

Yet Another Version of the “Arab Spring”

Ramifications of the Syrian Armed Conflict for the Existing Arab Order and Beyond

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At the start of 2011, events began to unfold in some of the most stable Arab countries betrayed the signs of an unpredictable phase in local, regional and even international political life. Nine of the 22 Arab League members were, to varying degrees, undergoing unprecedented mass gestations promising a long-awaited if unscheduled divergence from the existing Arab order. While that order had been criticised widely for its chronic problems of entrenched bad governance, it was ordinary citizens in Tunisia who first belled the cat and crossed the fear barrier marking a new turn in modern Arab history. For a relatively short time, crowds of protesters in Tunisia, and then in Egypt, took to the streets and occupied public squares, shouting slogans in support of freedom, justice and dignity and against the two corrupt political regimes, which had allegedly whittled away state institutions, multiplied unemployment rates and caused mass poverty. Thanks to social media networks, the reverberations across Arab states were far-ranging as clashes between the masses and riot police were recorded and aired to the whole world. Later, in Libya, the situation turned especially tragic due to the heavy death toll and large-scale urban destruction caused when the conflict expanded to regular warfare and NATO staged a direct military intervention. It was only vetoes by both Russia and Syria at the UN Security Council that stopped a replay of the Libyan scenario in Syria.



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Henceforth, the world became gradually divided over the implications of the blood-stained “Arab Spring,” a term – coined by the Western media to describe a fresh cycle of Arab political life – that was unlikely to bloom in Syria, just as it has not, to date, flowered anywhere in the Arab countries swept up in the uprisings. This article considers yet another version of this “Arab Spring,” addressing the repercussions for Syrian statehood and unity and the ramifications for the existing Arab order and elsewhere.

Keywords: Arab Spring, Syria, jihadists, NATO, geopolitics, Islamists World/Arab order, regime change, regional/global intervention

Introduction

In his *Philosophy of History*, Hegel places great emphasis on the role of consciousness of freedom in the process of historical change and eventually the emergence of the state and its lawful institutions as the guarantors of that freedom.¹ If other factors are acknowledged by other philosophers and schools of thought as parts of that process, then they have no valence in the Hegelian hypothesis where the dynamic nature of history allows for only one constant index: change. To this end, the Arab world, as a historical entity, is no exception. The various popular uprisings, which first erupted in Tunisia² and – thanks to rapid satellite media transmission³ – incited much of the public to contest the dictatorship, corruption and bad governance of other Arab states in both Africa and Asia, cannot be arbitrarily put down to coincidence or some conspiracy theory as some Arab politicians and intellectuals have tried to do. In fact, there are solid reasons why the Arab masses made that historic move in honour of freedom, justice and dignity. These three vertices of the triangle variously labelled a “rebellion,” “uprising,” “Arab Spring,” or “revolution,” by Medias are part and parcel of people’s conscious aspiration towards better living conditions and a better lifestyle. This is as true in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen as it is in Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iraq and other Arab countries.⁴

The existing Arab order has been rotting and turning to dead wood for quite some time. In fact, the stale Arab political scene needs refreshing if not total replacement. Local and national political parties, long passive or indifferent to the pitiful Arab situation (and at times

accomplices to unpopular regimes) have found themselves running breathlessly on the heels of mass demonstrations, which have sustained heavy losses of life in order to effect a remarkable change to the governance structure and eventually the state apparatus. To add insult to injury, the unprecedented popular movement, which demands a real shift to democracy and socio-economic justice, has been overridden and hijacked by interventionist imperialist world powers⁵ and direct support from the most backward Arab regimes applying political and financial pressure.⁶ In the case of Syria, this includes lavish, blind spending on the rebels; the support of satellite-transmitted media campaigns to fuel and aggravate the ensuing armed conflict; and providing weapons, transport and sophisticated communication and media devices paid for in cash to serve rebels from scores of countries, some of which (Chechnya, for instance) are a thousand miles away. These insurgents, for the most part, do not come under a single military command and have various patrons and sponsors. Some of the rebels are Syrian army defectors and fugitives, others are non-Syrian Arab and non-Arab fighters (self-proclaimed jihadists) affiliated with underground movements decked out with a myriad of names and signs.⁷ The remainder are mostly uncompromising Islamist extremists driven by an irrational and unearthly confessional allegiance that allows no place for dialogue or a political settlement with the current Syrian government or any other Arab regime.

Many documents from Western governments (including Denmark, Holland, the United Kingdom, France, Sweden, Norway, the US, Australia, Canada, Spain and others) point to the increasing number of foreign fighters (their citizens) who smuggled through Turkey, and other countries, to participate in the battle over Syria and Iraq. Their guidelines are part of some hidden agenda and plans nursed and sponsored by masterminds outside Syria.⁸ Ironically, however, footage and video reports show that most (if not all) of these insurgents and well-armed young rebels, including the Islamist factions, have evacuated their injured across the borders to Turkish, Lebanese, Jordanian and Israeli hospitals.⁹ They even share and exchange field information with various international and regional military intelligence agencies and receive financial and military support from Arab and foreign financiers and the puppeteers of a grand plan against the Syrian government called "Friends of Syria."¹⁰ With waves of merciless violence being car-

ried out by both rebels and Syrian armed forces across almost all of Syrian territory, the prospects of an Arab Spring blooming in the country are few. In other Arab states like Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, which experienced varying degrees of violence and succeeded in toppling their political regimes, the situation is no better. In fact, it has grown worse: less secure and more fragmented. Still, when compared with those Arab countries swept away by the winds of change of the blood-stained and tarnished Arab Spring, Syria tells a different story. For over three years, the country has stood out from the collapsing Arab countries of the Middle East: bleeding gravely, but still miraculously composed and intact. Why, then, are Syria and its government resistant to the “constructive chaos” intended for the Arab world?¹¹

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In the first place, we must remember that the war on and over Syria is a war for a new Middle East, as envisioned by former US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice. Here Syria's role as a major sponsor of Arab liberation movements for decades is crucial; its practical support of the PLO and more recently Hezbollah in Lebanon has always been a thorn in the side of Israel and its supporters in the West. Syria's geo-political location, in the midst of three rising regional hegemonic powers (in Iran, Turkey and Israel), creates temptation enough for subduing it—by hook or by crook. Jewish lobbyists in Europe and North America have been working hard on this project: Syria must be brought to its knees. This is one explanation for the regional and global interventions in Syria from day one of the Syrian popular uprising though their declared pretext was the cause of freedom and democracy. Still, Syrian armed forces have withstood these interventions, and the state and its institutions seem to have won most rounds, albeit at a heavy cost. Secondly, the Syrian president's early response to constitutional change has been a strong move towards pluralism and multi-partisan political life.¹² While other Arab regimes in Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and Egypt overlooked the popular and legitimate demands of their people, Bashar al-Assad took a step in the right direction. Thirdly, Syria has stayed composed, maintaining the day-to-day operations and services of its state institutions and, above all, the unity of its armed forces and security police. This is why the country has remained intact and unified despite heavy losses of life and property and its shrinking control over important and oil-rich provinces such as al-Riqqa and Deir al-Zour. Fourthly, Syria's unified body politic and the strong nation-

alistic spirit of its people (including the country's internal opposition) have kept the state apparatus operating at home and abroad; only a handful of high-ranking officials have resigned from their jobs and joined opposition factions to be heard of no more. Fifthly, the Syrian leadership and its regional and international alliances have lent weight to national steadfastness in the face of regional and global sanctions and threats, local violence and foreign military intervention—to name only some of the fronts. And finally, we may consider the practical reconciliation measures taken by Syria to grant pardon to fugitives and defectors as well as civilians who took up arms and fought against the government. All these are part of the national story of Syria's defensive efforts to squash and foil the plan to restructure and redraw the map of the Middle East.

Against the odds, the fate of an indivisible Syria remains the concern of its entire population. This is as true for the Syrian elites as it is for common citizens and ethnic minorities, all of whom see Syria as their first and last homeland. Even those citizens who have been displaced and left homeless inside Syria, across state borders and in other parts of the world have spoken out unfalteringly against the partitioning of their homeland. On the level of popular Arab consciousness and pan-Arab nationalist movements, it is believed that Syria's unity and the national aspirations it endorses and upholds are the main concerns. Although the Syrian regime has its own failings, which are too numerous to name, it is Syria, the state, its history, location and role which are being targeted in a plan pre-meditated, tailored and orchestrated by enemies of the Arab world.¹³ These opponents have hijacked the Arab Spring in Syria and twisted its goal for other purposes. The strategic visions of globally influential countries with fast-growing economies such as the BRICS and their strong political position in support of Syria and their own geopolitical interests, add another dimension to the seemingly endless armed conflict in Syria. As it is, the complications of the situation look set to spill over to the countries neighbouring Syria. From there, they could spread to those faraway states from which thousands of insurgents have come to fight the Syrian army and destroy community life, power and water facilities, factories and air defence bases and above all steal the people's grain and wheat silos. Those foreign fighters will eventually leave Syria and return home, this time as skilled and professional militants in the art of warfare, posing a grave threat to the national security of their countries of origin and residence.

Genesis of the 2011 Arab Popular Uprising

That the 2011 Arab popular uprising erupted in several Arab countries almost simultaneously was not a matter of chance. The genesis of this collective national consciousness goes back to the early years of modern Arab history at the start of the twentieth century. It all begins in mid-World War I when Sharif Hussein led the great Arab Revolt against four hundred years (1516-1918) of Ottoman military occupation of most of the Asian part of the Arab world.¹⁴ Duped by British colonialists into serving as a Trojan horse, Hussein's troops launched armed attacks on Ottoman forces from within the empire while British forces planned an onslaught from without. When Turkey lost the war and shrank back into its own national borders, thus surrendering all the Arab territories it had occupied for centuries, the Arab Revolt came to an abrupt end. The Arab tribal leaders who outlasted the revolution had been expecting their victorious allies in Europe to confer part of the war dividends on them. Instead, the Arab world was divided up between Great Britain and France.¹⁵ The direct result of the war of independence, then, was the collapse of the dream of Arab unity and the mingling of a sense of defeat and discomfort with the collective Arab consciousness of freedom. Instead of long-awaited unity, the Arab League was established (at Britain's recommendation) by six founding Arab states in Cairo, Egypt, in 1945; this was done with Anglo-French approval since most of the Arab world remained under British and French colonial rule. Ironically enough, instead of coming true, the dream of Arab unity was shattered, and in its place there mushroomed banana republics, protectorates, emirates and sultanates, each hoisting up its own national flag, singing its own national anthem and sanctifying its own borders under the patronage of declared or undeclared Western protection and hegemony, a legacy handed down by Anglo-French colonialists but sincerely observed by self-appointed Arab leaders and their successors. The result was the loss of Palestine under the Balfour Declaration against which the Arab masses of Palestine took the first step towards resisting neo-colonial policies.¹⁶

Ever since the transformation of Palestine into a Jewish settlers' state in 1948, the central Arab cause has been foiled. So many military coups have been attempted across the Arab world, all bearing the false fragrance and pollen of a "Spring" but yielding no fruit. Most of these coups have occurred in Egypt, Syria and Iraq, whose leaders rose to power on the pretext of maintaining and consolidating national independence and liberating Palestine as the crucial Arab goal. It was

believed these leaders would pose a threat to the new-born state of Israel inside Palestine. Ironically, the deadly consequence of their corrupt military rule was the loss of more Arab territories along with all of Palestine in the Six-Day War (1967) between Israel and at least three Arab regimes surrounding the Jewish state. Ordinary citizens of the Arab world condemned that defeat right away and supported the birth of the Palestinian resistance movement in the wake of that great loss. However, with Palestine remaining a dream unfulfilled for more than 60 years, the Arab public has gradually soured against these regimes; it is ready to condemn their leaders as dictators and support any prospect of change to the tired political scene and its disordered power relations. Against this background, we meet the long-awaited wave of change that overtook the Arab world at the outset of 2011.

The Turning Point

The suicide of the young Tunisian vendor Mohammed el-Bu'azizi and its aftermath unleashed a series of popular uprisings across Arab states.¹⁷ For a relatively short time, protesters took to the streets first in Tunisia (December 2010) and then in Egypt (January 2011). They occupied public squares, shouting their support for freedom, justice and dignity while condemning the corruption and decay of the respective political regimes, which had allegedly whittled away state institutions, ballooned unemployment rates and caused mass poverty. Thanks to social media networks, the reverberations across other Arab states were astonishingly compelling: the unprecedented violent clashes between angry masses and riot police were videotaped and screened round-the-clock to the whole world. Surprisingly, the regimes in both Tunisia and Egypt collapsed soon after and their presidents were forced to step down in clearly worded resignations and disappear from the political scene for good.

In the case of Libya, the situation was devastating and tragic due to the heavy death toll and large-scale urban destruction caused, in large part, by the direct military intervention of NATO air and navy forces under UN Security Council Resolution 1973. Interestingly, it was the UN vetoes of Russia and China at the same Security Council meeting which averted a replay of the Libyan scenario in Syria. From here on, controversy surrounded not only Syria but also the fate of the blood-

stained “Arab Spring.” The world divided gradually over the connotations of that term – coined by the Western media to describe a new era of political life in the Arab world – that was unlikely to bloom in Syria since it has not blossomed in any of the Arab countries swept up in these events.

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Syria, which has sustained unspeakable war damage in all private and public sectors and a heavy loss of life for over three years, must be read, thus, as crossroads story about the conflict between strategic regional and global geopolitical interests. There is a seeming convergence in most political and military analyses of the Syrian situation published in the international media over the last three years.¹⁸

The Syrian Version of the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring caught most rulers of the Arab countries unaware. Sensing the power of this sweeping change to undermine the existing Arab order, each one of these states viewed that Spring as an unwanted process. This explains the various narratives that emerged in this context. The ones framing the Syrian version of the Arab Spring are heavily loaded. Each of these stories is purpose-built to serve some agenda whether locally, regionally or globally. Islamist factions, each with a different vision and transcript, share a commitment to violence and armed struggle against the existing Syrian regime embodied in the person of President Bashar al-Assad. This accounts for their resolve to unseat the regime and bring about a new order based on their unilateral interpretation of Islamic thinking, no matter the cost. Such nihilism would never allow for a constructive dialogue with diverse others to occur and bear fruit. For those Islamist factions, it is an existential imperative that half-measures cannot be tolerated and defeat must not be conceded. On the other hand, the official Syrian narrative describes the whole situation as a premeditated act of aggression set in motion by a regional and global conspiracy against Syrian national sovereignty and independence as well as a direct intervention in its national and domestic affairs. Yet, Syria has not dismissed the possibility of reaching a political agreement even with armed rebels.

Since the outbreak of anti-government events in March 2011, the Syrian government has called on all political parties and key figures inside and outside Syria to join the negotiating table to start a national

dialogue and broker a peaceful settlement over the country's future. The responses from fragmented opposition factions to that call have been conditional: Assad must step down first. Even talks in Geneva, sponsored by the UN, Russia and the US, were a fiasco because of the conflicting agendas (in some cases hidden) which the different parties maintain and have gone to the war for. Standing on either extreme of the political spectrum, the Syrian government and the opposition seem to be in a deadlock so long as the military solution does not decisively favour either one of them. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Amidst heavy losses of life and property across the country, the Syrian government's position is based on the lessons learnt from the experiences of other Arab countries into which the Arab Spring has brought chaos, disorder and tragedy ¹⁹What, then, makes that Spring so controversial and its national objectives so mystified?

It seems that Syria has realised that the Arab Spring has been hijacked and overridden by both regional and global powers. Based on this assumption, it is highly unlikely that this Spring can bring a significant change to the political life of the countries where it has been active. The hijackers have distorted its legitimate objectives and gradually created a mood of frustration among the masses of the Arab world. The Arab Spring has failed to bring democratic reforms to any of the countries overtaken by popular rallies demanding an immediate change of the political regime and the ousting of the ruling party. In other words, it has failed to bloom in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. Its biggest failure, however, has been in Syria. There it has descended into the alternative of a military solution aiming to bring faster changes to the political scene. Meanwhile the situation has worsened and grown more tragic: millions of Syrian civilians are now displaced (inside and outside Syrian national territory), jobless and at the mercy of volatile security conditions and warfare developments. A large number of Syrian refugees who crossed the borders into host countries such as Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon are living in bleak makeshift shelters and tents where UNHCR and other regional and global humanitarian organisations operate pending fundraising campaigns and available resources. This version of the Arab Spring as seen through the lens of Syrian officials, seems to be grounded in realism. The expansion of military action – accompanied by the violence and brutality of militants of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) against anyone who fails to abide

by their strict belief system in Syria, Iraq and perhaps beyond – is solid enough proof of the deteriorating situation in the name of the Arab Spring. Horrific acts perpetrated by militants against Syrian civilians and soldiers across so much of the country have been broadcast on networks for the sake of intimidation and propaganda. Syrian children in rebel-held areas have been mobilised and brainwashed to join the on-going war in Syria as “fuel” or “martyrs.”

However, Syria has also shown the other side of the coin. As a result of a dialogue initiated by the internal National Consultative Ad-Hoc Committee, which took place inside Syria in 2012, the Syrian national constitution was modified significantly. The changes touched on issues including multi-party and pluralistic political life, presidential elections, the cancellation of Article 8 (which appointed the Ba’ath Arab Party the leader of the state and the nation), the recognition of the Kurds and other ethnic/cultural minorities within the Syrian population and many other positive points which would have remained unthinkable had there been no mass uprising demanding change. During the most recent multi-party presidential election in Syria on 03 June 2014, many Syrian citizens who had been banned in their host countries (Kuwait, UAE, Saudi Arabia, France, the UK, US, Canada and others) from exercising their right to vote at their own embassies, headed home to exercise this constitutional privilege in support of the state and the rule of law. The voter turnout inside Syria and all its neighbours, except for Turkey, was unprecedented. The proportion of the population that participated in the presidential election reached 77.8%, a percentage which exceeds comparable figures for the US and France.

The Larger Arab Scene

The larger context of the Arab Spring is rather sad and frustrating. What started as a gleaming hope of real change in some parts of the Arab world soon dimmed and vanished. Thanks to daily mass rallies and other hidden forces operating inside and outside the Arab world, some political regimes began to collapse under the pressure on the streets and the inability of local governments to contain these no-compromise situations. Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen each crumbled, but their rapid collapse has, to date, produced no better system of governance or tangible change on any level including domestic security and

civil services. In Tunisia, even the “moderate” Islamist an-Nahda Party, which won a general election and ran the state for almost two years running, was an exclusionary party. The result has been the country’s volatile situation entailing a change of government and national dialogue among Tunisia’s key constituencies. The most recent development in Tunisian politics has been the forming of a new transitional cabinet run by an independent politician whose job it is to organise general elections for a new national parliament. In Yemen, the situation is no better after the interim transfer of the presidential office. Armed struggle and domestic violence (often in the shape of terrorist attacks) have only worsened the lives of the Yemeni people, and the dialogue is still unripe among local forces in the country. Ironically, the unified Yemen has finally opted for a six-province, federal state, however the death toll across the country has not subsided, due to endless rounds of shooting and violence at the hands of the Yemeni army and Yemeni militiamen including al-Qa’eda rebels.

In Libya, the state has practically undergone an official partitioning process recalling the situation during the Italian colonial period before national independence and the unification of the three Libyan provinces under King Idris es-Sanussi in 1951.²⁰ Most recently, Libya has seen unprecedented armed violence erupt across the entire country – with Tripoli, Ben Ghazi and Sabha hardest hit – in fighting between the newly-built but fragile state army and Islamist militia supported by armed-to-the-teeth tribal factions. This open-ended battle threatens to produce more tragic consequences as the belligerents pay little heed to half-measures or the prospect of rational compromises.

Nor is the situation ideal in Egypt. After the popular uprising of 25 January 2011 that excised (then) President Hosni Mubarak and his regime, the Muslim Brotherhood organisation rose to power and Mohammed Morsi was elected president of the republic. During his brief term in office, almost everything went wrong: corruption, sectarian violence, crime, rape, insurgency, more mass protests and opposition rallies and above all poor “Islamist” administration of the collapsed and indebted state, which found itself on the verge of bankruptcy. Morsi’s government was also a poor achiever at the level of foreign policy. He was himself behind the expulsion of Syria as a member of the Arab League, and he severed diplomatic relations with Syria in a public speech while keeping an ambassador in Tel Aviv.²¹ The Egyptian made

a show of waving the flag of the Syrian opposition, which was designed during the time of French colonial rule (1918-1943). Since Morsi's jailing by Egypt's new transitional government on 30 June 2013, and the election, inauguration and swearing in of a new president, Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi, on 08 June 2014, Egypt has been recovering from two years of economic stagnation. The recovery is still under way despite the stronghold of the new president and the generous grant (\$5.8 billion USD) offered by Saudi Arabia on the eve of the presidential election to stabilise Egyptian economy and bolster el-Sisi's position. The US, likewise, resumed aid to Egypt following a state visit to Cairo by US Secretary of State John Kerry in June. At best, Egypt is undergoing a transitional period during which the declared war on terrorists in the Sinai Peninsula and other Egyptian provinces will continue.

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Repercussions of the Syrian Arab Spring

The Arab Spring has certainly aggravated security concerns across the region and made life unbearable for much of the populations facing it. This is as true in Lebanon as it is in Iraq and Jordan and may even extend beyond these states. What repercussions could the Syrian version of the Arab Spring possibly have as it spills-over into Syria's neighbouring states? In fact, a critical turn in Syrian-Lebanese historic relations rests on the consequences of the war in and on Syria. So far, this maddening war has resulted in large-scale damage to infrastructure facilities, immeasurable destruction of large cities and towns across Syria as well as major losses of life (around 160,000 are dead) and mass displacement (affecting around four million) inside and outside the country,²² not to mention devastation to the economy, finances, quality of life and civic services for Syria's population of 23 million. As the spill-over from Syria into Lebanon and vice versa is inevitable for a number of reasons, the socio-political and security situation in Lebanon is not much better than that in Syria. A great number of radicals from Lebanese political and religious parties have been directly or indirectly involved in the rounds of fighting in Syria, either as supporters of the Syrian state or its opponents.²³ Currently the situations of the two countries are to a large degree inextricably connected and entwined so that any answer to the Syrian conflict, whether political or military, will help to bring about some solution to Lebanon's unstable domestic

situation. It is highly likely that Syria will always be a major player in the Middle East, and Lebanon is just a pawn in a game of regional and international powers. The recent history of the two countries strongly supports this hypothesis.²⁴ On the human level, the number of the displaced Syrians in Lebanon has become a grave problem in terms of providing shelter, water resources, hygiene, schooling, security to the population. Lebanon has failed to set up refugee camps for the majority of displaced Syrians, who have found rented accommodation among Lebanese civilians in many places across the country and particularly along Syrian-Lebanese borders. It has been a huge struggle for the Lebanese government to provide for the scattered Syrian refugee population, guarantee their safety and oversee basic daily essential services. For Lebanon to cope with this problem, it needs to do much more than it can afford. Even UNHCR services and foreign aid in this area are not enough to ease the situation, which seems irresolvable in the short-term. Additionally, Lebanon has taken in armed fugitives and insurgents who are fleeing the Syrian battlefields and taking shelter in Lebanese cities, towns and the countryside. No guarantee has ever been provided by the UN or major powers (including Lebanon's surrogate mother, France) to protect Lebanese cities from potential acts of disruption. To the extent, then, that Lebanon has been suffering the repercussions of the Syrian crisis, the Lebanese people themselves are divided over the Arab Spring in Syria.

In Iraq, the security situation is even worse than that in Lebanon. The spill-over of the Syrian armed conflict into Iraqi national territory has become a real threat, not only for the region but also for the world at large. Thousands of radicals and insurgents have crossed the borders at many points from Syria into Iraq and vice versa; they established the first Islamist principality, the Islamic Imarah in Iraq, and then transformed this into ISIS.²⁵ ISIS is now a significant danger to both Syria and Iraq: it has recently expanded over large parts of both national territories and even reached the crossing between Iraq and Jordan in Iraq's Anbar province. A sketch drawn and posted on the ISIS website (22 June 2014) shows arrows of a potential attack in two directions: one into Jordan, the other into Saudi Arabia. If ISIS expands further into Iraqi territory, the next battle will be over Baghdad. Hence, we see the strong reaction to ISIS hegemonic power over three Iraqi provinces, including Mosul, the second largest city in the country and

the oil pipelines between Iraq and Turkey. The danger is only compounded by ISIS control of two Syrian provinces, including Riqqa and most of Syria's oil fields in the eastern provinces bordering Iraq.

With ISIS now occupying large parts of Syria and Iraq and hovering at the borders with Jordan and Saudi Arabia, the threat to the stability of the whole region is already grave. ISIS has practically removed the "sanctified" borders drawn up under the Sykes-Picot partitioning plan for the Asian part of the Ottoman Sultanate in 1916. Official statements from the foreign offices of many countries, among them major regional and global powers, warn of the threat ISIS poses to global stability.²⁶ Due to the latest transformation of the geopolitical scene in the Middle East, ISIS has been designated as a terrorist organisation by world powers, the UN Security Council, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Ramifications beyond the Arab World

The threat of terrorism has become a stark, undeniable reality. This refers especially to the horrific acts instigated or carried out by Islamist jihadists such as al-Qa'eda, ISIS and many other militant factions who have used brute force in the name of Islam in Syria, Iraq, Tunisia, Yemen and Egypt. Car bombs, mines, hand grenades, mortar shells and other explosives have already killed scores of innocent civilians in those Arab countries and recently also in Lebanon and it is highly likely that such terrorist acts cross the borders into Europe and America. A glance at the statistics on extremists travelling from the West to Syria and Iraq shows the numbers of these militants in the two countries to be quite shocking. British PM David Cameron put the figure at 500 (of whom 30 have died in Syria alone) when discussing the threat that UK nationals now fighting in the Syrian conflict could soon head home; Australian PM Tony Abbott has said that there are 120 Australian insurgents active in Syria; French Prime Minister Manuel Valls and Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius claim that 800 French citizens have joined the fighting in Syria and probably in Iraq, and some 30 of them have lost their lives. Valls told BFM TV, 'We have to ensure the surveillance of hundreds and hundreds of French and European individuals who are today fighting in Syria.'²⁷ US Secretary of State John Kerry has echoed this call and warned of the spread of ISIS, which his administration

sees as a threat to the international community. At his most recent (June 2014) press conferences in Cairo and Baghdad, he reiterated the discovery of ISIS terror and the danger it poses to the world. All these high-ranking Western officials who previously campaigned in aid of armed rebels in Syria appear to have become Islamophobic now that there are Islamist militants finding their ways back home and harbouring plans to create unrest and disorder in their countries of residence. It is worth asking who precisely created these Islamist extremists and sent them to Afghanistan in the early 1980s to launch a guerrilla war against the Soviet “occupation” there.²⁸

There is a degree of double-standards applied as many Western leaders appear proud of the support lent to the insurgents in Syria and then decry the threat the same or similar extremists pose in Iraq. For them, the rebels in Syria are freedom fighters while those in Iraq are terrorists. Sample video tapes recently circulated show young Europeans heading off to fight in the region, preaching about a holy war against all non-Muslims and naming ‘the West’ as one of the targets. The West is, in short, quite aware that terrorism is often identified as a transnational or transcontinental threat. It cannot be reduced to some ethnic group or identity in a specific geographic location. This is why there is a need for security coordination among nations and communities when combating terrorism—a step that is urgently called for before it is too late. If, however, the West expects the insurgents that it provides with arms, health care and logistical aid to return home as tamed and disciplined “good boys,” then it is deluding itself either through miscalculation or underestimation.

Concluding Remarks

The Syrian version of the Arab Spring is incompatible with other local and global versions. The Syrian version shows that Syria’s political leadership is rather rational and more flexible than the governments of other countries swept up in the Spring. The flights of the presidents of both Tunisia and Egypt, either out of cowardice or in an effort to avoid bloodshed on the streets and in public squares, could not halt those countries’ acceleration towards chaos and instability. Nor could the rise to power of Islamists in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya resolve the deteriorating socio-economic situations of those countries. Islamist

militants appeared in these countries due to the vacuum created after the collapse of the security apparatus there. These states' situations remain unstable despite the ousting or distancing of Islamists from office, including through the dissolution of elected councils, whether consultative or representative. In Syria, the situation is bloodier since the war is fiercer and more merciless. However, the state survives through its institutions and armed forces. In areas where there are no armed rebels, life proceeds smoothly: the everyday activities of both government and citizens go on undisrupted as if there were no violence in the country. Recently 16 million Syrians were called on to cast their votes for a new president. The number who took part in that election process totalled 11 million. This is a sign that the Syrian people are gaining awareness of their national cause even in the midst of war, destruction and external intervention. For most of the Syrian population, the state and its institutions must come first. An honest reading of the Syrian version of the Arab Spring would allow us to take a long breath before heaving a sigh of relief.

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Notes

- 1 See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1902), *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, translated by J. Sibree, London: George Bell and Sons.
- 2 The tragic case of Mohammed el-Bu'azizi, a young Tunisian university graduate working as a vendor, who set himself alight in protest after a personal conflict with a policewoman, was what sparked the movement against the police state of Tunisia. Large, angry, crowds of young people rallied and occupied the public squares in Tunis and other large cities, posing a real threat to the then ruling party.
- 3 The popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt were unexpectedly record-breaking, bringing about the dramatic downfall of the presidents of both countries. It took just 28 days (18 December 2010-14 January 2011) for Tunisia's "Jasmine Revolution" to force President Zein el-Abidine Bin-Ali to stand down and flee incognito to Saudi Arabia for political asylum. Even more strikingly, it took ten days less than that (25 January-11 February

- 2011) for the Egyptian revolutionaries to oust President Mohammed Husni Mubarak.
- 4 The contagion spread to other Arab countries, namely Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Oman, Saudi Arabia and Syria, all of which appeared at the time to be politically stable and secure. Although the Arab regimes in question were also greatly afflicted by challenged governance, they did not follow the same pattern of collapse. In Oman and Saudi Arabia, the governments managed the situation by lavishing funds on the underprivileged to suppress and contain the angry masses. In Yemen, political power was transferred from within the establishment thanks to the intervention of the Gulf Cooperative Council (GCC). In Bahrain, the royal regime was backed by direct military intervention from GCC Peninsula Shield troops. It was only in Libya that the confrontation between the regime and the rebels took a startling turn. The one-man Libyan regime was toppled and the “invincible” leader eventually shot dead and left unburied.
 - 5 At the request of the Arab League, the UN Security Council was convened on 17 March 2011 to discuss the Libyan conflict. The Council issued Resolution 1973 (with 10 in favour, five abstaining) which established a no-fly zone over Libya, applied an arms and trade embargo, froze government assets and called on member states to comply and cooperate among themselves to effect the resolution. The military intervention of NATO troops (both naval and air force), combined with Arab GCC’s financing and arming of rebels, was central to this move to use the United Nations flag to change the Libyan regime by force. See also ‘UN Security Council Resolution 1973 (2011) on Libya – Full Text’ (2011), *The Guardian*, <www.theguardian.com/world/2011/mar/17/un-security-council-resolution> (accessed 15 August 2014).
 - 6 Over 2011 and 2012, the Arab League held a series of sessions in Cairo and took crucial decisions and measures against the Syrian government. These ranged from ousting Syria from the League (of which it was a founding member) to facilitating all means, including arms and logistical support, to serve rebels who had by then chosen to use force to topple the Syrian government.
 - 7 Al-Qaeda is only one of those militant factions. Others go by names such as Ahrar al-Sham, al-Tawheed, Suqoor al-Sham, Ansar al-Sham, al-Islam Brigades, al-Farouq Battalions and Fajr al-Islam Battalions, to name a few. All of these groups have been fighting to oust al-Assad and establish an Islamic/Islamist state in Syria and, according to some, beyond.
 - 8 Western media and state officials have reported that the involvement of European and American citizens in the Syrian conflict far exceeds the presence of similar insurgents in Afghanistan and Iraq. In a recent statement (03 June 2014), French PM Manuel Valls claimed almost a thousand French citizens had been fighting in Syria, including 30 reported dead in the conflict. Obama himself denounced a suicide bombing by a US citizen from Florida under the alias Abu-Huraira. The American drove a booby-trapped vehicle which he detonated in a public place on the outskirts of Idlib, Syria in May 2014.

- 9 Turkey and Israel, in particular, have been major players in the current Syrian situation by providing the rebels with open corridors into Syrian territory as well as medical, intelligence and logistical services. International and local television channels have screened long reports about those services.
- 10 The “Friends of Syria” describes the governments of 84 countries (now reduced to 11 for unknown reasons) who support the multi-national rebels fighting Syrian armed forces, albeit based on different political and religious agenda. They hold periodic meetings around the world to voice their ‘unflinching’ position of support for the rebels on all levels. They were also behind the talks held in Geneva in 2013 and 2014 seeking a political solution to the Syrian armed conflict.
- 11 Following former US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice’s phrase ‘the birth pangs of a new Middle East’ (said during the Israeli war against Lebanon in July 2006), US neo-conservative foreign policy makers understand “constructive chaos” as the bloodshed required in order to bring about a new order.
- 12 See two key speeches in which al-Assad addresses the Syrian conflict, delivered and transmitted live from Damascus (one from the Opera House in 2011 and the other from the People’s Assembly in 2012), they propose national dialogue with the opposition and a political solution to the conflict. They also call for the drafting of a new constitution pending a national referendum and the forming of a new state government whose aims are reconciliation and the reconstruction of war-damaged facilities and residential areas in cities and the countryside. See Bashar al Assad (2013) ‘The West has Brought Terrorists to Syria: President Bashar Al Assad’s Historic Speech. Full Transcript,’ Centre for Research on Globalization, 07 January, <<http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-west-has-brought-terrorists-to-syria>> and <<http://www.trcb.com/al-assad-delivers-speech-at-peoples-assembly-48754.htm>>. (accessed 01 October 2014).
- 13 See the Anglo-French Sykes-Picot plan for the partitioning of the Asian territories of the Ottoman Empire during World War I, the Balfour Declaration and the latest geo-strategic plan developed by the US, the UK and Israel for a ‘new Middle East.’ See also this commentary on the redrawn map of the Middle East; it argues that some countries will disappear, others will gain or lose territory and still others will remain unchanged: ‘Plans for Redrawing the Middle East: The Project for a New Middle East’, Pakistan Defense website (forum thread posting), <<http://www.defence.pk/threads/plans-for-redrawing-the-map-of-the-middle-east/the-project-for-a-new-middle-east>>
- 14 Sharif Hussein was the custodian of the Muslim holy sanctum of Mecca as well as the leader of the great Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire in 1916. The revolt for Arab unity and freedom was coordinated with the United Kingdom.
- 15 For details of the division, see the Sykes-Picot plan partitioning plan for the Asian Ottoman Empire (1916) concluded between the governments of France and the United Kingdom.

- 16 This was a letter sent by Arthur James Balfour, the UK foreign secretary during World War I, to Baron Lionel Walter Rothschild, a leader of the UK Jewish community. It declared the sympathies of his Majesty (King George V)'s government with aspirations to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine. See also Leonard Stein (1961), *The Balfour Declaration*, New York: Simon and Schuster.
- 17 El-Bu'azizi's suicide in Sidi Bu-Zeid, central Tunisia was the catalyst for not only a series of uprisings across the country but also the flight of then president Bin Ali and the disintegration of his political regime.
- 18 The most recent version was conveyed by US President Barack Obama in an interview that aired on US television network CBS on 06 June 2014: 'I think this notion that somehow there was this ready-made moderate Syrian force [armed opposition] that was able to defeat [Syrian President Bashar] Assad is simply not true ... it's a fantasy.'
- 19 Reference is made here to the current unstable situations in Libya, Yemen, Egypt and Tunisia and even to earlier bitter experiences in Iraq. In 2003, Bremer, Iraq's American governor, dissolved the Iraqi national army, thus allowing insurgents to fill the vacuum and cause unspeakable damage to the Iraqi people and Iraqi statehood.
- 20 In the unstable and deteriorating conditions in Libya after the killing of Colonel Muammar el-Qaddafi on 20 October 2011 and collapse of his regime, the Libyan provinces of Barqa and Fezzan declared their autonomy within state territory. Neither one attempted to negotiate legal terms for a possible federation, which could have been an optimal solution. Their actions were prompted by the frequent assassinations of key local military, judiciary and civilians. More recently, an ex-general in the dissolved Libyan army has taken charge of a military unit in a move to correct Libyan rebels who are seen as having prioritised their own interests over those of the state.
- 21 A letter from Morsi to Israeli leader Shimon Peres was read at an official reception to honour the Egyptian ambassador on his return to Tel Aviv. In it, the ex-president of Egypt addressed the Israeli as 'my great friend,' a phrase that rankled Muslims, who maintain that their sanctum in Jerusalem continues to be occupied and desecrated by Israeli soldiers.
- 22 According to recent records (May 2014) of the Lebanese Ministry of Interior as well as UNHCR data, the number of displaced Syrian civilians in Lebanon so far amounts to one-third of the Lebanese population, that is 1 382 134 people.
- 23 Hezbollah, the Lebanese Islamic resistance party, has been directly involved in the Syrian domestic armed conflict as have other Islamic (non-Shiite) militants, albeit in disguise.
- 24 Since Lebanon became independent in 1943, it experienced two rounds of bloody civil strife and domestic unrest (in 1958 and 1975), the longest and most devastating of which was the 1975-1990 civil war. In both cases, Syria contributed greatly to restoring Lebanon's stability as an influential stakeholder. If the situation in Syria remains explosive, Lebanon may descend into a third round of civic conflict. Such an outcome is already being

- fomented by local puppet groups fueling sectarian hatred.
- 25 Islamic Imarah in Iraq (al-Imarah al-Islamieh fil-Iraq) is an offshoot of the al-Qa'eda organisation. After the Arab Spring erupted in the region, a group of al-Qa'eda militants moved to northern and western Iraq under the leadership of Abu-Bakr el-Baghdadi. This emir established his emirate in Iraq under the name al-Imarah al-Islamieh fil-Iraq in 2012. A year and a half later, it was renamed ad-Dawlah al-Islamieh fil-Iraq wa-Bilad el-Sham or the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi continues to sit at its head and 55000 armed loyalists operate in Syria and Iraq under his command.
- 26 Speaking at two press conferences – in Cairo and then in Baghdad – on 23 June 2014, John Kerry declared ISIS to be a major threat to the world. His comments were made in the presence of Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukri and then Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari. See also the joint statement released at a London meeting on 20 June 2014 between UK Prime Minister David Cameron and NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen. The two condemned ISIS and terrorist groups operating in Iraq. These views were endorsed by other high-ranking officials in Europe and North America.
- 27 See <www.english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx> (accessed 10 September 2014).
- 28 These developments bring to mind a common literary theme explored in works like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein: evil destroys evil*.

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