad, where he finished his studies, and then later to Istanbul where he enrolled in the military academy. Barely a second lieutenant, and just as the Ottoman Empire's entry into World War I was underway, al-Qadiri was taken prisoner by the Russians on one of his first military encounters on the Caucasian front. He spent the war years in Tbilisi, and later, as he wrote in his memoirs, he got to witness the outbreak of the Bolshevik takeover in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Fate tossed him anew among the Muslim Tatars, where he became a military advisor of sorts for them, and then later he found himself as the commander of Islamic factions within General Grigory Semyonov's 'Independent Russian Siberian Army' based in Manchuria, fighting for the Whites to defeat the Bolsheviks and resurrect Romanov rule.

Naturally, his account of what he saw and the adventures he experienced, to which he added layers detailing many other topics, such as Rasputin's exploits, the duplicities of the Czechoslovak Legion, the horrendous killing of the royal family, as well as his observations of Japan and Korea, had the effect of exciting the curiosities of Baghdad's reading public who wanted to know all there was about the great events that had unfolded in recent years. The world war had even brought the Russians to within a few days' march of their city as the Russian Imperial Army advanced down the Diyala River after defeating the Ottomans in Rawanduz and Khaniqin, where they also committed horrors among the populace. However, the version the readers got by purchasing this book was rather one sided, that of the White Russians, and within it they received a substantial dose of the 'Jews are behind it all' narrative.

Qadiri wrote: "One cannot measure this astounding [Bolshevik] revolution by any revolutions that have occurred in the world hence, for this one supersedes all by several magnitudes..." He explained his intent which is "I bring forth this brief study in which I delve into the facts of this revolution to show the world, and especially my kin the Iraqis, an overview of what happened, of this incredible development, in Russian lands...because I was an active participant in all the stages of this revolution." Adding, "the Russian revolution was the third victory for the nihilist organism, whereas its first victory was in 1815 in the great French revolution and its second was in the year 1908 in the Ottoman coup, but its third victory which

exceeded its own expectations bore fruit in Russia in 1917. The Zionist and Freemason and Anarchist and Bolshevik organizations are but a façade for this aforementioned organism that they contrive in different places, but the goal and intent remains the same even though the name changes, for the founders of these groups are the Jews or the monies of the Jews, and you can find them in every nation professing honesty and devotion but they only seek, through the guise of patriotism, to achieve their ends.” The Jews, al-Qadiri went on to explain, were always striving to sow dissent and turmoil through revolutions and upheavals in order to extort the wealth of other nations, stopping at nothing.

In transcribing the Whites’ narrative in Arabic, al-Qadiri transferred some of their errors too to his audience. For example, the Whites believed that Alexander Kerensky was of Jewish origins. But that is incorrect; what is known about him is that he took on landmark cases, when working as a lawyer before becoming premier, defending Jews, hence it was assumed he was a Jew even though there was no proof of that in his genealogy. Al-Qadiri also records some of the incorrect rumors that would have reached him and his comrades in those frenzied days, such as dramatic manner by which Admiral Alexander Kolchak’s wife was killed aside her husband by the Red Army in the city of Irkutsk in 1920, when in truth his wife was living in Paris at the time, while the woman by his side, his mistress, was not shot but rather lived to a ripe old age, dying in Moscow in the mid-seventies. The most interesting ‘fake news’ the Whites were peddling, or as al-Qadiri heard it, was that Vladimir Lenin was put up as a figurehead for the revolution and the government formed by it, while the real power was in the hands of the Jews. Al-Qadiri asserts “that [the] vast majority of the Bolshevik leaders and their retinues are Jews, and the Russians hardly occupy any of the sensitive posts in Bolshevik Russia, for out of 503 positions only 11 of them were held by Russians, and another 8 are for foreigners. Whereas the Bolshevik cabinet comprises of 18 members and only 3 are real Russians, the other 15 being Jews. But these Jews had assimilated into the Russian patria and converted to Christianity a while ago and changed their original names.” He then relayed the lament that Lenin had allegedly uttered on his deathbed, “Ah! What have I done? I have tossed the Russian people into destruction so that Jews be happy.” It seems that the Whites had not compiled accurate genealogical tables on the Bolshevik leadership either, for they missed the fact that Lenin’s maternal grandfather was born a Jew.

Evidence suggests that al-Qadiri had written the original text in Ottoman Turkish, and it was then translated for him into Arabic. We can infer that from a few hints here and there. One wonders who would have arranged for that? At other turns in his memoirs, he tells us about the many contacts he maintained with British consulates in the Far East, and he wrote in profusely flattering tones about the British Army. The origins of these memoirs, I think, may have been reports that he had been compiling for the British about the revolutionary conditions in Russia, as well as about the inclinations of the Muslims of Central Asia and the

Caucasus whose outlooks deeply interested the British, especially as it related to their imperial assets in India and Persia. Perhaps al-Qadiri was trying to convince the British to fund a new fighting force to be formed out of those Muslims for he wrote “I await breathlessly for any call to take up arms against the Bolsheviks in Russia and I am fully prepared to return and lead my valiant soldiers!” Instead, the British and the Iraqi state had him supervising military operations against al-Hafid and, later, the Barzanis. There could have been another motivation for whoever funded the translation and subsequent publication of the memoirs: inoculating Iraq against communist propaganda. Anti-Semitism prevailed among high-bred British officers at the time, who had taken a new dislike to what the Zionists were trying to push in Palestine under their watch. They also loathed communism, and could have been easily swayed towards putting two and two together by conflating Jewishness with the communist menace for propaganda purposes. This, however, remains within the realm of conjecture.

We may not have evidence for how al-Qadiri’s memoirs came to be, but we do know how the Jews of Iraq responded. Writers like Haddad took to the pages of *Al-Misbah*, accusing al-Qadiri of fomenting sedition and sectarianism. This pushback forced al-Qadiri to add a clarification to the second edition of his book, where he said that by “Jews” he only meant the Jews of Russia, declaiming that “I was never referring to the peaceful Jews who are famous for their tender nature and kindness of heart such as the Jews living in Shorjeh and Suq Hannon and in Basra and Amara and Mosul and Damascus, and the Balat neighborhood in Istanbul, for those are consumed with their livelihoods and hard work.” That did not put an end to the back-and-forth, leading al-Qadiri to lose his cool, baring his venomous ill-will. He subsequently wrote in *Al-Alem Al-Arabi* that he will imminently escalate matters to reveal “the secrets of how the Jews residing in Iraq and Palestine are colluding with the Jewish Bolshevik Russians” and the tricks and subversion they are up to in Baghdad to spread anarchy and Zionism among peace-loving peoples. He also teased his readers by revealing the chapter titles of his next book, such as “Every Jew is a Zionist and Vice Versa” and “The First Zionist Conference and its Decisions and the Twenty-Four Sacred Pamphlets or the Zionist Protocols.” The book was to be called *The Global Coup*.

But it took al-Qadiri thirty three years to fulfill his threat and to release his second book, in 1957, with the rather bland title of *The Red Menace*. By then, there were no Jewish publications in circulation to answer him, and hardly any Jews left in Shorjeh or Suq Hannon or Basra or Amara or Mosul. I eventually did put the bookseller in touch with al-Qadiri’s offspring, whom I found through Facebook, but they denied having any unpublished letters or archives left in their possession, and they certainly had no inkling about any vanished heirs to the Romanov throne.

When al-Qadiri’s memoirs came out in the mid-twenties, the dice had still not been cast as to which narratives would dominate. Conservative, reactionary forces were still kicking up

frantically here and there as they went down, while the coming turn to the right and towards absolutism still lacked the airs of inevitability. Some hoped for something radically different, for an era of amity and prosperity. Possibility abounded: the caliphate had been abolished, new states were rising, the roar of that decade emanating from the big cities of the West found a welcoming cheer in many a Middle Eastern polis, or at least within certain classes. Rank sectarianism such as al-Qadiri's must have seemed nothing more than the fevered bluster of those destined to be left behind, their darkening, sickly vapors surely will dissipate; among the hopeful ones, even Zionism had a chance of being normalized, perchance celebrated.

I was astonished to pick out a book off another bookseller's shelf advocating for and defending Zionism, in Arabic! It had been printed in Egypt sometime in the twenties. At first one would assume that it was written by one of those Jewish intellectuals such as Haddad, but the name on the cover implied that the author was not Jewish, could be Armenian, though more likely a Maronite Christian from a family that began leaving Lebanon over a century and a half ago for Cairo and Alexandria, the most vivacious and prosperous of the region's realms then. Nowadays, it seems very hard to imagine in retrospect how the book would have gotten to Baghdad, given that its contents are a blatant heresy against the monochromeness of Arab Nationalism that seemed to overwhelm much of the preceding century. Maybe a student at the same high school Haddad presided over, who had fallen under the sway of a Zionist fervor, had gotten hold of this copy and then awkwardly extended it to a childhood friend, a pal from the neighborhood, a non-Jew, maybe one who was himself agog with Arabism, and by that earnest act suggesting that they may still be friends, and may still exchange news of their lives, after *Aliyah*.

To be a Christian writing positively about the Jews had important implications: much of Europe's anti-Semitism was transferred to Middle Eastern lands primarily through the contacts made by European merchants and missionaries with Christian minorities in the Levant. For example, the first anti-Semitic tracts translated into Arabic from languages such as French were done by Christian priests and journalists in Lebanon and Egypt towards the latter half of the nineteenth century. Even before appearing in print, that distinct and vile obsession was agitated for by French and British consuls, urging the local Christian communities to adopt it. Perhaps the most famous of those episodes involved the Blood Libel case in Damascus in 1840.

It seems Michel Sarkis, the author of [*The Israelite Renaissance and its Glorious History*](#) was aware of the tensions agitating relations between Christians and Jews. He wrote, "I don't care whether someone says [derisively] Look! A Christian lauding Judaism!" and also, "some envious [souls] and enemies of benevolence and our awaited union may say, he's a Christian, what business does he have with Israel's renaissance? Why would he care about the affairs of the Israelis?" Sarkis responded that he was moved by the values of humanism, and that he sees himself not as a Christian but rather he is providing a service to all humanity by attempting a

union between the peoples of the East. He takes as his inspiration Egypt's renaissance where "the imam embraces the priest and the rabbi in the mosques and churches" so that society as a whole would leave behind petty differences and turn towards developing their nation. He wanted this spirit to spread to Palestine too, for change is coming, and that "whoever looks to what happened in World War I, when kingdoms fell and others arose, and crowns were snatched from the heads of kings while other were adorned with crowns, and the old geographical maps were changed, and reconciliation conferences were held and peace [was made] between warring, quarrelsome nations. Whoever looks to all that in the short time we [have witnessed], cannot rule out that the Israeli renaissance may be completed very soon after its tools were prepared and its justifications were heralded and its actions have increased. And its call has spread to all parts." History will remember, per Sarkis, that he was the first to write these words and "at that time, we will have the right to be proud that this book was the first voice in the East that arose to salute the revitalizers in the East and the West, and to be the first proclaimer of peace and unity."

The author cannot assert uniqueness, though. Other Christians understood that they had to present a different model to their Jewish counterparts than that of the neo-anti-Semite. In Iraq, in the same year that al-Qadiri published his book, a Christian Chaldean intellectual from Baghdad who would in a few years' time serve as Minister of Finance, wrote a book with the dreamy title [*A Yearning \[Man's\] Promenade Through the History of Iraq's Jews*](#), one purposefully positive and acclamatory, seemingly turning the page on the acrimonies of the past. Furthermore, there were voices in the Arab press, rare ones, granted, that also saw fit to take advantage of the energies of the Zionists and their global influence (so they thought at the time) and their desire to return to the embrace of the East, in order to compel and instigate a wider awakening for all the nations that lived there. This seems to be particularly true of those who were Masons or were influenced by its message of brotherly enlightenment, who were advocating for new concepts such as patriotism and nationalism and shedding away the parochialism of sect and ethnicity. This aspect was clearly reflected in Sarkis' book by his reprint of a communique issued by the Grand Masonic Assembly of Egypt to the people of Palestine saying "remember that the Jews are your brothers and cousins that had been cast into foreign lands and had succeeded" and that "the Arab and the Jew are offshoots of the tree of Abraham." Clearly, during those times some truly believed that an Arab and an Israelite renaissance can be synchronized to become mutually advantageous.

The book is undated, but since it was dedicated to Herbert Samuel, Britain's High Commissioner in Palestine, who left this office in mid-1925, while it also makes mention of the Rutenberg water and electricity concession, which was launched in 1923, we can date it to that intervening period.

Sarkis knew that his excitement for Zionism would bring about a backlash. He was aware that his slender book would run against a towering narrative resting on a foundation of numerous anti-Semitic tomes that had been published in Arabic and Turkish over the course of four decades. Jewish emigration to Palestine was an issue that was very much on the minds of Middle Eastern intellectuals at the time he went to a publisher with his manuscript. He even wrote that what compelled him to travel to Palestine was to get an opportunity to see firsthand the oppression and misery befalling the Arabs there at the hands of the Jews. However, he was surprised to discover a reality much at odds with the prevailing propaganda, especially the one that had it that “the Jews are lazy good-for-nothing rebellious Bolsheviks who hate order and yearn for anarchy and hate the Arabs of Palestine and its people and seek to do malice unto them...” That propaganda did not correlate to one of the first scenes he encountered during his trip, the sight of a volunteer Jewish medical team then making the rounds to Arab villages to treat patients for free. Sarkis knew the drill: he knew that those who hate the Jews would peg such acts “as a trick to endear themselves to the Palestinian nation despite the latter’s better judgement”—rationality is no match for the polemic. He knew that what he wrote would make him vulnerable to all sorts of charges, the least of which would be “a pen for hire.”

We may not know the deeper motivations that made Sarkis write this book. Maybe he did indeed want to flatter a few rich Jews and have them buy up dozens of copies to distribute to their friends and family. That was certainly a pattern among publications and directories of this sort at the time. Yet it was also a time of high emotion, and it would have been easier for him to tap into the anti-Zionist market by showcasing rich Jews in Egypt and the Levant professing their shared antipathy to Zionism and their love of their home countries—they too would buy up many copies for distribution, and certainly this approach would be less of a headache. Sarkis, however, chose the harder path. We find him extolling Herzl, and even sympathizing with Captain Alfred Dreyfus and his famous case from two decades prior. Here, Sarkis had taken a position at variance with the Francophiles around him, for they too had had much to say about the ‘L’affaire Dreyfus’ whose percolations lasted for ten years, very little of it smacking of any empathy. According to Sarkis, the Zionists “want a national home that was denoted to them by history, and their rights to it were enshrined by the holy books.” He adds that the Balfour declaration was simply “a statement of a right and there is nothing surprising about it...” Accordingly, “the Jews are not foreign to Palestine and these were Eastern lands that were [designated] for their ancestors and the bones of [those ancestors] are buried within it.” He returned to his call for a union between the Jews and others in the East, addressing the Arab speaking audience, “for they are a force for you [that will help you] reach your goals; a financial and global power that will aid you for [the general] good.” Sarkis pointed out the

many successes accrued to the Jews in Palestine within the span of a few years, such as turning Tel Aviv from “a pile of forgotten ruins and a parched desert” to “a mini-Paris”.

The oddest part of the book is when Sarkis cajoles the “sleepy, negligent” Arabic-speaking Jews of the East and berates them for laziness and for failing to adequately assume the Zionist project upon their shoulders. He wished to organize a conference for Jews of the East and the West so that some of that enterprising spirit exhibited at Tel Aviv would rub off on the Jews of Baghdad, Aleppo and Cairo and elsewhere. Furthermore, Sarkis hoped for a wide archeological survey to be conducted by the Zionists, so that they would uncover historical truths, not just for Judaism, but for the Eastern world at large, to remind them of their former glories. Towards the end, Sarkis expressed his desire to conduct a tour of Jewry around the world, such as the one, as he tells us, that he had conducted before publishing the present book among the Jews of Yemen and the sultanates of Lahij and Oman, to collect enough material for a second book on the topic.

The book is a throwback to a brief flowering moment in the mid-twenties when it was possible to conceive of comity between Arabs and Jews in Palestine. But that possibility grew dimmer and dimmer as the narrative turned more hostile. Early Zionist letters echo Sarkis’ sentiments, beginning with Herzl and running through to David Ben Gurion who, for example, advocated in 1917 for collaboration with the Arab peasantry because, as he thought, they were of Jewish origins themselves and should be treated as distant relatives. Of course, very little of that happened, and archeological surveys conducted today are like excavating memory’s minefields, scouring the soil for particular bones while ignoring those of others. The narrative had hardened, turning injurious. Sarkis’ book and the lofty ideas within were left behind, an oddity, a freak, foxing away on a cluttered shelf. The two pals, among whom the book may have exchanged hands, were destined to lose touch.

I don’t remember the exact sequence of events that had me purchasing [*Registry of Jews Divested of Iraqi Citizenship Per Law No. 1 for the Year 1950*](#), with a subtitle of ‘Register No. 1 Baghdad Province’. I remember that one of the booksellers had alerted me to its existence, and that a colleague of his was in possession of it at a nearby stall. I have a faint memory of trying to negotiate down the price, which seemed exorbitant at the time. I may have even contacted the Iraqi National Library and Archive on whether they had a copy (they did not) and whether they could scrounge up the sum needed to buy it (they didn’t). Months passed, maybe even a year, before the registry was brought up again during a conversation with booksellers about the Jewish archive that was being repaired and digitized by the U.S. National Archives, and whether it would ever come back to Iraq. I asked about the price again, and one of the booksellers put in a call to the fellow holding on to it, returning a few minutes later with an ask of 1,500 U.S. dollars. I counted the cash in my pocket, and I just happened to be in the company of a wealthy businessman who always carried a large wad. We added up what we had

among us, and it came to 1,400; we proceeded immediately to get the book. The 'owner' was surprised to see me back, seeing how he had quoted me a much higher price earlier, but relented and took the cash on offer.

The registry bears the stamp of the Travel and Citizenship Police, and what probably happened is that the Iraqi state printed a limited run of it for use by immigration officers at entry and exit points to the country. Given that so few copies existed, that is probably the reason why it was missing from the national archives, as well as the libraries of the Ministry of Interior. The registry alphabetically lists the names and dates of birth of some thirty seven thousand Iraqi Jews from the province of Baghdad, where Jewish presence was concentrated. That's about a fourth of the country's Jews. The registry also preserves a record of the file numbers of individual Jews who wished to give up their Iraqi citizenship so that they can leave the country. The process would begin when a Jew would go to a designated office where he would sign away, in the presence of a policeman, any claim to the rights and privileges enjoyed by an Iraqi citizen. The process was conceived by a law that had been hastily written and enacted by the monarchy-era parliament in the spring of 1950. The legislation only amounted to 212 words. These words effectively served to erase 2500 years of Jewishness in Mesopotamia after the Jews had been brought there, against their will, by the Assyrians and the Babylonians—back to the same plains that their ancestor Abraham had quit several hundred years before that, if we go by the Torah's timeline.

I promptly handed over the registry to the National Library on the condition that they digitize it and give me a copy. One of the booksellers, upon hearing of what I did, admonished me by saying, "you'll find the same registry back for sale here on Mutannabi Street in a couple of months. Corruption!" Of course, there is always a difficulty in parting with such a find, especially one so rare, but after the destruction, pilfering and neglect of the state's archives since the nineties, I could not bear the thought that all memory of those women and men listed in the registry would be erased and there would be no official record that they had once been Iraqis.

The government justified its actions then on humanitarian grounds, hoping to regulate and legalize Jewish emigration, thus minimizing the use of the dangerous smuggling routes some of them took to escape. I wonder whether the crafters of the legislation had a sense of how massive the exodus would be. Did they believe that only a few hundreds, or a few thousands, would leave? However, when one peruses the press and parliamentary deliberations concomitant with passing the law, the tone was radical and accusatory, holding all Jews to be traitors, and that no tears would be shed over their loss. Furthermore, there was systemic action by Zionist and rightist groups, each working from their own ends, to sow terror among the Jews, driving them to flee. The thought of a Jew-free Iraq as a 'final solution' was certainly a European import harking back to medieval mass expulsions from Spain and elsewhere, and

running through advanced anti-Semitic concepts that treason ran in the blood; that whatever faith or new identity a Jew would adopt, whether through conversion or by putting up an Iraqi flag, such gestures cannot wash away the innateness of his or her subterfuge and wickedness. Law no. 1 for the Year 1950 was to be the first legislation, probably in the whole Middle East, that officially turned Judaism into a negative attribute afflicting a citizen. Given the anti-Jewish fervor of the time, follow-up laws were easily passed freezing the bank accounts and other assets of the Jews who had left.

I looked for the name Ezra Heskell Haddad in the registry but could not find him. Maybe he decided to hold off a bit, hoping that the storm would pass. Scrutinizing the names, I had an urge to walk up to Abdullah Ezra Moishé, born in 1917, and the holder of file number 1, and ask what compelled him to pat down his hair, wear his best, shine his shoes and stand early in line to be the first to bid adieu to Baghdad. Maybe Gurji Yousif Salman (“Gurji”, meaning ‘Georgian’, entered Iraq’s database of baby names following Georgian rule) would join us too, seeing how he was carrying file number 2. Some of the women’s files cryptically bear the letter “B”, beginning with Raheel Yonah’s file number 1-B. Why was that? Did it have some seedier aspect now forgotten? Was another Raheel (Raheel Ibrahim Ezra) really 141 years old at that time, or was her birth date just marked wrong as 1809? Maybe that was also the case with Raheel Ibrahim Bassoon who was born, or rather unborn, according to the registry then, in 1980?

However, Simha Abboudi Aziz was indeed possibly born in 1840, and by then she would have witnessed over a century of Baghdad’s comings and goings. Maybe she would know the reason why one of the families listed had the intriguing surname of Sitt al-Kul (‘Lady of All’) shared by a certain Farha and her relatives Naima and Juliette. I also remembered a note that I had made of a name that I was anxious to look up. It was of an Israeli woman who claimed, after the 1958 revolution and the murder of al-Said, that her son, a teenager at the time, was the legendary statesman’s only surviving grandson. I had transcribed her name in my notes as ‘Nadia Maslia’, but since it was from an English rendering, it could have come in several forms, or mangled all together. Thus I also looked for Najjiah Mazel, as well as for the last name Muzzayen. ‘Nadia’ was not a name with wide currency in Iraq then, and the last name Mazlaya was very rare, borne only by a family that had left Iraq at the turn of the last century to Burma and then made their way from there to Los Angeles. I did find a Najjiah Ezra Muzzayen, born in 1915, who may have fit the bill, especially when it came to her age, but I couldn’t be sure. Frustrated, I went back to the August 11, 1958 issue of *Time* magazine to discover that I had failed to make a note of what that woman had said about herself, that she met Sabah, al-Said’s eldest (and married) son, through family connections, and a love story flowered between them. So Sabah took her as a second wife in 1939 and set her up in a home in Mosul. She bore him a son, Ahlam, three years later. However, she could not bear the first wife’s harassments,

so she picked up and left Iraq in 1946 to settle in Tel Aviv, where she bought and ran a hotel in addition to some other property. Meaning that she had left five years before the registry was printed. Her son changed his name to Abraham when Israel was formed. I don't know whether there is any truth to all of this, but it serves to reflect the kind of bonds—sometimes messy bonds—that form after two bloodlines had been living in close proximity for hundreds of years. Maybe Nadia or Najjiah or whatever her name was thought that no one would challenge her account, since press reports at the time indicated that Sabah, who was killed by unruly soldiers at the Iraqi Broadcasting Agency while trying to retrieve his father's remains, perished alongside his (first) wife and two sons. The wife and the children managed to survive and escape though. A great granddaughter of al-Said's had left a comment on an article describing the claim, saying that it was all “very interesting” and that she would like to know more about what happened to 'Ahlam'—clearly the tale had not been told to her.

Al-Said was an enthusiastic supporter of the law when enacted, and later, when returning to the premiership, an enthusiastic enforcer. Did he believe the hype at the time, that by finally getting rid of the Jews then Iraq would be spared the machinations of a Bolshevik fifth column? Did he think that only the troublesome, restless Jews, yearning for revolution, would leave, and Iraq's docile and productive Jews would go on to resume their usual lives? The Jewish exodus had important ramifications on the country, depriving it of an expansive range of administrative talent in the private sector. That talent is on full display when one leafs through commercial directories, [before and after the exodus](#). But their departure's more enduring legacy was even more disastrous for the country: it raised its tolerance for maximalist solutions. Expelling the Jews eased Iraq's leaders into thinking that they can erase the legacies of the past and its present troubles with one grand fell swoop. The bloodlust unleashed by the Farhud eventually caught up with al-Said; very little of his corpse was left intact after much mutilation and dragging over the hot asphalt of a July day in Baghdad. The notion of mass expulsion would be wielded by Saddam throughout the seventies and early eighties to tear out hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, 'accused' of Persian ancestry or of being Faylis, from the country's societal fabric. Consequently, it made the decision of launching the Anfal campaigns that much easier. Abadi's decision to sort out Kirkuk with tanks is but an echo.

A scene from Sami Michael's novel, *Victoria* (1995), set in Baghdad during World War I and depicting the travails of an extended Jewish family there, seemed to allegorically capture what happened to the Jews later during the sudden Farhud. In embittered tones, the writer tell us of how...

The muddy waters of the Tigris roared liked the sandstorms that sometimes shook the roofs of the city. The wild torrent scared her. For a moment the water seemed to stand in place while she and the crowd

flowed on: then, all thought deserted her as she saw, halfway across the bridge, a man thrust into the traffic lane. Each time he tried amid howls of laughter to regain the pavement, a welter of arms and legs drove him back into the path of the snarling motors and charging horses, until gasping for breath he gave up all hope of rejoining the human ranks that had ejected him. In front of him rattled a wagon piled with crates, its barefoot driver racing before it with the bridle; behind him sped a cabriolet, its shiny leather top rolled down and its passengers smiling grimly from their high, springy perch while the coachman ran with the horses and sought to calm them.

And so Ma'atuk Nunu was forced to sprint at a frightening pace, sweat pouring from the roots of his hair despite the chill wind. He had continued to dress in traditional garb even after unexpectedly coming into money, and now he stripped off his elegant camel's-hair cloak and threw it over his shoulder like a bath towel, baring the shameful, inciting hump on his back. Not even as a child had he ever run like this in the street.

Watching him comically flap his arms like a fat rooster trying to fly, Victoria forgot her own distress. There was a dark side to this City of the Rooftops that many preferred to turn a blind eye to. Others blamed it on the jinns. Perhaps it came, this callous treatment of the misfit, the freak, the living thing that did not perform its function, from the harsh and distant, desert-dwelling past of the city's inhabitants. Horses that stumbled while pulling a carriage were whipped till they bled. Children tortured cats and tormented helpless old men. Boys hunted madmen, who fled volleys of garbage and stones shrieking with pain or laughing dementedly. If you fell flat on your face in a puddle, you would look up to see more grinning faces than helping hands. Victoria knew that the jiggling figure of the hunchback was a perfect outlet for such dark passions. Ma'atuk's terrified look told her that he too was aware of how easily the hidden devil could be aroused. "Run, you son-of-a-bitch, run!" guffawing shouts could already be heard. The driver behind him cracked his green-beaded whip over Ma'atuk's head and the crowd broke into a cheer.

In the land of tyrants, no tyranny is worse than the mob's. Not a kind word was spoken, not one person had the courage to reach out and gather Ma'atuk in. His red slippers pattered like tongues. The crowd

resented his struggle to retain his dignity, which was something he did not deserve to have, a performance-spoiling ruse. He tripped, and for a moment it seemed that he was about to go down beneath his hump and scamper on all fours. The mob's roars drowned out the river. The whip cracked again, catching the cloak on Ma'atuk's bobbing shoulder and coiling around it. Like a hunted lizard shedding its tail, he flung it away and grabbed hold of the back of the wagon with a desperate lunge. Victoria caught a last glimpse of him, dragged along like an old sack until he vanished to the jeers of the crowd.

What happened to the city the Jews had adoringly called their *Adina*?

After the 2003 war, political space allowed Iraqis to publicly speak again about the Jews, not as enemies, but as friends, neighbors, classmates, comrades, and in some cases, actual cousins. Some even reconnected through social media. There was an outpouring of nostalgia as the grey-hairs remembered who owned what shop in the market, and who lived around the corner. Abandoned synagogues were eagerly pointed out, no longer furtively. Books were written and published, tens of documentaries and news features filmed. I remember taking a tour of Old Baghdad with a friend in 2004, a Muslim wholesale foods merchant with a warehouse in the old Torat neighborhood who made it his personal mission to remember the Jews. He took me to meet one of the holdouts of the community, one of a dozen or so, a well-educated man in his late fifties living in squalor, who feigned that he could not leave Iraq because he must attend to his cat. We walked into a building around the corner that had once been a school for blind girls, established in the early 1930s by Jewish philanthropists. Its stated purpose was spelled out in ceramic above its entrance in Arabic, Hebrew and English. The merchant asked the families squatting there at that time what they knew about the place. They feigned ignorance, so he proceeded to loudly admonish them with a rendition of their dwelling's history so they should never forget that Jewish benevolence had, indirectly, placed a roof over their heads. Such words would have gotten him into a lot of trouble had Saddam still been around. Rediscovering and proclaiming a smothered past was an exhilarating experience. Most young Baghdadis have not met any Jews in their lifetime, but it was not too late to let them know that a big part of their city's story over time was Jewish. Missing, though, was an examination of how things came to this, a tendency to overlook the anguish. Much like the twenties, the early years after Saddam had the feel of something new, and hopeful. One still finds traces of it, for example, with al-Sadr's periodic call for Iraqi Jews to return to their 'homeland', provided that they renounce Israel. That is highly unlikely. One of the last 'young' Jews who had obstinately decided to stay was a gold jeweler with a shop in the maze of alleyways leading up to Mutannabi Street. He was in the final stretch of completing his PhD at

the English department of the University of Baghdad, and had been married for three months, when he was abducted in December 2005. Yaqub Naim Eliahu Shahrabani had convinced his Iraqi Jewish wife to leave her Dutch refuge, and to marry him in Amman. They were to build a life and a home together in Baghdad, he had insisted. He was taken from near that home in the 'Arasat neighborhood, an area where al-Sadr's Mahdi Army militia was active at the time, as well as Badr's. His body was never found.

Today, Israelis are well positioned, better so than ever before in their relationship with Washington, to provide their version of the Middle East to the power brokers of the Oval Office. I fear that that version is severely handicapped. The State of Israel, where the Jews of Christendom and Islamdom had gathered, bringing together two conflicting mindsets as Lewis had masterfully pointed out, is only seventy years old—hardly long considering the antiquity, and memory, of the wider region. Israel was born in the aftershock of Europe's black hole. That it casually collapsed the truly old narratives of Iraq's Jewry as it came to be, for example, demonstrates the immense power of black holes. I wonder whether it is the lingering shock of birth (or rebirth, as Zionist narratives have it) or the limited experience of sovereign infancy that has left the Israelis stuck in denial, refusing to acknowledge the newness of what is happening around them, dismissing it as much of the same old, same old. Their sense of historical rhythm seems off. Their understanding of the pacing of events misses the evident warp. Consequently, their sizing up of the Bin Salmans and Bin Zayeds as allies, whether strategic or tactical, or their taking measure of Soleimani as an enemy for that matter, may be off too. Caveat emptor, Mr. Trump. Caveat emptor.

*

*

*

In the late afternoon of May 1, 2003, an important meeting was occurring in Baghdad, one that would be overshadowed by a speech given thousands of miles away in the Gulf of San Diego. The speech, exclaimed by President George Bush aboard an aircraft carrier, with the famous backdrop of 'Mission Accomplished' behind him, was certainly flashier and more newsworthy. What space was left over in the news cycle went to cover Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's announcement, in Kabul, of the end of military operations in the Afghanistan theater. However, that meeting in Baghdad could have changed the course of many things to follow, but little do historians and analysts realize it, few even know about it. In many peoples' minds, in Iraq, in America, and around the world, history has already passed its verdict about the events preceding and following the Iraq war. Opinions have hardened, judgements have been pronounced, and the minutes of the debate, now desiccated and calcified, have fallen

behind a filing cabinet somewhere. What can possibly be attained by introducing new evidence at this late hour? What possible utility is there in a reconsideration of what could have been?

On that day in May, with the summer heat already radiating from every surface, I accompanied Chalabi to the Al-Hayat Palace Hotel in Karrada, which had been rented out by Masood Barzani as his temporary headquarters in Baghdad. The lobby was teeming with dozens upon dozens of Iraqis, Americans and Brits, their nervous energy infusing the tepid air with even more clammy eagerness. There were politicians, flunkies, journalists, bodyguards, all throwing furtive glances sideways, sizing up the new crop of Who's Who in the capital. It was a significant event, for it was the first time that the various heads of the opposition had met together with the Americans, in Baghdad. Two Americans, a man and woman, well into their thirties and looking athletic and peppy, bouncily sat down next me, to inquire, in an exceedingly friendly and very direct Washington-like manner, who I was here with. I was sporting a proto-hipster beard back then, with a handlebar moustache and all, and they may have misjudged me as an Islamist hanger-on arriving with the al-Hakim crew, one that could potentially become a useful contact. Their expressions turned dour when I answered 'Chalabi'; they coldly got up and turned away without saying another word. It was easy to mark them, because of that encounter, as Agency folk, given the aversion the American 'deep state'—a term now normalized—held for my former boss. The pair would be attending the meeting later.

That the meeting would take place at Barzani's HQ says a lot about the political pecking order and relative prestige of the various players as those hierarchies were understood then. In a second-story level conference room, around a long dining table, sat Chalabi, Barzani, Abdul-Aziz al-Hakim (who was flanked with his translator), Talabani, Ayad Allawi and Adnan Pachachi. On the American side, there was the U.S. envoy to the Iraqi opposition Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, and retired General Jay Garner, who headed the Office for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA), as well as the two CIA officers. I don't remember whether there were a couple more State Department staffers there or not, but I rounded out the attendance, choosing to take a seat along the far wall, facing the entire scene, which in my mind's eye had morphed into one evocating Da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. On the Iraqi side, Pachachi was the odd man out: until 1998 he still had not severed his relationship to the Ba'athist regime, accepting to meet, in Geneva, with the dictator's half-brother, Barzan al-Tikriti, who, judging by his leaked memoirs, had already gone barmy by then. However, a year later, and as a sop to Persian Gulf powers, especially to the Saudis and the Emiratis, the State Department forced his presence at opposition functions, such as having him participate in the INC's delegation to the United Nations in 1999. As recently as a couple of months before that meeting in Baghdad, Pachachi had been involved in an Emirati plan to offer asylum to Saddam

in return for avoiding the regime's violent overthrow, while allowing the Ba'ath Party to hold on to power, as long as the post-Saddam party leadership pledges to liberalize and hold elections eventually. Otherwise, all the political leaders in attendance were 'it': that is, even though things were still hazy in the immediate aftermath of the regime's overthrow, few would have disputed that the attendees were the central pivots of Iraqi politics at that moment.

Before the meeting got going, niceties and jokes were circulating in Farsi, a language spoken fluently by the Afghanistan-born Khalilzad, al-Hakim, Talabani and Barzani, while Chalabi spoke it haltingly but understood it well. I was chuckling under my breath watching Allawi getting antsy since he could not follow the repartees. He eventually spoke up and said "let's begin". I did not take notes. They did not seem to be saying anything very interesting. I usually zone out at such gab fests, preferring to read the room by watching how the actors interact with each other, their body language, mannerisms, 'tells', etc. At the time I was more focused on whether the alliance fostered by the Agency to sideline Chalabi, what we called the 'Gang of Four' pitting the KDP, PUK, SCIRI and Allawi against him, was about to transition from the opposition days to the hard work of governance. The Iraqi attendees seemed uneasy, while the Americans did not exude authority. Chalabi was smiling throughout, but then again that is his default mode. The meeting wrapped up, and I followed Chalabi out. There was a bounce in his step; he seemed exceedingly animated, which surprised me. The sun had already set as we got into the car. He ebulliently turned to me to say: "We won!"

"What did we win?"

"Didn't you hear what they said. There isn't going to be an occupation. We won!"

"I don't think that is ..."

"They said it! They wanted to work out the details of a transitional government. No interruption of Iraqi sovereignty."

"Then why are we hearing this stuff about this new guy coming..."

"What does it matter?! Those were Bush's representatives to Iraq. They just told us that Bush expects a transitional government. You were there!"

"That is not what I heard. I don't think this is what is going on."

"You're such a grouch. We won, and you can't see it." He turned his face away. I guess he wanted someone to celebrate that moment with, his own 'mission accomplished'—that there would be no foreign occupation of Iraq, a prospect that we found daunting, expecting American viceroys to make a hash of things—one that he had fought very hard for ever since April 16, 2002, when he first publicly warned against the idea in the maiden issue of the *New York Sun*. I do not doubt that that is what he heard. But from where I was sitting, the words did not match the energy of the room; one would think that a historical turning point would *feel* different from that dreariness hanging over the meeting we have just exited.

On May 6, Bush introduced the press to his new ‘Presidential Envoy’—that “new guy” we had gotten word about—L. Paul Bremer. It would later transpire that Bremer had requested from the president full discretion in making decisions, and that would entail removing and demoting both Khalilzad and Garner. Bush decided to devolve those authorities unto him. It would prove to be a fateful decision, and it would prove that Chalabi was wrong to be optimistic. On May 11, Bremer arrived in Baghdad. Five days later he announced the establishment of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and appointed himself as its ‘Administrator’. There would be no transitional Iraqi government. Two months later, he announced the formation of the Governing Council, where the kind of political heavyweights who attended the May 1 meeting would sit coequally with nineteen other members, many of them second and third tier opposition figures, in addition to a new crop of unknowns such as Wael Abdul-Latif, Ahmad al-Barrak, Raja al-Khuza’i, and Aqila al-Hashemi who had somehow been vetted and elevated to the highest rungs of Iraqi politics by American and British diplomats and spies.

A star of misfortune brought Bremer to Iraq. Another saddled the country with Brett McGurk. When his emails from a decade ago mysteriously emerged in the summer of 2012 to sabotage his imminent appointment, by President Barack Obama, as U.S. ambassador to Iraq, the racier exchanges he had with the reporter were not what struck me. What I picked up on through scrolling down his name-dropping, cringe-inducing banter was that this man, who had served as a legal advisor to the CPA, then was promoted to the role of Iraq specialist at the National Security Council, then moving on to serve as special assistant to Bush and an adviser to the NSC on Iraq, was still a political novice even though he had been camped out in Baghdad for five years already, one that was much impressed by some Iraqi politicians whose opinions I would not have banked on. In many ways, that was the overarching defect in America’s dealings with Iraq: it sent “blow-shit-up” officers, dullard, maleficent spies, sloppy accountants posing as economic wizards, and protocol-obsessed diplomats along with “nobody-listens-to-me” misanthropic experts yanked out from some dank recess of Foggy Bottom’s, to the searing morning light of Baghdad. There were too few ‘natural’ politicians among the American crew, who understood, at a gut level, the possibilities of raw politics, and who would recognize their own kind among the Iraqis they were meeting.

McGurk was being considered for the ambassador’s role in Baghdad right after he had sabotaged, in indirect collusion with Soleimani, the no-confidence motion against Maliki. That misjudgment of his was to prove of utmost significance. Lest we forget, Maliki’s biggest vice was impeding the organic emergence of Sunni politicians from within the rules of the political game, distasteful as their rhetoric and character may have been.

There were several fateful choices made between the decision to send in Bremer in 2003, and the failure of the no-confidence vote in 2012. Iraq also lost half a dozen of its most

seasoned political players early on in that period, ones whose skill set had taken decades to hone. I would count the decision to engage the Mahdi Army in April 2004 as one of those ominous, ill-advised decisions taken by U.S. officers—it was simply avoidable, and the Sadrists were well on their way towards irrelevance had it not happened. Misfortune, acting through the hand of the jihadists, struck down the country's most capable Islamist politician, Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, in August 2003. He would have known, better than anyone else, how to outmaneuver a man like Soleimani where it mattered at the time, in Tehran. All the way up to that first military confrontation between the Americans and the Mahdi Army, Iraq had been primarily the purview of Iran's *Ettela'at*, its Ministry of Intelligence, and not the IRGC. Soleimani's Quds Force was merely part of a larger Iranian presence in Baghdad headed by its spy agency, which guarded its turf and prerogatives jealously. Hakim had the gravitas and contacts to potentially sabotage Soleimani's usurpation of the top role, one that he gained after making the case to the Supreme Leader that, with America declaring war on the Sadrists, Iraq was actually turning into a field of warfare rather than conciliation with the Americans, and his Quds Force should expand its footprint for that eventuality. The election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad a little over a year later further empowered Soleimani's vision for creating a proxy battlefield—a third star of misfortune was clearly paving the way for that. Jihadists also struck down Izzeddin Salim in May 2004; he was the most thoughtful and decent of the Da'awa crowd, whose prestige and character would have made it difficult for the first 'accommodations' of corruption to find passage (for example, the mobile network deal, Iraq's first major contract, that transpired under then Minister of Telecommunications, Haidar Abadi).

The failure to understand the importance of political life, how to nurture it, how to protect it, was evident once again after the 2014 elections, and the decisions taken, by the Americans and the British, together with the Iranians, together with the Iraqis, as to who will lead the country at its most challenging juncture. This would have been a good moment to pick Barzani as president of the Iraqi republic. Such a bold choice would have solved the internal Kurdish political crises, given the Kurds the assurance that their demands would get prioritized, that the long dormant constitutional schedule for sorting out the differences between the center and the KRG would be reenacted, and it would have given the sense to the whole country that the big political bosses are again gathered at Baghdad's table, for it is they who can actually take the hard decisions needed to fix the state. And contrary to what was being circulated at the time, I know that Barzani was amenable to the idea, if the right sort of Prime Minister and Speaker were chosen alongside him, men of equal stature as his. None of that happened. Instead, the feeble-minded political class was circulating rumors that Barzani had actually aided ISIS in taking over Mosul, some of those claims even finding their way into diplomatic and intelligence cables sent back to Washington and Langley, even though the

record shows that he had warned whoever would listen in Baghdad and elsewhere that Mosul was about to fall a week before it happened.

McGurk was in the thick of the miscalculations of 2014, as he had been in those that transpired two years earlier. His political instincts were off then, and with repeated, serial offense, one can only assume that this is a congenital condition. McGurk was again at the forefront of the Kirkuk 'station', bearing his own individual human agency, clumsy and incompetent as it is, down on Iraq's unhappy fate. Word had come out that he would be relieved of his duties by the end of May, suggesting that his unique flair for damaging Iraqi politics would not extend into this current round of post-election government formation. But the star of misfortune lingers still: McGurk's tenure was extended until December.

The word 'Iraq' has become a catch-all in Washington for denoting foreign policy failure, an article of faith used both sides of the political divide, by Ben Rhodes and Trump alike. There is an established narrative as to how America lost its way in Iraq. Many seem to draw comfort from that, refusing to reconsider it. It continues to color almost everything they see unfolding in the Middle East. That understanding of the political domain which I extolled above, as the arena of mediation between old and new narratives, as an essential conduit to stabilization, and that the gratifying triumph of 2003 was the return of political life to Baghdad, well, that perception is absent, misdiagnosed as a complicating malignancy, or glossed over. It explains, at least to me, why much of Washington did not understand the opportunities presented by the Lebanese, Iranian, Arab and Turkish 'Springs'. What American policy-makers missed was that each one of them portended a return of political life. The scene at Gezi Park in Istanbul, before it was broken up, looked very similar to the descriptions of the atmosphere, energy and diversity on display sprawled across the grounds of the British Legation in Tehran circa 1906, in the run-up to the Constitutional Revolution. In the first of the essays in this series, its most hopeful one, I had described Gezi Park in this way:

I got to see the phenomenon on its last day, in fact in its final hour. I left before realizing that this was to be its end when the riot police marched in for what turned out to be the final time. Gathered there were all the pieces of the Turkish puzzle that had resisted Ataturk's forced forging of a national Turkish identity, in his own image for the most part. There was a Kurdish dance underway. One of the dancers wore a shirt emblazoned with the Kurdish flag and the caption 'Kurdistan'. The trinkets and talismans of Alevism, a pseudo-Shi'ite religion, were being hawked alongside slices of watermelon. Transvestites sat with their backs leaning against dapper Istanbulites from 'White Turk' pedigrees. If one knows where to look, one could

also spot members of the shadowy Gulenist religious order circulating among the tents. This was no sugary expression of transient camaraderie. In the true Turkish manner, it was a stern nod from one set of unique identities towards another—"I see you, and I don't mind that you are here, sharing our common space." This was unprecedented, and exceptionally powerful. Rather than a carnival, Gezi Park was an outdoor museum of ethnography, sociology, class hierarchy, and even sexual orientation. It was everything that Kemalism had tried to deny or paper-over; it was a conversation that Turkey had to have with itself, an acknowledgment of itself as it is, before it could move forward.

Having that conversation, one that can only occur within the political domain, is what is needed across every component of the Middle East. The various Springs brought promise that it can be held. In that same essay, I had the temerity to reconsider the story and potential of Iraq, brandishing it as the only place in the Middle East where a real conversation about the past and the future is possible, one that cannot even be held in Israel.

Some in Washington supported the Kurdish referendum because it would break off the 'healthy' part of Iraq—that is Iraqi Kurdistan—saving it from the malaise infecting the whole. But they were seeing things upside down. Right after the referendum, I drew up a roadmap for Kurdish independence. It was a very hard task for me to accept and prepare. It ran counter to so much that I long held sacred. However, I was compelled in doing so in order to save what I perceive to be the healthy part of Iraq: political life in Baghdad. Clearly, it was not healthy enough to deal with Kurdish separatism, but I held out hope that it may recuperate at some point in the future whereby it could. In the meantime, some form of separation would be required. The plan was an extended and detailed version of something that Chalabi had floated in a meeting with Kurdish leaders in Salahuddin in November 2003. It involved a settlement to the issue of Kirkuk within a special administrative status and the quasi-privatization of its oil fields, with the Kurds getting a share by sitting on the board of a newly formed ARAMCO-like oil company. I remember one of the most versatile and capable of the KDP's politicians, Sami Abdel Rahman, exclaiming in response, "Yes! This is it, this is the solution!" (...the jihadists would kill him too the following February). My plan envisioned creating a single administrative unit encompassing most of Kirkuk and the Disputed Areas, running from the west of Sinjar to the east of Badra and Jassan. I called it the 'The Hamrin Region', in recognition of the topographical outcrop that would be its geographical backbone. The Hamrin Region would be managed jointly between Baghdad and the Kurds as a diarchy, borrowing some ideas and solutions from the book *One Land, Two States* (2014), put out by

Mark Levine and Mathias Mossberg, where they presented their vision for sorting out Israel and Palestine as “parallel states”. The rest of the KRG would turn into a ‘Kurdistan Authority’, one that would proceed to full independence within a mutually agreed timeframe. There would be multiple pathways for normalizing the situation in Hamrin Region along other timeframes, coupled with a formula for sharing its wealth in each eventuality. Then there would be clauses by which an independent Kurdistan could re-enter into a union with Iraq, in a variety of forms, after the passage of time, and the cooling down of emotions. I floated it through a trustworthy politician, who had the credibility to advocate for it. But he hesitated, suggesting we should sit on the plan for a few weeks, presenting it at such time when feathers get less ruffled. But by the time the military operation to recapture Kirkuk happened, such ideas would not find a place in the conversation, because essentially there no longer was one.

* * *

If those tasked with drawing and implementing America’s policies have made such a mess of things, then why would one keep harping on about a conversation to be had in Washington about the Middle East? Isn’t it too late, too irrelevant at this point? I don’t have a good answer for that.

However, what I know is that the narrative of America’s ‘control’ of the region was a critical, tethering deterrent against adventurism, if not the paramount one. The myth of American dominance, of Washington’s sapience, of Kissingerian hard-heartedness in pursuing Western interests, was probably the Middle East’s most stabilizing narrative of yesteryear. Even conspiracy theories are useful as such, since they would make a would-be adventurer think twice about just how much of his plan is already revealed to darker powers, or even whether his plan is not his in the first place, and he’s been manipulated all along. There was resentment, sure, but also comfort, among many Middle Easterners in believing that the United States had a plan—that all that had come to pass, and that what was happening, was part of some strategy underpinning a ‘Global Order’ that maintained America’s position as the undisputed hegemon. As I wrote above, every other day one sees a manifestation of that perverse desire being peddled on Iraqi social media, running parallel to the protests, claiming that America has a coup in the works; that the Americans are burning through the old order they had created to make way for their newest designs. But as that perception withers, as that narrative breaks down, as more people watch the dramatic claim to victory being asserted by Asad in Syria, as Soleimani orchestrates a dazzling sequence of moments of clarity showing just how little America really matters any more in several important crises underway, as the

rally of American re-engagement in rolling back Iran is shown to be hollow, then one should expect a wider awakening of adventurist appetites. Why shouldn't Soleimani overthrow what goes for a political order in Tehran? Why wouldn't the Salafist Internationale press for a hostile takeover of the Saudi venture? Why wouldn't the PKK gird up for a wider fight with the Turkish state or to carve off a city like Kirkuk?

The illusion of control was useful. But for some inexplicable reason, former President Obama thought it wise to dispel it publicly during his last year in office. I guess he was showing off his smarts to *The Atlantic* crowd, demonstrating to them that he has it all figured out, basing so much of his self-congratulatory narrative on believing that he had figured out Iraq early on. But in doing so, in explaining plainly that America is taking a hands-off approach to the region, he cost the United States much of its residual standing, and perceived menace, thus quickening the collapse of those previously stabilizing narratives. Another statement he made to that magazine, which on the surface too seems sagacious and erudite, was that the United States is evacuating the Middle East because it cannot afford to manage 1,400 years of accumulated historical hurts and local grievances. However, as we have seen above, many of the narratives in circulation throughout the region are of a more recent provenance, and though it may draw on old cloth, the stitching is fresh and new. Maybe his pronouncements are not inexplicable, after all, and that there is actually a simple, and simple-minded, explanation for it. Watching the HBO documentary *Final Year* (2018) as it tracks the going-ons of Obama's foreign policy team, one is struck by how hollow and scripted they sound, from the president down. They seem so certain of their place in world history, but given that the audience knows throughout of the Trump era that follows, and then gets to watch the Obama crew's crestfallen reactions as it dawns, one is jolted by the thought that these people were actually running and enacting policies that, among other things, allowed the jihadist singularity to amass.

A new team has replaced them, but has yet to significantly replace their policies. And even if they eventually do, I fear it is too late. The policy moves being dribbled out these days—such as moving the embassy to Jerusalem, creating a stark, sobering launch for peace talks between the Palestinians and Israelis; scrapping the Iran deal and bearing down with harsher sanctions; bringing in the Turkish military as part of the regional security calculus, in conjunction with an 'Arab NATO'—may have worked to stanch the depletion of American geostrategic cachet, had all such measures been enacted concurrently, back in June 2017. And they should have all been devised to establish new realities, a showdown, in Syria that stole a march on Iranian and Russian designs. The backdrop to all that would have been Trump's disruptive, inscrutable, nonplussing persona. But what we are witnessing now, this slow rollout of a half-hesitant move here, a stropy statement there, looks sloppy and inane, especially with the loss of maneuverability in Syria. This look is unbecoming of such a power as America. A toehold in

Al-Tanf, a few special operators running patrols with the SDF, does not fool anyone who can follow the news out of Dera'a and Afrin. Patting Abadi on the shoulder will not get the Iraqi political class to unsee what Soleimani did in Kirkuk.

Soleimani, while publicly addressing a rally a month ago to memorialize a battle from the Iraq-Iran War days, was clearly signaling that he wants Trump to see too what the Iranian general had achieved in Kirkuk and elsewhere. Soleimani wants the American president—"the gambler"—to ask his intelligence and strategic establishments on whether Iran had won or not. This is not a turn of phrase. This is Iran's starting position: an acknowledgment that over the last year they had gotten the better of all their enemies, and if Trump wants to hold talks, as he has signaled recently, then he must first recognize Iran's victory and come to understand how it came about.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told an Emirati newspaper recently that "Soleimani is causing trouble throughout Iraq and Syria and we need to raise the cost for him – for his organization and for him personally." Raise the cost? Like how? Financial? Lifespan? Soleimani is drunk on glory, such things are not costly for him. What would have costed him was denying him the chance to declare victory. That is how he thinks. And for that, well, it is too late. I do not know if taking out Soleimani is useful at this point. He is, indeed, a unique actor, one who I doubt can be replaced. But then again, given how much unpredictability we are facing, we really have no way of knowing. There was a chance to defeat him in a different, elegant way. It would have entailed making Iraq, for example, as frustrating for him as it is for many others. But that pathway is off the table with the quickening death of politics in Baghdad, as well as the act of tearing up the Iran deal. I have maintained that Soleimani was preparing for a victory parade irrespective of the status of the deal. But had it stood, he would have had to be more circumspect when planning for the spectacle, if for nothing so as not to give new fodder for his detractors in Tehran. Now, however, Soleimani's parade can be as garish and loud as it needs be. In practical terms, that may look like high level assassinations in Baghdad if he does not particularly like where things are going, or if he wants to push political life and constitutionality over the edge. In Syria, and especially as talk increases of trying to get Russia to edge out Iran as Assad's patron of choice, one should remember how the Mehdi Hashemi clique abducted Soviet-trained Syrian intelligence officer Ayad al-Mahmoud (a pseudonym), then a 'diplomat' in Tehran, in the mid-1980s because he had the gall to broker the release of an American hostage who the Iranians had transferred from Beirut to Tehran. Soleimani, if he is influenced, as I conjecture, by Hashemi's strain of extremism, can be expected to take dramatic action in Damascus as well to demonstrate that there is only so much of backchannel understandings he would tolerate. Soleimani is unlikely to go slow, consolidating his gains. He is a maximalist, and believes there is more to gain by war and action, always has. Besides, it is not as if the Syria-Iran association is a temporary byproduct of

this latest civil war, one that can easily be unraveled: I remember walking past a white Opel station wagon (licence plate 'Police 39255') parked outside Damascus' Bab Touma station house with a poster of Bashar with Nasrallah to his right and Ahmadinejad to his left pasted across its rear windshield — this was back in June 2006. The Iranians have been around for a while and are unlikely to be leaving anytime soon.

Or, maybe that event horizon I am expecting would turn out to be a happy one, occurring in Tehran rather than Riyadh, rendering Soleimani and all his machinations irrelevant. Maybe those protests, in Khorramshahr, in Isfahan, in Karaj, and now breaking out occasionally in Tehran may actually coalesce a force that undoes the forty year old story arc of the Islamic Revolution. I would personally be optimistic about the Iran that could emerge beyond this particular black hole. But try as I may to find the heroic protagonist, the avatar of individual human agency, in this new narrative of protest, my search comes up short. Right now, the most convincing icon, celebrated in an oft-repeated slogan by the demonstrators, or at least what we get to see in their uploaded video streams, seems to be the once tall and broad-shouldered Reza Shah, whose disheveled, mummified corpse was macabrely and accidentally exhumed recently at a construction site. And having Netanyahu record public service announcements egging on the protesters comes off as surreal and a little bit unseemly. The regime for its part has turned towards resurrecting the legacy of Hassan Modarres as a means of indirectly answering the burgeoning nostalgia for Reza Shah; last month the mullah's home in Tehran was reopened as a museum, with wax statues and all. Modarres (1870-1931), an obstinate and principled man, had been a strict constitutionalist, an opponent of the Qajars, and a thorn in the side of Reza Shah's authoritarian rule. He was a hero to Khomeini, who sought to turn him into an icon of the revolution's, and by doing so suggesting that he was following the path that Modarres had laid. He was so iconic that Operation Tariq al-Qods ('The Way to Jerusalem'), which began the first series of major battlefield victories against Iraq that would culminate in the liberation of Khorramshahr six months later, was launched in late November 1981 to coincide with the anniversary of Modarres' alleged murder in one of Reza Shah's remoter jails. In 1985, Modarres' visage adorned the 100 Riyal banknote. But slowly afterwards, his memorialization was phased out: Hussein-Ali Montazeri began resembling Modarres more so than Khomeini did. Honestly, it would have been more fitting for the protests to appropriate Modarres away from the revolutionary regime than to resurrect Reza Shah; he was a true democrat and, in contrast to the "thieves robbing us in the name of religion", incorruptible. This is but one example as to why the symbolism associated with the protests seems to lack the solemnity and resonance portending a massive transformation. Yet the most critical reason why I am not holding my breath is that Soleimani can still count upon tens of thousands to fight for the preservation of the revolution, and they will fight hard. They are already primed to believe that it is political space that has allowed for such protests, and

they will be easily convinced that the regime must shut it down forcefully. The regime's typically snooty way of doing things, subtly, deviously, such as 'rediscovering' Modarres, is certainly not what Soleimani has in mind by way of a remedy. His To-Do list runs "Rope. Blindfolds. Crane operators."

Or maybe, America's local allies in the region will have it all wrapped up in a year's time, somehow neutralizing and confining Iran's menace. Yet the odds do not favor our side when matching up Bin Salman, al-Sabhan and Nader against Soleimani, Nasrallah, and al-Muhandis, even if those allies were outfitted with gleaming American-made weaponry and guided by Israeli advice.

In July 2017, Kushner told some interns that a younger Arab generation "knows that Iran had replaced Palestine as the center of Arab interest...We don't want a history lesson. We've read enough books. Let's focus on, how do you come up with a conclusion to the situation?" There is an incongruity in this statement: if Iran had indeed replaced Palestine as a focus then that means that new histories and narratives are being authored, ones that neither Kushner nor anyone else would have had a chance to read yet. That said, it seems that he and many others missed some useful lessons: those four books on the Kurds in Iraq I discussed above may have come in handy in understanding the historical importance of what was unfolding on October 15, 2017, in Kirkuk. While those four books on the Jews that we ran through can give one a sense of how deeply-established historical truths can simply vanish when ill-considered policy short-cuts are enacted.

There is little strategizing one can do when confronting the awesome marvel of a black hole. And if we are not to have a strategy, then at least let us be provided with clarity: A world power that is unable to head-off insipient, large-scale breakdowns, that fails to mold outcomes or prepare for them, and that is facing unprecedented levels of unpredictability in a region counted for two generations as its own, then that power can be said to have experienced strategic collapse. None of this was 'inevitable', as sophists such as Obama assert. There should be a measure of accountability for that, if not for nothing than an acknowledgment of the millions of lives that will be impacted. And since unpredictability, by its very nature, makes it exceedingly difficult, even pointless, to prepare for what may emerge beyond the black hole, then time and effort are better spent in reconsidering how it came to this, meaning there should be lots more history lessons in store. 'Iraq', as a catchall, as an amulet protecting a policy planner from accountability, is not enough of a riposte. That it continues to be used as such denudes the unseriousness of the conversation.

But, pray tell, "How long ago was Ali Abdullah Saleh killed?"

*

SOME NOTES:

On Mulla Mustafa's rift with Qasim: Jalal Talabani has a different take as to how it started. According to him, the two had a very close relationship, up until the time Mulla Mustafa told Qasim, while the latter was convalescing after the 1959 assassination attempt, that he had ordered the murder of one of the Zebari chiefs (his youngest wife's uncle) in retribution for the harassment endured by the Barzanis at his hand while Mulla Mustafa and most of the menfolk were in exile. Qasim was incensed because Mulla Mustafa had acted outside the law, superseding the authority of the state, or rather Qasim's own.

On Mulla Mustafa and the Soviets: a memorandum from the Soviet intelligence archive does suggest that as early as July 1961, when Mulla Mustafa's Peshmerga began settling scores with the traditional Kurdish enemies of the Barzanis who had remained loyal to the Iraqi state, the Soviets were discussing means of sending aid and arms to him. However, there is no evidence that such plans came to fruition when the fighting between the Kurds and Qasim's government began in earnest in September 1961.

On Maliki's Kurdish lineage: The al-'Illli of the village of Janajeh near Tweirij descend from al-Warram (a probable derivation of 'Hawram') son of Abi Firas, of the Kurdish Javan tribe. They share this lineage with the Kashif al-Ghita' family of Najaf. Al-Warram led soldiers from his tribe to come to the aid of the medieval Shia Mazyadid state of the Bani Asad tribe at the end of the tenth century. The Mazyadids founded the city of Hillah (al-Jama'ayn) and the Javan Kurds were settled there too in their own quarter. Later genealogists fancifully tried to concoct a new lineage for al-Warram, having him descend from Malik al-Ashtar al-Nakha'i. On the Kurdishness of the Javan, see Mustafa Jawad, *Qabilet jawan al-kurdiyya* (1967). There is a possibility that parts of the Javan stayed behind in Kurdistan and came to be known as the Jaff tribes.

On the princes of Amadia: Their Abbasid lineage has been fairly established by scholars, see for example Imad Abdul-Salam Raouf, *Al-shajarah al-ziyooqiah* (2009). They even attempted to copy the dual dragon-serpent relief from Baghdad's Talisman Gate onto Amadia's Bab Bahdinan as well as the former entrance to the prince's palace.

On lowlander-highlander, pastoralist-peasant relations in Kurdistan: I was influenced by reading James C. Scott, *Against the Grain* (2017)

On some of the first narratives concerning Kurdish 'history': See Muhammad Amin Zeki, [*Tarikh al-duwel wel imarat al-kurdiyyah fil 'ahd al-islami*](#) (translated, 1948) Zeki (1880-1958) is considered the first modern historian of the Kurds. He was born in Suleimaniya, graduated as a topographer from Istanbul's military academy, and worked on several tasks, including delineating the Ottoman-Bulgarian and Ottoman-Russian borders. He was elected deputy speaker of Iraq's Constituent Assembly in 1925, and headed its military committee as well. He later held several ministerial posts, and was a member of the Senate. His theory was that there were two components to the Kurdish nation: indigenous Zagrosian peoples, who in later stages merged with incoming Median settlers.

On the reasons behind the hanging of Sheikh Abdul-Salam Barzani in December 1914: The Kurdish narrative has it that he was executed on political grounds, having demanded de facto autonomy a few years prior, and that the Ottomans took preemptive action to stamp out sedition. This argument is based on the strength of Abdul-Salam having signed a petition, along with several other notables, for wider usage of the Kurdish language in official transactions and to appoint more Kurds to positions of local authority. Other interpretations have it that Abdul-Salam was already in open rebellion, and that he had escaped ahead of punitive military action taken against the Barzan area. The story turns fanciful from then on, suggesting that while exiled, he met the Russian Archduke, the Tsar's brother, in Tbilisi to press for Russia's help in securing

Kurdish independence from the Ottomans. Other narratives have him coordinating with Agha Petros, an Assyrian commander propped up by the Russians, after having met him in Urmia. There is a picture allegedly showing the two together. However, I do not find this story convincing: the Russians began working in earnest with the Assyrians near Urmia in the summer of 1917 (Barzani was hanged almost three years earlier). In fact, Gen. Semyonov, later of the White Army, was actively coordinating that relationship with the Assyrians then, and he would apply the lessons he learned on the Russian-Ottoman front while organizing his ethnic Buryat army to fight the Reds. For decades, the Barzani family paid a family in Mosul to tend to Abdul-Salam's grave there, and to keep its location secret.

On Muhammad Ali Pasha's Kurdish ancestry: The story arises from his family's lore, that they were Kurdish horse traders from the village of Ilic near Erzincan before moving to Ottoman Kavala in the Balkans. The tale is attributed to Prince Abbas Hilmi, see Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, *Egypt in the reign of Muhammad Ali* (1994), p. 25.

On the origins of the Junbulats: See Saleem Hassan Heshi, *Ali pasha junbulat* (1986)

On the Bedirkhan enclosure in the vicinity of Sheikh Khalid Naqshbandi's shrine, Damascus: Buried there is Bedir Khan, the last prince of Botan (1802-1868), together with his grandson Prince Celadet Ali (1893-1951), and Celadet's wife (and cousin; also a granddaughter of Bedir Khan's) Princess Roshen Salih (1909 [Kayseri]-1992 [Banyas]). Interestingly, the inscription says "This mausoleum was renovated under the auspices of Mr. Jalal Talabani, President of the Republic of Iraq, and Messrs. Abdul-Hamid Darwish and Kemal Burkay" the latter gentlemen being a Kurdish Syrian politician and a Turkish Syrian politician respectively.

On the Talabanis' non-Kurdish linkages: Saddam Hussein's clan, the Baijat, at one point drew the ire of the Ottomans in 1907, consequently escaping and taking refuge for two years with a subsection of the Talabanis in the vicinity of the town of Yenkiyeh. The Talabanis later interceded with the authorities in order to issue an amnesty for the Baijat.

On the origins of the Talabanis and Abdul Rahman's tenure: See Mukarrem Talabani, *Al-sheikh Abdul Rahman al-talabani*, part 1 (2003)

On the Turkish journalist and parliamentarian descended from Abdul Rahman Talabani: Omer Ozturkman (1929-2010). He was born in Valikonagi Caddesi in Istanbul's Nisantasi neighborhood, completing part of his schooling in Kirkuk. He was a correspondent for the Anatolian Agency from the mid-fifties until 1965, when he was elected as an MP for Bursa. He was a columnist for *Turkiye* for seventeen years.

On the status of Abdul Hamid II's estates around Kirkuk: See E. Mahmud Sami, *The Quest for Sultan Abdulhamid's Oil Assets* (2006)

On Hussein Abdul-Karim Barzanji, the composer of *Ay Raqib*: His biography closely mirrors that of his colleague, the poet 'Dildar'. He was born in 1918, in the town of Qader Karam (much of the lands around there are owned by a subsection of the Talabani family, who had a long history of feuding with the Barzanjis). His family was associated with a Sufi lodge of the Qadiri-Qarajiwari order (a nephew, Ibrahim Barzanji would be counted one of Kurdistan's top Sufis until his death in 2005). Barzanji had no formal musical training. His musical talent, including a singing voice he was renowned for, developed within the chanting and drum beating rituals held at the lodge. Like many of his peers, Barzanji attended high school in Kirkuk and then moved on to study law in Baghdad. Dildar seems to have been his classmate in both places. He joined the Hiwa Party at around the same time as Dildar did. Then they both joined the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), ostensibly because it enshrined "a nation's right to self-determination". However, neither Dildar nor Barzanji left the ICP to join the KDP after the latter was formed in 1946. Thus, even when having the chance to join a strictly Kurdish party, they chose to remain active as part of an 'Iraqi' party—a conundrum facing many

Kurdish intellectuals at the time. Barzanji was a polyglot, and was fluent in Turkish, Farsi, English and Arabic as well as Kurdish. He seems to have translated some of Tolstoy's stories from an English version to Arabic. He also wrote other pieces of music, which have been appropriated by a few Kurdish singers. Barzanji's younger brother, Ma'arouf Barzanji was also a secret Communist, and he was serving as head of Kirkuk's municipality when the riots of July 1959 broke out, leading to a massacre of Turkmen by ICP cadres and ethnic Kurds. Both Ma'arouf and Hussein were arrested by the Qasim government and charged with stoking the violence. They were given the death sentence in 1962, but it was not enforced. Only after Qasim was overthrown were they executed by the Aref regime in the summer of 1963. Source: a conversation with Yahya Barzanji, the composer's nephew, who had written a book, in Kurdish, about his uncle.

On the controversy over who composed *Ay Raqib*: One finds the assertion that it was composed by Nouri Siddeeq Shawees (the father of former Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Roz Shawees). Shawees was a top aide to Mulla Mustafa who was present with the Kurdish leader at Mahabad. I think the discrepancy at hand is due to the possibility that the anthem played at Mahabad may not have been *Ay Raqib*, for there is another narrative that has it that the author was not Dildar, but rather Abdul-Rahman Sharafkandi (penname: 'Hazhar'). Sharafkandi was a poet laureate of sorts at Mahabad, so he does fit the bill, whereas Dildar was never there. Consequently, it is possible that another composition, now lost, counted as that republic's anthem.

On how unprovocative 'Kurdishness' was during the fifties in monarchical Iraq: I would also note that Iranian-born Ala'addin al-Sajjadi (1907-1984) published a Kurdish-language travelogue in Baghdad in 1956. I believe this book, [Geh shtik le kurdistana](#), is the first attempt to introduce Kurds to different parts of Iraqi Kurdistan. Al-Sajjadi, together with Ibrahim Ahmed, issued *Galawezh*, a Kurdish language cultural magazine in 1939, also in Baghdad, and it ran for a decade.

On what monarchy-era directories can tell us about changes in Kirkuk: Another directory, from 1955, offers anecdotal evidence as to how the administration of the province was 'Arabized' with a large portion of administrators having been born in Baghdad rather than Kirkuk if compared to the 1946 directory; this trend seems to have been part of a deliberate policy. See Muhammad Hadi al-Dafer and Abdullah Hassan's [Directory of Northern Iraq](#) (it covers the provinces of Diyala and Kirkuk)

On the Hamidiye Cavalry: The British would later reintroduce the same idea to Iraq by forming the predominately Assyrian levies early on during their occupation, ahead of its reincarnation by the Iraqi state in the 1960s, and ahead too of the American-backed tribal 'Sahwas' of 2007.

On the Bani Shaybah in Iraq: According to their family lore, they arrived with Murad IV's campaign, and settled at first in the Bab Al-Sheikh quarter. They were then awarded lands around Kadhimiya, together with the custodianship over the shrine there. They remained Sunnis of the Maliki school for generations, until the custodianship of Abdul-Nabi (I), who declared himself a Shia (although some of his sons later reverted to Sunnism). Abdul Nabi (I) is the great-grandfather of Abdul-Nabi (II), who himself is the great-grandfather of Abdul-Muhsin al-Hakim. Abdul-Nabi II had many sons and daughters from multiple wives, in both Iraq and in Lebanon. It is unclear whether the girl's ancestor, Abdul-Razzak, who also assumed the custodianship of Ali's shrine in Najaf in addition to that of Kadhimiya, was a son or a brother to Abdul-Nabi II.

On Mahmud Shawkat Pasha calling Abdul Hamid a "Byzantine owl": This could be a reference to the persistent rumors swirling around the capital for decades that the Sultan was not sired by a preceding sultan, but rather by a Greek tailor in one version, or an Armenian tailor in another.

On the Shawkat's family descent from Ahmad, Agha of the Janissaries: I have not been able to get a clear answer after contacting a couple of the family members, or by perusing Naji Shawkat's memoirs. They claim to be from the Rabi'a tribe, and specifically from the Rashidi subsection (unlikely). Shawkat's father, Rifa'at was

likely born around 1834 (d. 1899). Shawkat died in 1915, in Istanbul. His genealogy is given as Shawkat son of Rifa'at son of Ahmed bin Hussein bin Ali, with Ahmad being the 'Agha of the Janissaries'. It is also unlikely that there were two 'Ahmad Agha of the Janissaries' within a generation, especially since this was an important and well known personality—he even gave his name to the Bab Al-Agha neighborhood of Old Baghdad. Ahmad led the 1802 uprising against Ali Pasha as the latter was preparing to take over the reins of power after his father-in-law Suleiman Pasha had died. The coup was popular with Baghdad's masses but it ultimately failed. Ali Pasha was a hated figure, and plenty of gossip circulated about the circumstances of his marriage. But the key detraction was his failure, in 1798, to stamp out the Wahhabi threat to Iraq. He led an army as far as Al-Hasa but was then turned back by the Wahhabis. He arranged for a truce to last for six years, which was even signed at a ceremony in Baghdad. However, the Wahhabis broke it with their raid on Karbala in April 1801. Ahmad the Agha of the Janissaries was cut to pieces after his bid had failed. Thus, he could not have been Rifa'at's father. It should be noted that Rifa'at ran into some legal trouble at one point in his career and found refuge with the Saudi family in Nejd.

On Ibn Hanbal's grave: Consensus has it that he was buried in an area that is today west of Kadhimiya. However, there is a vague notion that his remains were removed at one point, unclear when, and transferred to a new location in the Goknezer neighborhood of Baghdad because the original location was inundated. There may be some merit to that notion since Ibn al-Jawzi, the Hanbalist propagator of the twelfth century, was buried near Ibn Hanbal at first, but seems to have been moved to where his home and school used to be situated, for the same reason as the inundation of its previous location. His grave is now situated adjacent to the Abdul-Rahman al-Naqib's former house in between the Sinnek and Mreba'a neighborhoods, almost overlooking the Tigris. Al-Naqib was the first prime minister of Iraq. However, Salafists do not acknowledge Ibn Hanbal's grave where it stands today, claiming that it had been lost to time and the elements. Yet some Hanbalites do and have, for at least a century, and the failure to keep to its perimeter clean shows how weak the Hanbali school used to be, until recently, in Iraq.

On al-Sa'iqah's disciples: Subhi al-Badri (1936-2013) was al-Baghdadi's kinsman and influencer. Taqi al-Din al-Hilali (1893-1987) was the Quran's translator. Abdul Khaliq 'Uthman al-Mashayikhi (1933-1976) was the founder of Jund al-Rahman.

On whether Salih Sarriya's group was the first jihadist organization: The cell formed by Elwy Mustafa, Ismail Tantawi and Nabil El Bora'y did come earlier, in 1964. But it can hardly be seen an operationalized model for later jihadist organizations. See Samuel Tadros, *Mapping Egyptian Islamism* (2014), p. 72

On Iran and the Houthis: I am uncertain about this matter. It is not as if the relationship has not developed from those first tenuous contacts into something resembling an alliance, but the talking points that have the Houthis as some sort of appendage of Soleimani's regional gambit are a little bit off—the Houthis are just as much of a handful for him as they were for others. I think the assassination of Houthi leader Saleh Ali al-Sammad on April 19, 2018 offers interesting insights: the Iranians had been facilitating mediation efforts between the Houthis and U.S. and British representatives in Oman, Baghdad and Kenya, without involving the Saudis and Emiratis at this stage. Al-Sammad was one of the few top Houthis that the Iranians could reason with and with whom they could exercise leverage, such as bringing the Houthis to the table. Al-Sammad's assassination through an aerial strike seems to have been a move by the Saudis and Emiratis to sabotage the talks. Soleimani's camp understood it as an escalation. Al-Muhandis, who was one of the facilitators of the talks, tweeted out on April 24: "The martyr al-Sammad is not simply a loss for the Yemeni resistance and its people who face down arrogance and conspiracy and serial starvation and humiliation [at the hands of the

Saudis] and their ominous alliance; he is a martyr for the entire *ummah* in confronting Wahhabism and terrorism and its allies.”

On mapping the regions of dislocation and displacement across the Middle East and how they reflect on identity: The best primers on the genre (for me) were Norman N. Lewis, *Nomads and settlers in Syria and Jordan, 1800-1980* (1987); Aydin Osman Erkan, *Turn My Head to the Caucasus* (2009); Ryan Gingeras, *Sorrowful Shores* (2009); Bruce Clark, *Twice a Stranger* (2006).

On other reasons that the Najaf hierarchy kept their distance from Muqtada’s father: There was a pervasive suspicion that he had been compromised by the Ba’ath regime, and that he and his students served as informers. There is no evidence that I have seen to corroborate that. However, it would make sense for the regime to ‘sponsor’ his bid for prominence within Najaf, since he was a disruptive and quarrelsome element, at once weakening and embarrassing the clerical institution. There are anecdotal references, also uncorroborated, that it was Seyyid Abdul Karim al-Madani (1899-1991, of Najaf, then Diyala) who recommended to the Ba’ath authorities that they should support al-Sadr’s bid to undermine that of others.

On the disenfranchisement of al-Hawali’s ‘southerners’: If one considers the area that al-Hawali takes to have been the domain of the Bani ‘Aidh state (southern Hejaz, Assir and al-Bahah) then there is empirical evidence suggesting deep-rooted discrimination. For example, throughout the history of the Saudi Arabian kingdom, only one minister was picked from this area, and his tenure lasted less than two months (Muhammad bin Ali Aal-Hayazi, from ‘Asir, Minister of Health from early Dec. 2014 to late Jan. 2015). A review of the top positions assigned within the Saudi Arabian elite until the early 2000s, as [was conducted by Muhammad bin Sunitan](#), seems to bear out the accusation of southern disenfranchisement too. It should also be noted that 13 out of the 15 Saudi hijackers on 9/11 were from this area.

On the relative religiosity of the al-Hawali’s southerners: This seems to be an oblique retort to an incident that allegedly occurred in the spring of 2012, when the then-governor of Al-Bahah, Prince Mishari bin Saud, read out a historical document in a public audience with ‘Asir tribesmen. The letter, dated April 1952, was written by his father, Crown Prince (at the time) Saud bin Abdul Aziz, and it is addressed to the tribes of Ghamid and Zahran castigating them for their irreligiosity and wayward mores, suggesting that they were practically unbelievers prior to his father’s conquest of their domains.

On al-Hawali’s admiration for Sharif Khalid bin Mansour Ibn Lu’ay: This admiration is in conflict with how many southerners may remember Ibn Lu’ay; the Salafist Sharif led a punitive raid against the town of Baljureshi 1922, ostensibly to punish them for their lack of religiosity but more likely having to do with a turf war. The raid resulted in casualties and much property damage and looting. Baljurshi is near the ancestral lands of al-Hawali’s family.

On the Bedouins calling Izra ‘Azerbaijan: See Hanna Abi-Rashed, *Hawran al-damieh* (second edition, 1961), p. 354, n. 3

On further explorations of Salibi’s thesis on Judaism’s territorial provenance: Salibi dedicated his first book on the topic to two persons, “Ahmed and John”—Chalabi would later tell me that he is the Ahmed concerned, having been a close friend and academic colleague of the historian’s, and also for suggesting a couple of insights for the thesis. This little aside could put Chalabi’s enthusiasm and support for archeological excavations at a site called Tell Khaiber in southern Iraq in another light: maybe he thought the dig would reveal more insights about the thesis. Early results indicate that it was a city, maybe the capital, of the ‘Sealand Kings’. No obvious connection to early Judaism has been uncovered so far.

On the number of Jews in Mosul according to Benjamin of Tudela: Haddad’s translation incorrectly assigns the number “700” (likely a printer’s error) whereas the original travelogue gives the number 7000.

On the many stages by which anti-Semitism developed in Europe and the Middle East: See Bernard Lewis, *Semites and Anti-Semites* (1999)

One Michel Sarkis and the Masons: The only other book bearing his name was a directory of the notables of Cairo and Al-Minia, coauthored with another person who is not named, and we can judge from the text that it was written in either 1916 or 1917. The book contains the names of many Masons, suggesting that Sarkis had an established relationship with the Masonic organization in Egypt.

On the Ba'ath's expulsion of Iraqi-Persians and Faylis: Some of them went on to serve the Iranian state, as was the case with Iran's chief nuclear negotiator Ali Akbar Salehi, who was born in Karbala and educated at the American University of Beirut (AUB). In 1977, after completing his PhD in nuclear engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), he thought he would be going back to a career in his country, Iraq. But then it turned into Saddam's Iraq. Iran took Salehi in, awarding him citizenship as a *moaved* ('returnee'). Others joined the IRGC, today serving as some of its top commanders. One of the latter, the Baghdad-born Hassan Danaeifar, would be appointed as Iran's second ambassador to post-Saddam Iraq.

On the survival of Mehdi Hashemi's network beyond the purges: Details of Washington's engagement with Tehran (Iran-Contra) first appeared in print on the pages of *Al-Shira*, a Lebanese magazine, in its Nov. 3, 1986 issue. Its editor Hassan Sabra had publicly claimed, some years later, that he received these details in Damascus on October 27 from two Shia Saudi seminarians, followers of Ayatollah Muhammad Shirazi. They in turn had learned about the matter through a series of pamphlets that were allegedly distributed in Tehran by Hashemi's network. Sabra added that other Lebanese media organs had also gotten word of the story but decided to sit on it. However, a source tells me that Sabra would say something else in confidence when asked, in the late 1980s, about the story's chain of transmission, namely that he got those details of the deal from Iran's ambassador in Syria then, Ali Akbar Muhtashamipour, through an intermediary. Muhtashamipour was an important operative for the Iranian regime; he claims to have been instrumental in the creation of Lebanese Hezbollah. He was never identified with the Hashemi network, and although removed from his ambassador's post in 1986 (I haven't been able to get an exact date, he was succeeded by Muhammad Hassan Akhtari), he went on to assume other prominent roles within Iran's security matrix.

On Hassan Modarres: An interesting read on the man and how he stood up to Reza Shah comes to us from the memoirs of Iranian diplomat and functionary (as well as being Modarres' neighbor) Abdollah Mostofi, *The Administrative and Social History of the Qajar Period*, Vol. III (1997, in English).

I have drawn on several articles and Twitter threads I've written over the past year for this piece. First names were used in lieu of surnames in cases where there was more than one character from the same family.

*