



**THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES**

# **Perfect Storm: The Implications of Middle East Chaos**

**Yaakov Amidror**



**BESA Memorandum No. 8**

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**BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY**  
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# Perfect Storm: The Implications of Middle East Chaos

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# Perfect Storm: The Implications of Middle East Chaos

*Yaakov Amidror*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Middle East is in the midst of a period of stormy upheaval. The process began in Iran, after that country's revolution gave birth to a Shi'ite dynamic which continues to have an impact on the entire region. This dynamic brought together radical Islamic forces that had smoldered under the surface since the collapse of the last caliphate, the Ottoman Empire.

When the British and the French divided up the region one hundred years ago – according to their needs – they created artificial states, some of which have now ceased to exist, and some of which are facing collapse. Forces that seemed to have disappeared, repressed by the dictatorial regimes ruling the states created by the colonial order, have resurfaced. In many areas, one's family, tribe, ethnic community, and religion have once more become the chief loci of identity and power, eclipsing the state.

Radical Islam, in its several different forms, views Islamic governance as the solution to the ills of the region and to the weakness of the Muslims in the world, and as a preferred alternative to the modern world order of nation states.

Several additional major events have shaped the region since the Iranian Revolution, including the rise of radical Islam in its political form, the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States (9/11), the conquest of Iraq as a response to these, and the "Arab Spring" – which toppled states or weakened them while swelling the power of the Arab street. To this we must add the weakness displayed by the US-led West, the total



worthlessness manifested by leading international organizations, and the ruinous activities of local forces unique to each state.

The result is nothing less than a struggle over the character and future of the Arab nation, and perhaps of Islam as a whole. The contenders are the forces of change, some of which are anarchic, versus defenders of the decades-long Arab world status quo. Each side resorts to wide-spread violence and cruelty, while terrorism is omnipresent. There is no way of knowing how long this struggle will continue or how it will end.

The upheavals are of historical proportions, wide in scope and deep in implication. Any external body attempting to influence the course of events in a positive direction will find the task very difficult. As for the State of Israel, it must act cautiously.

Israel must not allow itself to be drawn into the regional upheavals. Instead, it is incumbent on Israel to narrowly identify the greatest threats to its security, and focus on confronting these threats, and these threats alone.

In addition, Israel ought to seek new diplomatic opportunities as they emerge from the regional chaos -- although that is a subject for a future study.

# Perfect Storm: The Implications of Middle East Chaos

*Yaakov Amidror*

## **INTRODUCTION - THE DREAM AND ITS DESTRUCTION**

The world today confronts difficult dilemmas in deciding how best to respond to the radical Islamic movements, led by the Islamic State (IS), that have taken control over entire regions and states in the Middle East. (For our purposes, the region in question is the entire expanse from Marrakesh to Bangladesh, from the Atlantic to the Himalayas.)

During the last decade of the twentieth century, and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it seemed as if the “end of history” had arrived, and that slowly, but surely, humanity would march forward to a more democratic future and an open and global economy, based to a large extent upon the “values of the United States.” And not without reason! For this seemed merely to be a continuation of the “American century,” which began quite clearly during World War I, when American troops arrived to save Europe. During World War II America returned to Europe, in order to save it from Nazi Germany, and to Asia, in order to destroy the Japanese war machine that reached the outskirts of Australia and Hawaii.

As the twentieth century progressed, the United States remained the dominant state in the international system. After World War II, it stationed its troops in Japan and Germany, pledged to defend these areas and guarantee the peace there, initiated and carried through the Marshall

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Plan for European recovery and reconstruction, and helped Japan rebuild and become a democratic state. During the Cold War following World War II, the United States was the leading power opposing the USSR and China, and sent its troops to fight in the bloody Korean and Vietnam wars with the aim of blocking communism's efforts to advance by force of arms. America was the greatest military power throughout the twentieth century, the leading economic power, and the state that contributed more than any other to technological development around the world. Putting a man on the moon and developing modern-day computing (from IBM to Apple), the Internet, and GPS are just a few examples of America's worldwide leadership in technology, both on earth and in space.

So it is not surprising that following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, many people hoped and assumed that a new world would be shaped, led by the United States and based upon its worldview.

However, not long after the beginning of the new century, on September 11, 2001, the biggest terrorist act in history was perpetrated on American soil. At a superficial glance it would seem that nothing changed in the United States following this event. On the face of it, life returned to normal. However, it would be a big mistake to trust this impression. Osama bin Laden and his organization, al-Qaeda, changed the American way of life to a very large degree. America is now much more suspicious than before, as is felt by every foreigner entering the country. The United States is obsessive about the possibility of a terrorist incident, as evidenced by the scope of information gathering (mainly SIGINT) carried out by the United States throughout the world. America goes to extreme lengths in all aspects of ensuring the security of its representatives all over the world. In short, it is worried, and its citizens feel themselves much less secure than in the past. Thus they have the hero of a popular television series saying to his friend, "Our children will not believe that once upon a time we flew without them rummaging through all our baggage for forty-five minutes, two hours before our flight," and he is right.

However, and perhaps more importantly, al-Qaeda's major terrorist acts, and in particular those perpetrated on US soil, also changed the consciousness of many Muslims in the Arab world. In a twisted process, this change led to the recent occurrences in Iraq and Syria. With his

decision to go to war (for the time being, only from the air) against IS (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant [ash-Sham], also known as ISIL), President Obama signified that the world was entering a new phase in the age of the “clash of civilizations,” even if he would not choose to define it that way. The bitter reality is that the democratic Western world is fighting a real war against radical Sunni Islam, a war that has been going on now for over thirteen years. Israel, we note, has been involved in a similar conflict for thirty years, ever since it encountered Shi’ite radical Islam in Lebanon.

The warfare now taking place in Iraq and Syria is happening against a background of what the Americans call a “perfect storm,” that is, an assortment of events that, on the face of it, seem not to be connected, and certainly not coordinated in advance, whose coming together creates an occurrence far more powerful than the sum of its parts. For the most part, it is impossible to identify all the primary components of a perfect storm, and the bigger it is, the greater the difficulty. However, although no deconstruction can be perfect, in complex situations like the one currently confronting us, this kind of analysis makes it easier to understand the big picture. Therefore I will try to identify the main root causes (among many other factors) that have brought about the scene we are witnessing today in the Middle East – the “perfect storm” the world is facing.

## **SOURCES OF THE STORM**

The roots of the storm reach down into three widely-separated events, among others, which came to symbolize the end of the previous period and the beginning of a new one. The story begins about a hundred years ago, with the collapse, as a result of World War I, of the Ottoman Turkish Empire, which had ruled in the Middle East for several centuries.

First of all, this collapse meant the end of the last Caliphate in the Muslim world. There were no rivals or pretenders aiming to take its place when it disappeared, and thus no other Caliphate arose, and no state claimed the title of ruler over all Muslim believers.

Second, the state of Turkey was pushed into the modern world by force, while trying to create for itself a different future as a secular entity. This intensified the break with the past. The abolition of the Caliphate (a historical and religious institution which was the focus of much wishful thinking, even if it did not have much practical significance) joined the broader historical process by which Islam lost its leading role in the world. This process was not the result of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, but rather stemmed from the increase in the West's power, and the fact that its values came to dominate world affairs and important discourse everywhere. With this, Islam lost all hope of playing a major role in determining how the world would be constructed. Even after the world economy became dependent on energy, mainly from Muslim states', the influence on world affairs remained negligible. The mood of both the Muslim masses and their leaders was influenced by the frustration created by all these phenomena. In one of his first speeches, al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden referred to the traumatic date of the end of the Caliphate, and few in the West knew what he was talking about.

The third event symbolizing the end of an era was the decision of the victorious powers in World War I, Britain and France, to redraw the map of the Middle East according to their needs and interests, once the region was conquered from Turkey. Senior officials of theirs (Sir Mark Sykes and Monsieur François Georges-Picot) sliced the region into a series of newly-constructed states (a new concept in large parts of the area). In many cases they did this without any consideration for natural borders or the disposition of tribes and ethnic groups, which were sometimes artificially joined together and sometimes cruelly separated. A Bedouin tribe was divided between two states, and some states were made up of hostile groups whose being thrown together was much to their chagrin.

The Middle East has experienced numerous developments and processes in the 95 years since then, but throughout the entire period most of the states of the region were ruled by two types of dictators: royal houses that viewed the state as their personal property, for better or worse; and rulers who acquired power and ruled thanks to the loyalty of the army and the security services. Meanwhile, from almost the very beginning of that period, about ten years after World War I, the Muslim Brotherhood was established. Its slogan, "Islam is the solution," symbolizes very well an aspiration that

was nurtured continuously in the heart of this span of dictatorial regimes. Although the regimes' constitutions referenced Islamic law, decisions were taken not by those faithful to Islam, but by those loyal to the dictator. From a distance it may have seemed like the Middle East was a region frozen in conservatism, gripped by iron pincers. The severity of the grip may have varied according to the character of the ruler and the regime, but no significant changes occurred, even when kings were replaced by officers or a new dictator replaced his predecessor. However, beneath the surface strong forces were always smoldering, with Islam at their center.

The first formative event in the process of change we are witnessing today took place in 1979 in Iran. That year Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini succeeded in toppling the Shah's regime and in building an Islamic state ruled, without dispute, by the clergy. This event delivered two messages to the region. The first was for Shi'ites throughout the Muslim world, namely, that this was a historic reversal that freed them from centuries of passivity and submission to their inferior status as a minority (15%) among the Sunni majority. The second message was even more important, namely, that Islam's success in Iran showed even Sunnis that in the modern era a Muslim state could be run according to the precepts of Islam and administered by clerics.

The Iranians took advantage of their success to advance Shi'ite interests all over the Middle East. Their actions injected new dynamic forces that aroused discontent and unrest in the Arab states. There is no doubt that their actions awakened dormant forces among the Sunnis, who became concerned about the rising power of the Shi'ites, and also among the Shi'ites, who realized that it was possible to change their status. As part of their efforts to change the Middle East, the Iranians developed both Shi'ite (Hezbollah) and Sunni ( Hamas and Islamic Jihad) terrorist capabilities. They brought terrorism into the heart of the Muslim world, and turned it into a legitimate and successful tool with very high levels of capability and execution. (They were not the first. The influence of Arafat's successes internationally, achieved with the aid of intensive use of terrorism, has not yet been properly investigated. My assessment is that the Palestinians' success throughout the world was an important step in introducing massive terrorism onto the Muslim scene in the modern era, starting from the 1970s and onward.)

The Shi'ites have remained a dynamic force in Islam ever since Teheran began its new wave of radical Muslim activism. Once started, the Iranian-Shi'ite drive never halted. Just recently a senior Iranian official declared that this was the first time in recent centuries that Iran has had Shi'ite allies with decisive influence in four Arab capitals (Baghdad, Damascus, Sana'a, and Beirut), and he added that this was not the end of his country's designs in the Middle East. The urge to take control of its immediate surroundings, and later, at the very least, the whole Arab Middle East, lies at the root of Iran's effort to acquire nuclear weapons. Success in this would provide Iran with total defense. Under a nuclear umbrella the country could realize the Shi'ite dream that was repressed for so many years. Iran's Arab neighbors, the vast majority of whom are Sunni, understand this and fear Iranian-Shi'ite aggressiveness in general, and the nuclear bomb in particular. It is impossible to understand the Middle East at this time without taking into consideration the deep, centuries-old rivalry between Sunnis and Shi'ites, and the historic change that took place as a consequence of the revolution in Iran, a change that to this day is the strongest driving force on the Shi'ite side of the struggle. This change has found expression and will continue to do so everywhere in the Middle East where there is competition between Shi'ites and Sunnis.

The most recent expression of this, meanwhile, is the struggle for control in Yemen, Saudi Arabia's southern and impoverished neighbor. In Yemen, minority Shi'ite tribes (Zaidis) joined up with loyalists of the deposed president, a victim of the Arab Spring, and together they captured the capital city Sana'a. Saudi Arabia, which considers itself the leader of the Sunni Arab world, watched with concern as Iran's allies, receiving large amounts of aid, mainly weapons, gained control over Yemen, creating another Iranian pressure point on the Saudi state. After much hesitation, the new Saudi king decided to respond to the Shi'ite challenge. The Saudis began bombing Houthi tribe targets in Yemen and preparing forces for a major invasion, if it became apparent that only a ground operation could save the situation. Saudi Arabia was joined by other Sunni Arab states that wanted to maintain the status quo, including the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Morocco, and most importantly, Egypt. Each of these contributed only a little of their capabilities (the Pakistanis refused to assist altogether, and no state is helping with ground troops). However, the Saudi initiative created an important framework

for possible future confrontation with the rising Shi'ite wave. This is yet another sign of the modern version of the Sunni-Shi'ite struggle that has been going on now for over a millenium.

The second lesson of the revolution in Iran had a wider effect. Radical Islamic factors, also Sunni, understood that their dream of taking over the various states and ruling according to the principles of Islam was not impossible to attain. If the dream was realized in Teheran, it could also be realized in Cairo and Riyadh. Regardless of the differences between them, all the fundamentalist movements understood that there was a new reality, that the "Islamic solution" had a future in today's world, right here and now.

The second event affecting the process of change in the Middle East was more complicated and included several stages. It began with the radical Sunnis' success in Afghanistan in standing up to the communist Soviet Union from 1978-1989. The USSR was the world's biggest secular superpower at the time, one of the two superpowers after World War II. In the view of the Afghani Sunnis, they were responsible for the USSR's collapse a short time later. The Taliban achieved its successful staying power while receiving much high-quality aid from the United States, which viewed the Afghanis' struggle as another opportunity to inflict damage on the USSR. The Taliban, for its part (and others like it), used its success as proof of the invincible power of radical Sunni Islam. The question asked after the first success of Islamic power against a modern, secular, European power was: What now; what comes next? As time went on, the Afghanis' success led to a Sunni awakening that brought about the creation of al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia, its transfer to Afghanistan (where it was hosted by the victors over the communist superpower), and the redirection of the struggle toward the only remaining superpower, America. For many years, Saudi Arabia was the exporter of radical Islamic thought based upon the teachings of Wahhabism, whose proponents are the partners and providers of religious legitimacy to the reign of the House of Saud on the Arabian Peninsula. Osama bin Laden, who was born in Yemen but grew up and was educated in the habitat of the Wahhabi fanatics, came to believe that the path they were following, and their cooperation with the Saudi royal house, was leading nowhere. So he left his homeland and joined those who had defeated the USSR, in order to continue the war of annihilation with the remaining superpower.



According to bin Laden, the Western powers had fashioned a world in which Islam was pushed to the fringes of history, and its influence was hardly noticeable. He thought in terms of a world revolution, with the United States as the major enemy, since it was the world's only superpower. Not only was American political and military power anathema to him and his followers, but so was Western culture, which, in his fundamentalist worldview, threatened Islam. The mixture of frustration over Islam's lack of influence in the world and hatred of the dominant Western culture became the primary source of negative energy for bin Laden and his organization, and for other fundamentalist organizations (of which IS is the most prominent) as well.

The most blatant expression of the Sunni struggle led by bin Laden from Afghanistan was the devastating 9/11 attack. In the wake of this massive violence on its territory, the United States declared a war of annihilation against Sunni terrorism and set its military power in motion. It invaded Afghanistan, al-Qaeda's stronghold, and conquered Iraq. America's occupation of Afghanistan, and the problems it left behind when it withdrew its forces from there, have had little influence on the Middle East as a whole. In contrast, the effects of America's occupation of Iraq have been very great. The heart of the Arab Middle East stretches from the Fertile Crescent, with Iraq at its center, to Egypt lying along the Nile River. What did the United States do in Iraq? It removed one of the strongest and most influential rulers in the Arab world; it created a precedent of liquidating a despot and interfering blatantly in the internal affairs of another state; and it left behind an endless trail of blood. The warfare thus engendered led to the dissolution of Iraq, to the incitement of Shi'ites, Sunnis, and Kurds, one against the other, and to a process that created a governmental power vacuum: the huge expanses of territory from northwest Iraq to Baghdad became a region lacking any effective governance. Without proper governmental control, such vast territories virtually invited destabilizing forces to enter, IS being the most recent such force. As for the state of Iraq, it is not at all likely to return to being a single state as it was before the American invasion.

The overall result of the wars against the world's superpowers has been very encouraging up to now, from the Islamic point of view: stunning success in opposing the USSR and great harm inflicted on the United

States, which failed in its attempt to create stability in Afghanistan and Iraq. In the end, the superpowers were driven out of the Islamic lands, resulting in a very powerful and significant sense of success. It would appear that it is impossible to impose changes upon the Muslim world, in contrast, for example, to the changes imposed on Germany and Japan after World War II. This is especially so if the entity attempting to impose change does not have the will to invest extensive resources for many long years, at the cost of sacrificing numerous lives. It has become clear that the movements crystallizing around the worldview of radical Islam do not give up their dreams easily, and they are able to hold their ground in long and exhausting battles against the West. Some of them have gone even further and succeeded in reaching Western capitals by devious ways, and there too acting against the enemy.

The combination of the radical movements gaining strength and confidence, and the world powers (with America at their head) demonstrating ineptitude in coping with the radicals, has had a very negative effect on the behavior of the leading forces in the Middle East, and will continue to do so. Unless a revolution were to occur as the result of a long series of defeats, then, it seems, no one will succeed in the near future in damaging the self-confidence of the radical movements and their conviction that Allah is fighting on their side. They will view any failure as merely a temporary setback on the way to the great victory. They are fighting to change the world that pushed Islam to the margins, and they understand that this battle will go on for a long time. Their worldview preaches that patience and steadfastness over time, in a relentless struggle that sometimes seems hopeless, are key components of their strength in this struggle, and that precisely these components will give them the advantage over their enemy, the West. Thus, the way the radicals view time, and the timetables they set for achieving their aims, distinguishes them in yet another way from the West. Western political culture is generally in a hurry, based on the need to produce quarterly reports of gains and losses, and on the need to stand for reelection every few years.

The third major event or development that has exerted great influence over the Middle East is what has come to be called the “Arab Spring.” With one blow, the “Spring” destroyed a significant portion of the territorial arrangements implemented by the colonial states of Britain

and France after World War I. This opened the way for the emergence of dark and powerful forces, some of which had been forcibly repressed by the totalitarian regimes ruling their states. The family, the tribe, the ethnic community, and religion became once again the focal points of attraction and loyalty, taking the place that had been occupied by the state ever since the fall of the Ottoman Empire. In large parts of the Middle East (Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Iraq are the most prominent states in this group), the old political system that had imposed itself on the citizenry and prevented the unleashing of dark radical forces, disappeared entirely. In other states, the rulers feel threatened, and domestic pressures could bring about more revolutions (Lebanon, Bahrain, and Jordan lead the list of states threatened from within). Even states that seem stable, like Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, are going to have to cope with very difficult challenges. Every government in the region remains dictatorial (with the exception, perhaps, of Tunisia and Turkey), but each will have to pay attention to domestic pressures and the moods of its citizen masses, and take them into consideration in its decision-making. The street has now become a decisive influence, even in states that have maintained their political framework and their mechanisms of control and coercion, to the point that there are even those who recommend calling this “streetocrazia.”

The outburst of the masses from 2010 on, from Tunisia to Syria, was caused by internal factors related to the character of the regimes in the region, although each state had its own particular problems and circumstances. As a Kuwaiti scholar told me, the main reason for the outbreak of the Arab Spring was the damage that had been done to the “dignity” of the citizens in the Arab states. This general term, “dignity,” is characteristic of the fact that the all-powerful ruler in each of the states forgot that he had a commitment to all the citizens of the state, and not just to those close to him. The dictatorial regimes performed disappointingly, but took care of their cronies. The events of the Arab Spring that erupted in each state were entirely due to the relationship between the ruler and the ruled, almost without outside influence. It is interesting to note that it was precisely the region’s kingdoms – whether wealthy like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates or poor like Jordan and Morocco – in which the ruling elites remained almost entirely undamaged. Among other reasons, this was probably due to the legitimacy enjoyed by these royal rulers in their own countries, an attribute both cultural and religious in character.

The events of the Arab Spring, and the strengthening of Islamic worldviews in the Middle East, are part of the struggle over the identity of the region and of the communities living there. All the outbreaks took place against a background of loss of faith in the doctrines, approaches, and worldviews imported from European culture.

It was Europe that brought the movements that determined the various courses of development the Middle East would follow from the end of the eighteenth century, when Napoleon conquered Egypt (1798), until the successful rise of dictators, most of whom were military leaders destined to rule for decades in a number of states in the heart of the region, from Algeria to Iraq. As noted, the division of the region into states was in most cases a European imposition, made according to the needs of foreign powers, with no thought given to historical connections, or the societies concerned, or geographical circumstances. Thus it is no surprise to find, as a very prominent feature of four separate election campaigns, people turning to an alternative source of legitimacy, that of Islamism. Among the Palestinians, and in Egypt, Turkey, and Tunisia, representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood and persons with similar views were elected by a majority of the population, willingly, without any coercion. In the countries noted, at least, the majority of voters believed that “Islam is the solution” to the difficult problems facing them as human beings, as Muslims, and as states. This success in different localities in the region indicates that the choice of radical political Islam as a way of life is not a chance and limited occurrence, but the result of a process with deep historical roots. The fact is that the vote for radicalism found expression in two of the most important states of the Middle East (Turkey and Egypt, one of which is not Arab), in a state where European influence was strong and long-standing (Tunisia), and, insofar as the Palestinians are concerned, in an entity inhabited by one of the most educated Arab societies in the Middle East.

In Turkey, the change that occurred put an end to the very impressive and longest-lasting effort to turn a Muslim state and society into a secular state whose citizens were Muslims. The experiment begun by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, almost one hundred years ago, failed to withstand the authentic and deeply-rooted power of Islamic religion and culture in the Middle Eastern country closest to Europe. (While the

results of the recent June 2015 elections in Turkey indicate a reduction in the power of the Islamist party, it is clear that this process has not ended, and its direction remains unclear.) In Egypt, the generals understood, perhaps because of the Turkish experience, that if they failed to stop the process quickly they would lose their status and their ability to change the situation. Hence the counter-revolution and the removal of Morsi. However, the Muslim Brotherhood is still the strongest civilian power in Egypt; in the first free elections the Muslim Brotherhood received 54% of the vote, while the Salafist movement won 24%. Tunisia, after additional elections in which a secular government was elected, represents perhaps a sign of possible change in the future.

Over twenty years ago (when I was head of the research department of Israeli military intelligence), I was asked by the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin why I believed that the Islamic danger, which we had already taken note of even then, had a longer life expectancy than other doctrines, like Nasserism, Ba'athism, and Pan-Arabism, with which he was familiar and had dealt for many years. My reply was that Islam as a political force grows from below, from the bottom up, from the authentic culture of the inhabitants of the region, in contrast to the other worldviews, imported into the region by elites and imposed upon the various societies. What has subsequently occurred over the years has proved this to be correct.

The Western world's contribution to the catastrophe of the Arab Spring can be seen quite clearly in the Libya operation and its results. There the West liquidated a deranged and repellent leader who had little ability to cause harm outside his own country. The result was the breakup of Libya as a functioning state, a never-ending war between tribes that have been rivals since time immemorial, and the transformation of Libya into a huge weapons market. Today weapons are exported from that "country" to various states of sub-Saharan Africa, for use by local radical factors, to Egypt, for internal use, and to Sinai, for use by radical factors on the Peninsula and in the Gaza Strip. This is Libya's main contribution, after its revolution, to mankind in general and the Middle East in particular.

The negative contribution of the outside world also found expression in its unwillingness to use force either to stop Iran's intervention on behalf of Syrian President Assad or to help moderate elements in Syria during the initial stages of the rebellion. Even today there is very little willingness to assist the Kurds, either in Syria or Iraq, against IS fighters. As a result, extremist elements among the Syrian opposition and in the region bordering Iraq gain in strength, and the (reciprocal) fighting and killing continue. This is the basis for the momentum of IS: it stepped into the breach created by the weakening of the Iraqi regime and the exclusion of Sunnis by the Shi'ite government in Baghdad, following the withdrawal of American troops. Added to this, from the Syrian side of the border (which in practice has disappeared), are Assad's loss of control in the northeastern regions of Syria and the inability of the Syrian opposition to unite into a real power in order to control these areas. The world stands by, doing nothing, while in Syria a quarter of a million people, and perhaps more, have been killed, and the number of refugees has reached nearly ten million, more than a third of them now living outside Syria, in appalling conditions. Of course, it is impossible to know or assess how blocking Iranian aid or increasing support for the less radical rebels would have changed the situation on the ground, but it is clear that the vacuum created as a result of the outside world's show of helplessness made the emergence of IS possible.

Fortunately for the Middle East, the efforts of foreign factors to prevent or halt the army's counter-revolution in Egypt failed. If those efforts had been successful and the Muslim Brotherhood's rule in Egypt sustained, then the power of radical Islam would have been increased exponentially. Continued Muslim Brotherhood rule in Egypt would have been followed by an increase in support for its agents all over the Middle East. This would have weakened the existing regime in Jordan (perhaps to the point of toppling it), encouraged Turkey to increase greatly its active involvement in the heart of the Middle East by rendering aid to the radical forces in the Arab world, and perhaps even led to the Muslim Brotherhood in Tunisia resisting the democratic course imposed upon it. The problems in Egypt are chronic, and will not be resolved soon or easily by the generals. However, the coup they led gave a boost to the anti-radical forces throughout the region, and created another opportunity for dealing with the problems in a way different from that of radical Islam.

An additional factor must be added to these major events, a factor of lesser importance but still of some significance, mainly because of the increase in the weight carried by the street in the Middle East. I am referring to the State of Qatar. It is a tiny state on the Persian Gulf possessing endless funds, which it uses to maintain and strengthen terrorist organizations, for example, Hamas in Gaza, certain of the opposition forces in Syria, and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. With the help of Al Jazeera, the media network sponsored by Qatar, the country has done everything in its power to destabilize moderate rulers who do not submit to the dictates of the Muslim Brotherhood in their countries. Exploiting to the utmost the increasing influence of the street, Al Jazeera manages to destabilize political and social structures, but makes no contribution to constructing in their stead something else of value that will provide future stability. The exposure of Arab society to the media in the wake of the Internet revolution is important as a new social factor, but the most significant aspect of the media's impact on the Arab street has been the agitation promoted by Qatar. Saudi Arabia and the other rich Gulf States have acted and are acting to minimize Qatar's influence, but the damage it has already done to stability in the region is difficult to undo.

It is important to emphasize, especially against the background of the mistakes made by the West during the events of the Arab Spring, that external forces did not cause those events or their dismal results, neither by their actions nor by their inaction. In Libya, the contribution of external forces was deleterious. In Syria, external forces did not prevent negative phenomena even when, perhaps, it was still possible to do so. And in Egypt, external forces may have accelerated the events of the Arab Spring as they unfolded. Be this as it may, the Arab Spring developments were the result of the systemic difficulties facing Arab society, and the Arab rulers' betrayal of the obligations that even dictators have toward their people. The outside world bears no guilt in regard to these matters.

Over fifteen years ago I heard a diagnosis of the ills of the Middle East from a senior Egyptian official. Conversing about the region in general, he claimed that it had only four "real states": Egypt, Turkey, Iran, and Israel. When I expressed my surprise that there was no Arab country other than Egypt on his list, he replied: "These are not states, but families with flags." This categorical diagnosis, imprecise and general as it may be,



defines very well one of the important reasons for the events of the Arab Spring. In part, today's Middle East is an artificial world constructed, as noted above, to meet the needs of the victors in World War I.

In general, on the philosophical level, what has been described up to now relates to the struggle going on in the Muslim world regarding the whole issue of how to cope with modernity, at the core of which is the state. This is the heart of the internal conflict within Islam, and to a large extent it is the essence of the struggle of the radical Islamic entities against the whole world. Islam did not experience the revolution Christianity has undergone since the Middle Ages, nor the evolution experienced by Judaism. The inseparable connection in the Muslim world between religion, the state, and personal life is part of the problem that hinders the Islamic community in coping with the modern world, and to a large extent, this is the reason they feel excluded from it.

This is the essence of Islamic fundamentalism: it aspires to live, even today, the life of the century of the Prophet Muhammad, without any significant update. This approach takes on a menacing and cruel face when the movements advocating it pass from thought to action in all seriousness, tolerating no compromise, and showing no flexibility. This severity is also visible when one examines these movements' struggle against their opponents and against the rulers within Islam. The result is that during the past decade, despite the unending struggle against the Western invaders in Afghanistan and Iraq, and against Israel, the radical Islamic movements have killed many more of their fellow Muslims than non-Muslims – Shi'ites and Sunnis like themselves, some of whom were very religious by any standard. The combination of fanaticism and cruelty exacts a terrible, bloody toll among the Islamic nations in general and among the Sunnis in particular. The combination of religious fanaticism with the feeling that the world is not fair, and that it does not give expression in its behavior to what the radicals perceive as being in the interest of Islam and in accord with its religious ideology, makes the struggle hard and cruel.



## THE GLOBAL FRAMEWORK

Four global phenomena that serve to intensify the unrest in the Middle East came together with the events of the Arab Spring, whose source, as noted, lay mainly in internal processes in the region.

**1. Lack of an international arbiter** – There is no international organization today worthy of its name that functions as an efficient arbitrator, mediator, and force for calling to order rogue states that destabilize or intervene with their neighbors, finance and promote terrorist activity, or kill their citizens (Iran, North Sudan, North Korea, and Syria are the most prominent states on the list, but not the only ones). The biggest organization, the United Nations, upon which many hopes were placed after World War II, has become bankrupt. Its bankruptcy is glaring both in the realm of action – because the world powers neutralize each other and the activity of the United Nations when it is most needed – and in the realm of ethics, since the General Assembly operates on the basis of an automatic majority, regardless of the real needs of the international community. Since each country has the right to vote at the United Nations, organized groups can pass almost any resolution they please in the General Assembly, and the fifty-seven Muslim countries (almost half of the Non-Aligned Movement states) constitute the largest homogeneous group at the United Nations. It is no wonder, then, given the current composition of the organization, that it passes strange decisions and that it has become totally irrelevant to what is taking place in the Middle East and elsewhere. When Iran or Sudan are member states of the Human Rights Commission (about half of whose resolutions are aimed against Israel), and Iran is a leading member of the Non-proliferation Committee, the United Nations becomes a ridiculous travesty that insults its founders, who expected great things from it.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, it seemed as if the world would produce strong and effective international instruments in the fields of law and politics, on the basis of new and old beliefs, or as a natural development following the end of the struggle between the superpowers, which blocked all progress during the Cold War. However, none of these positive developments materialized; quite the contrary. Even the International Court in The Hague, like the Human Rights Committee, is on the verge of being

“hijacked” to meet the needs of the Palestinian struggle against Israel, and if the Palestinians succeed in this, then the International Court will also cease being a serious institution and lose its importance.

**2. The withdrawal of the United States** – The United States is trying to reduce its obligations to its allies in general, and in the Middle East in particular, and in some cases it is no longer prepared to pay the price needed in order to preserve the “Pax Americana.” America does, indeed, remain the only superpower, even as other powers gain strength (mainly China) or try to preserve their power (Russia, for example), but the United States is tired of being the world’s policeman, even though it has no replacement. Moreover, perceptions of America have changed not only in terms of its power internationally, but also in terms of its economic strength and resilience, following the severe economic crisis of 2008. This point is of great importance in determining how the states of the Middle East relate to the United States and its power (we note that this situation has changed for the better since the beginning of 2015).

The United States has disappointed its friends and surprised its opponents by abandoning friends or ignoring them when they were in distress (Egyptian President Mubarak, for example). The administration’s decision to withdraw from Iraq early, without waiting to build up the Iraqi army adequately, and to evacuate Afghanistan without leaving a government strong enough to cope with the Taliban, greatly harmed the standing of the United States in the region. The fact that the United States refrained from attacking Assad’s regime after it flagrantly crossed the red line of using chemical weapons, a red line drawn by the US president himself, had a similarly negative influence, as did what some Middle East states considered to be the “acquiescent” positions taken by the United States in its negotiations with Iran. The fact that, in practice, the Americans ruled out the military option as a means of preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear military capability played an important role in determining the way in which many Middle East observers measured America’s commitment to the region as a whole and to the prevention of (existential) dangers to its allies. The United States has not been weakened objectively, but it has lost a great deal of its determination to act, which is of no less importance, and therefore it has lost a great deal of credit with the decision makers in the region.

**3. The wane of internationalism** – There is no other rising power today, no state that is getting stronger and would be prepared to exert even a small portion of the effort America put forth during the past century. None of the rising economic, military, and technological powers feels that it has any degree of worldwide responsibility, like that which motivated the United States from the time of World War I onwards. No leader anywhere in the world is prepared to sacrifice his or her army for “world values.” All of them pursue purely domestic policies, taking into consideration only the needs of the state they rule. As a senior official from a state that is growing more and more powerful told me: We have responsibility for only one thing, that our citizens should have enough energy to keep warm in the winter. Therefore, he explained, our state will not fully implement the required sanctions against Iran in the realm of oil.

**4. The dissipation of European influence** – Europe has disappeared from the Middle Eastern (and perhaps from the global) equation. It does not have the means, the will, or the political structure that would enable it to take decisions and implement them. Therefore, despite its geographical proximity to the Middle East, it has almost no influence over what happens there. Certain states of the European Union have greater importance on account of the fact that the Union is one political body, but the fact that they have given up their military power has left them outside the circle of influence in times of crisis, such as the one currently facing the Middle East. The day the British Parliament voted down the proposal to use force against Syrian President Assad, after he used chemical weapons against his citizens in August 2013, will serve in the future as a symbol of Europe’s withdrawal from a position of real influence over what happens in the Middle East. Europe does remain important as the leader of the largest democratic bloc among the countries of the West, and as an important trade partner of several states. It is therefore able to exert influence on Israel, which sees itself as a member of the democratic bloc, but this is a special circumstance that does not apply to any other country or movement in the Middle East.

Apart from all this, there is the fact that the United States is aiming to achieve energy independence. At present it is still difficult to assess how the resulting changes might affect the Middle East. The region

remains one of the biggest and most important sources of oil and gas for Asia and Europe, but the United States is already much less dependent on it for this necessity. Furthermore, the market today is saturated with oil, and if the United States decides to export gas, it will be offered in large quantities to anyone who wants it. This is a market in which energy prices, the source of the cash income of the rich Middle Eastern countries, are declining. This new situation could increase the degree to which the United States disengages from its obligations in the region as a whole, and from the oil suppliers, led by Saudi Arabia, in particular. It is clear that the ability of the Middle Eastern oil states to mobilize the United States will decrease, as will their ability to invest large sums of money in the conduct of foreign policy. We have in mind here such things as the large payments made by Saudi Arabia and the Emirates to Egypt in order to save it from the clutches of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is hated in the Gulf, and the investments made by Iran in Lebanon and Syria, and in Hezbollah as well. The changes taking place in the energy market are just beginning to have an influence on the world and the region, so it would be very prudent to follow them closely, especially in view of the energy market's great importance for some of the region's major states.

It is clear that even if the United States were to become energy independent, it would still have an interest in maintaining its special relations with the rich Gulf States. One reason is that the latter are important arms buyers who procure in quantities large enough to influence the American economy; another is that the United States would not want to lose sources of power and influence in the world to its competitors, China and Russia. In practice, Saudi Arabia has been engaged in economic warfare since the end of 2014, including drastically lowering the price of oil. The aim is to eliminate states that produce more expensive oil, led by the United States, from the field of production and marketing, in order to retain Saudi Arabia's share in the oil market of the future. This is a struggle to preserve the importance of the Saudi kingdom, and the Middle East in general, in the energy market. Once this struggle ends, the picture will become somewhat clearer, and we will be better able to assess the energy market's place in the new world and the influence of the changes in that market on the world.

As noted, the fact that the explosion inside the Middle East coincided with the absence of an external power – whether a superpower or an international force – that could and would want to calm or stop the rampaging wild forces, served to intensify the chaotic result, and continues to do so.

## **CAN THE WHEEL BE TURNED BACK?**

Is it within the power of a military effort, like the one President Obama declared on September 10, 2014, to destroy IS or to change the course of events in the Middle East? In my estimation, the answer is negative, both in regard to the smaller circle of fighting against IS, and certainly in regard to the larger circle in which the radicalization of Islam across the giant expanses of the region must be combated.

The United States will not be able to succeed in its war against the Islamic State movement without making a much greater investment. In order “to destroy the Islamic State,” the goal declared by President Obama, significant numbers of ground forces will need to be deployed. Their job will be to assist the Kurds and others in fighting the army of the Islamic State. At the present time that army is drunk on victory and as blood-thirsty as ever. While there may be some hope of establishing anti-IS forces in Iraq, on the basis of the Kurdish forces and the Iraqi army, it is clear that in Syria there is no such basis. Furthermore, the factors that worked in favor of those using air power in Kosovo, and even in the last campaign in Gaza, are not relevant against forces that have no commitment to any community in the region. The leaders of the Islamic State movement feel an obligation only to themselves and to their people fighting on the field of battle. At this stage, this is the only “community” whose fate is important to these leaders. Therefore, as long as their people are not destroyed, there is no way to harm anything vital to them. The situation with regard to IS is thus completely different from the situation when fighting against the army of a state that feels some degree of obligation to its citizens; it is even different from fighting Hamas, whose obligation to its citizens is minimal, but nevertheless exists. The conflict with IS represents a war of annihilation, in the most primitive meaning

of the term. The advanced technology of the twenty-first century must cope with the same challenge as presented by warfare in the past: to kill the soldiers of the other side. As noted, in such warfare it is possible to succeed only by means of ground forces with real capabilities. In Iraq there are no such forces, with the possible exception of the Kurds, while in Syria there are certainly none. (The professional question regarding the need for a good level of intelligence as a necessary condition for the success of an air campaign against an enemy of this type, and the manner in which good intelligence can be obtained for the air force, requires a separate discussion.)

Regarding the issues raised by the larger circle of Islamic radicalization across the Middle East, the efforts of the United States and its allies to solve the problems can be likened to throwing stones into the Mississippi River in the hope of changing its course. The wave of radical Islam is a historical surge connected with several decades-long developments in the Muslim world and with the struggle over the character and identity of that world. As noted, the seeds of the crisis were sown with the fall of the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century, a century ago, and the crisis has been gathering energy since 1979, that is, for over 35 years already. To have any real influence on this raging wave is most difficult, and perhaps, impossible, even for the United States. The wave's geographical scope is too broad, and its religious and cultural roots are too deep.

This being the case, it is necessary to identify and concentrate on the most dangerous spots in the current deluge, in order to prevent the greatest disasters. It is possible to argue over which is the greater danger: the recent successes of IS and the brutal control it exercises over vast territories, on the one hand; or the slaughter going on in Syria, with 250,000 Syrians killed, most of them by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his men, on the other. And by no means should we belittle the cruelty of the adherents of IS, and certainly not the extermination of whole communities, destroyed just because they are not Muslims. (We note, parenthetically, that the on-going disappearance of Christians from the Middle East is an historical development worthy of attention that parallels the growing strength of the radical Islamic movements. The Christians are leaving some places, like Bethlehem, Lebanon, and Gaza, on account of environmental pressures, but without bloodshed,

while in places like Iraq, for instance, they are forced to choose either exile or death.) However, the important question is not who arouses more negative emotions by their cruelty, but rather, who is more dangerous and of more consequence for the future of the world. There is no doubt in my mind that a nuclear-armed Iran is a much more significant threat than either IS or Syria, by any standard.

Iran's status in the Middle East has become much stronger over the past decade. Iran was not only the first state to send a political blast wave into today's Middle East, with its 1979 revolution, but it was also more prepared than any other state to invest both blood and money in order to advance its interests. The Iranians also showed that they knew very well how to exploit the weaknesses revealed in the Muslim/Arab and international systems. Despite the competition between the Persians and the Arabs in general, and the Persian and Iraqi branches of Shi'a Islam in particular, the Iranians were able to gain almost total influence over important focal points of the various conflicts, with the assistance of the Shi'ite communities in each area – Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and even Gaza, which has no Shi'ite population. It appears that Iran also senses the weakness of the United States, and its concerns over becoming embroiled in incidents that would obligate it to resort to military force in the region. In light of this awareness, Iran has recently busied itself with trying to engage the United States as a new “partner,” by playing up its ability to assist America in the war against IS. This is another example of Iran's ability and readiness, when perceiving weakness in the environment, to invest and make connections with the aim of gaining influence.

However, the Iranians are not satisfied with just these capabilities. They see themselves as a superpower, regionally, at least, and as having a religious mission extending beyond the region. This is the reason they want to acquire nuclear weapons. Such arms in the hands of Shi'ite Tehran would threaten the entire region and become the basis for an accelerated nuclear arms race. The inevitable result of this would be a nuclear bomb in the hands of more than one Sunni state within a fairly short time. The Saudis, for example, have announced that they will acquire nuclear capability if Iran does so, the Egyptians have hinted at this, and Turkish representatives have said the same to staff members of American members of Congress. Once the various Sunni states acquire

nuclear weapons, it will not be long before terrorist organizations get their hands on them too. Nuclear-armed states in the Middle East would spell the end of the NPT, one of the international system's few achievements in connection with preventing the spread of nuclear weaponry.

Even before all this, though, if the Middle East were to find itself under an Iranian nuclear umbrella, then the region would become a paradise for terrorist organizations using conventional weaponry. They surely would not hesitate to use their weapons, knowing that the world would fear to act against them in an environment with the potential for nuclear conflict. The whole area would sink even deeper into the swamp of violence, since the Iranian umbrella would neutralize any possibility of taking action against the radicals. Taking all these considerations into account, it is clear that even without Israel's sensitivity, the nuclearization of Iran would pose a much greater threat to the region and the world than the success of IS, despite the latter's repulsive murderousness.

The above is an example of the type of analysis that needs to be made in order to determine the most dangerous threats that could develop due to the situation in the region. This makes it possible to focus the fight against these main threats, while understanding that it is impossible to resolve all the problems plaguing the Middle East.

## **THE SIGNIFICANCE FOR ISRAEL**

In the midst of this stormy sea stands the State of Israel like an isolated island. Israel is the only state in this giant expanse, from the Straits of Gibraltar to India, that is neither Muslim nor Arab. Moreover, Israel is the only state in this expanse that is a democracy based upon an open society, in the fullest, Popperian sense of the term. At one time it was customary to call Turkey a democracy as well, and it is to be hoped that it will be possible to see it as one following the country's recent elections. Recently there have been those who cite Tunisia as a ray of light in the darkness of the old and new dictatorships. However, despite the hopes Tunisia raises, it would be worthwhile to assess that state's durability as a democracy over a somewhat longer period of time. Certainly, for the present, Tunisia is not a model for any other state in the region.



Israel's ability to influence what is happening in the Middle East is very restricted. It cannot change the region by force, and even if it were to reach an agreement with the Palestinians, that would have no influence on the larger scheme of things. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has no relevance whatsoever to even one of the divisive factors that are tearing the Middle East apart. An agreement has importance for Israel and the Palestinians, but it will have no wider influence beyond that.

One caveat to the above is in order: Israel must be alert to the fact that, as a consequence of the changes in the Middle East and the world environment, new possibilities may arise for cooperation with some of its neighbors – in particular, those who prefer the status quo over radical changes and are especially concerned about a nuclear-armed Iran. The way to publicly-admitted cooperation in this regard requires, of necessity, an agreement with the Palestinians. Such an agreement is vital, not because any Arab leader thinks it is vital in and of itself, nor because the leaders of the Arab countries are particularly interested in the fate of the Palestinians (they most certainly are not). However, none of them can afford to ignore the Arab street, and certainly not since the events of the Arab Spring. On the street, for various reasons, the cause of the Palestinians still constitutes a symbol; it still grabs the attention and stirs the feelings of very many people. Therefore, the only benefit for the broader region of an Israeli-Palestinian agreement would lie in enabling Israel to upgrade its public relationships with some of the Arab states.

We recall that several important states have lost, to one extent or another, the faith they used to place in the United States. It is quite possible that after an Israeli-Palestinian agreement some of them would view Israel as a strong and stable factor capable of replacing to some degree the American anchor that is steadily dissipating. If this scenario were to come to fruition, and cooperation with such Arab states were to develop, then it is possible that the process that would develop after the agreement would promote stability in the Middle East. However, it is important to emphasize that none of the fundamental problems of the region will be resolved or even influenced by any agreement that ends the lengthy conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

With an agreement or without one, Israel cannot afford to disregard what is happening along its borders and beyond, since it is located in the heart of the greater Arab and Islamic world. Important segments of the regular armies in the region – forces that threatened Israel from the time of its establishment – have disappeared (Iraq) or have been seriously damaged (Syria). However, other forces from the dark world of the seething Middle East are now establishing bases on Israel's borders. In the Sinai Peninsula there are radical Salafists and representatives of IS. The Gaza Strip hosts the armed Palestinian wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad. Lebanon has Hezbollah, established by the Iranians. Hezbollah is the strongest terrorist organization in the world, with advanced military capabilities, over 100,000 missiles and rockets, shore-to-sea missiles, anti-aircraft missiles, and more than 15,000 armed and well-organized fighters, some of whom have combat experience gained in fighting in Syria. In Syria itself there is chaos, and part of the country is controlled by Sunni groups, radical to one degree or another. At the most extreme edge stands IS, the organization against which President Obama declared war. Bashar al-Assad's regime is maintained in power thanks to Iranian intervention and Hezbollah fighters (with quiet, but effective, Russian aid). Assad is dependent on Hezbollah, so he aids this organization as much as he can. He serves as a bridge with Iran, hands over to Hezbollah some of his more advanced military capabilities, and on top of this, makes it possible for the organization to deploy on the Golan Heights, thereby opening a new front against Israel.

Israel is thus surrounded on almost every side by terrorist organizations with considerable offensive capabilities. Their capabilities may not be as great as those of regular armies (Hezbollah is an exception insofar as its firepower is concerned), but because of the character of the terrorist organizations, the possibility of passing from the daily routine to real warfare without advance notice, at any moment, and without a lot of preparation (that is, a surprise attack), must be taken into consideration. During the next few years the State of Israel will have to contend with armed, non-state organizations that are getting better established and growing stronger all around it. When setting out to fight against them, the broader picture of the Middle East and the rise of radical Islam must be taken into consideration. This makes it clear that this is unlikely to be the type of warfare which ends with weapons of destruction strewn about

the battlefield, and with a clear and recognized defeat of the enemy. Rather, this will be a Sisyphean struggle, with the fighters of the terrorist organizations being mixed in among civilians, who might be terrorist sympathizers or indifferent to them, but who, by their very presence, will complicate the fighting immensely and interfere with the ability of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to act freely. The only way to defeat an enemy of this kind is by conquering territory and holding it for an extended period, as Israel did in the West Bank in the spring of 2002.

It is important to remember that despite the many differences between the various terrorist organizations, and despite the fact that each group sees the other as an enemy, and is even prepared to destroy it, all the radical Islamic organizations have a shared foundation: all of them believe that Islam should rule the world. The argument between them, sometimes to the death, is over the question: Which Islam? Having this shared basis, belief in the supremacy of Islam, they are united in their hatred of Israel (among other countries), and in some cases they are even prepared to play down their mutual conflict and help each other fight against Israel, while retaining their fundamental differences over how to interpret Islam. Thus, we find Shi'ite Iran today killing Sunnis in Syria, Iraq, and Balochistan, while at the same time building up the Sunni Islamic Jihad organization and sending as much aid as possible to radical Sunni Hamas. Given this situation, the Arabic saying, "I am against my brother, my brother and I are against our cousin, and the three of us are against our neighbor," assumes a very practical meaning. Almost all of them join forces against the West and Israel, despite their mutual loathing and their readiness to kill each other in places where they are vying for supremacy. That which unites them is greater than that which divides them when the issue involves the enemy outside of Islam, because for all of them, "Islam is the solution!"

Whether Israel likes it or not, it is a Western state in almost all respects, and thus most of the inhabitants of the region perceive it as an alien entity, colonial in character, serving as a foreign outpost of the "other" – hostile, liberal democratic – world. They see Israel as the long arm of the West, led by the United States: in the terminology of the Iranians, the "little Satan" representing the "big Satan." Furthermore, most Israelis want to stay the way they are and not become like their neighbors, even

though this places serious constraints on Israel's conduct in both war and peace (and, in my humble opinion, this is a good thing). At the same time, we must not forget the central point: If Israel's power is reduced, or if it loses the determination required to use that power, then it will be destroyed, having no place in the brutal world in which its enemies use weapons of the twenty-first century, but fight and kill according to the rules of conduct of the seventh century. It will take a long time and many wars before it will be possible to copy the rules of present-day Europe, or the relations between Canada and the United States, to the Middle East without causing a catastrophe.

Recently, a leader of a Western state, who had already retired from his post, said to me that even if he does not say this out loud to the public in his country, he understands that Israel stands at the forefront of the battle of the democratic and modern world against the forces of radical Islam. This is a correct observation that has practical implications. It is supremely important for Israel's blade to be sharp, and for Israel to be prepared to use it, and not only for its own sake. This is so even if the other democratic states are not prepared to admit it.

No agreement Israel reaches and signs will have any practical significance for the world being established in the Middle East unless Israel has in its hands the power to defend and enforce it. Moreover, developments like the increase in power of the Islamic forces such as IS, or Iran obtaining nuclear capabilities, turn the matter of reaching an agreement with the Palestinians into a very problematic issue. In such circumstances, the chances increase greatly that whoever signs an agreement with Israel will not necessarily be the party that ultimately rules the territory and determines the character of the ensuing relationship with Israel. It is possible, and even probable, that the most radical forces in the Muslim world will take power, as they have elsewhere, over the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, directly or through proxies, and they will be the ones to determine the rules of conduct in relation to Israel.

Any agreement with the Palestinians must be based on the understanding that no signatory and no guarantor of the agreement will have the power to prevent Islamic radicalization among the Palestinians. Hamas won freely-held Palestinian elections back in 2006, and there is no reason

to think that the organization's power has weakened since then. On the contrary, to all appearances, it is stronger. Even if a successor to Abu Mazen is chosen from among his supporters, no one can guarantee that the Palestinian government will be strong enough and capable enough to stand up to the wave of radical Islam, which could lead to a government even more extreme than that of Hamas. In order to prepare for the possible scenario of a very radical government in Ramallah, within mortar range of the Knesset (Israeli Parliament) building in Jerusalem, the security measures specified in any Israeli-Palestinian agreement will have to be extremely tough. In the Oslo Agreements, these concerns were not taken into consideration, and the process led to a situation that enabled Palestinians from territories under Palestinian control on the West Bank to enter Israel and murder about 122 Israeli citizens in one month in the spring of 2002. Israel did not succeed in changing the situation until it recaptured the whole West Bank (civil authority over the Palestinians in the area was left in the hands of the Palestinian Authority). Israel must not repeat that mistake in the future.

Even though an agreement does not appear to be on the horizon, Israel must continue to try to reach one. There is no easy way to achieve this, and the disagreements between Israel and the Palestinians will not disappear at the wave of a hand or in exchange for one Israeli concession or another. The main problem for the Palestinians is not the conquest of 1967 and Israeli rule in the West Bank, but rather that they simply do not accept the results of the confrontation that followed the 1947 United Nations Resolution. They do not accept the existence of the State of Israel even within the borders of the 1949 cease fire. It turns out that the slogan "territory for peace" was an illusion. It is not captured territory that stands at the heart of the Palestinian cause in connection with the conflict, but rather the existence of a Jewish state in the region that the Palestinians view as their homeland. The Palestinians find the fact that Jaffa, Tiberius, and Safed under Israeli control are to be more oppressive than the IDF roadblocks at the exits from Hebron or Nablus.

Therefore, the first thing that must happen is for the Palestinians to internalize the fact that Israel will continue to exist as the national state of the Jewish people. As for the Palestinians refugees, they will have to accept the fact that they will not get into Israel. Apart from this, against the

background of widespread turbulence and radicalism in most of the Middle East, and though the matter is sensitive and difficult, the Palestinians must understand that part of the job of guaranteeing the security of Israel is contingent upon the deployment of the IDF in vital areas, including along the Jordan River, where its presence will necessarily lead to real isolation of the Palestinian state from the Arab world. If this were not to happen, then Israel might find itself, by signing an agreement and withdrawing from the West Bank, in the position of having helped establish a dangerous fundamentalist force near its population centers, a force that would use Palestinian independence to develop terrorist capabilities aimed at the destruction of Israel. It is impossible to assume that the only Arab entity to emerge as a genuinely peace-loving democracy will blossom precisely in the vicinity of the State of Israel. Perhaps in a generation or two it will be possible to assess Israel's needs anew. Today, however, against the background of the current Middle East, these are existential requirements for Israel. As stated above, an agreement meeting these needs will not ease any of the sources of the wider conflicts in the Middle East, but it can be expected to make it possible for Israel to develop good working relations with several of the region's states.

## **SUMMARY**

Henry Kissinger wrote that the causes of conflicts in the Middle East are similar to the causes that were operative in Europe in the seventeenth century, and which led to the Thirty Years' War.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the Middle East behaves in much the same way as Europe did before the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, which ended that conflict.

From this it follows that the Middle East lags behind the modern world by more than 350 years with regard to matters of war and peace and the systems of relations between states. The significance of this is not technical, and does not lie in the number of years, but rather is substantive and qualitative. In the Peace of Westphalia, the relevant European states defined the systems of relations between themselves on the basis of the recognition of the sovereignty of states, and on the removal of the religious component from among the factors legitimizing a declaration of war.

In contrast, the Middle East is headed in the opposite direction: state borders are disintegrating, sovereignty is meaningless, and much fighting is conducted along the friction lines between tribes, sects, and religions. Indeed, religious differences are the most significant, exerting a very strong influence over the systems of relations between the different groups in a large proportion of the places. Moreover, in some places non-governmental military organizations are taking the place of states. Even in states that seem to be governing unchallenged, strong non-governmental organizations maintain aid systems and armies no weaker than the state's.

This process is not new, but has assumed greater impetus during the so-called "Arab Spring," mainly because of the weakening of the state as a force in Arab society and the strengthening of the divisive forces within it. This disintegration only serves to distance the Middle East from any process leading to political maturity of the Westphalia type.

The Peace of Westphalia saved Europe from ruin and desolation. It is not clear that there is anything or anyone who might lead the Middle East to a similar agreement, or when this might happen.

So, where is the Middle East headed? Given the reigning chaos, it is very difficult to know. In the words of Professor Joseph Dan regarding "chaos theory" and phenomena in the worlds of nature and human society in general: "Causes exist, but their precise effects are not capable of being predicted, and within a system containing just a few causes, varied results of endless variety develop, such that no one is capable of predicting them with precision."<sup>2</sup>

Clearly we should be modest about our ability to assess future developments in the region. That is, even if we have good and detailed information about the various factors that brought about the present situation, those phenomena alone do not tell us will happen from now on. Moreover, external intervention in the process could lead to unexpected results that no one today has in mind.

For example, the attack on IS by the US-led coalition, and the practical cooperation on the ground between Shi'ite militias and the US, could lead to a unification of the Sunni forces, who may come to view the US

as the enemy of all Sunnis, and as having taken sides in the most ancient conflict in the Muslim complex –the battle between Shi'ite and Sunni.

The US has abstained from attacking Bashar al-Assad, yet come out strongly against IS. Yet the fact is that the Alawite Assad has killed tens of thousands of Sunnis and used gas against them, while IS aggression has killed far fewer people. To many Sunnis, the conduct of the Americans seems unreasonable and unjust. If the US cooperates with Iran or Shi'ite militias against IS, then this feeling will be strengthened, because the Shi'ites view not only the IS fighters, but every Sunni in Iraq, as a potential enemy. Shi'ite forces act in this way in every territory inhabited by Sunnis. Furthermore, Sunni organizations and states will undoubtedly try to unite ranks against the Shi'ites, not out of love for IS, but out of hatred for the Shi'ites. Sunni feelings of persecution could change the balance of forces in the region, to the benefit in particular of radical Sunni organizations like IS – quite the opposite of what the US intends. Moreover, in the long term, America's conduct could lead to a broader struggle against it, even though today many Sunni states support it and are supported by it.

This is just one example of a distant scenario that is merely possible, but not impossible, which most likely was not taken into consideration when the decision was taken to attack IS, in order to contain the threat it represents. It's worth remembering that, among the processes we have witnessed in recent years in the Middle East, sometimes those that seemed less likely were the ones that came to pass.

The interesting question from a historical point of view is whether the coming century in the Middle East will be characterized by a constant, decades-long struggle encompassing several different conflicts: radical Islam versus the democratic West, joined by less democratic states with significant Muslim minorities (like China and Russia); Shi'ite Muslims versus Sunni Muslims; and episodic outbreaks of mutual destruction in conflicts unique to each region.

Or, perhaps the events unfolding before our eyes today, which seem like struggles between mighty forces over the future of the region, are nothing but a temporary episode, following which the region will



emerge from the crisis and enter a more optimistic period? If so, it will become apparent after the fact that today's events were a kind of last spasm of the forces of evil before their disappearance from the region, which will become freer, more stable, and safer.

In any case, it is impossible to make sense of the current situation without absorbing the lesson that almost all the events taking place in the Middle East are rich with complexity. Many forces are entangled within them: forces representing centuries-old tensions between Sunnis and Shi'ites; forces of radical Islam, which is seeking its place in the sun against other forces pulling in the direction of social modernity; and local loyalties that have replaced allegiance to the state (which may have disappeared completely or just been significantly weakened), opposed by political forces trying to preserve the status quo in their own favor.

As stated above, it is difficult to assess what will ultimately emerge from this complex web of conflicts. However, insofar as it is possible to make any assessment, mainly on the basis of past experience, the direction that seems most likely, to my regret, is the pessimistic one.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Does America Need a Foreign Policy? Toward a Diplomacy for the 21st Century*, New York: Simon and Schuster (2001), 164-165.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Dan, *Chaos Theory and the Study of History* [in Hebrew], Tel Aviv: Kineret Zmora-Bitan Dvir (2009), 17. [Hebrew title: *Torat HaKaios uMada HaHistoriya*.]4 “Esfahan,” Institute for Science and International Security, <http://www.isisnuclear-iran.org/sites/detail/esfahan/>.



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