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Managing the Fire Pit

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Towards a new American approach to the Middle East after the Obama years;

An open letter to my fellow interpreters of the Middle East in America, but also an essay in honor of three personal mentors: Bernard Lewis, Fouad Ajami and Ahmad Chalabi

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The rise of the Islamic State deepened Obama's conviction that the Middle East could not be fixed—not on his watch, and not for a

generation to come. –Jeffrey Goldberg, ‘The Obama Doctrine’, *The Atlantic*, April 2016

“Yeah, I admit very much to that reality,” [Rhodes] says. “There’s a numbing element to Syria in particular. But I will tell you this,” he continues. “I profoundly do not believe that the United States could make things better in Syria by being there. And we have an evidentiary record of what happens when we’re there—nearly a decade in Iraq.” Iraq is his one-word answer to any and all criticism. –David Samuels, ‘The Aspiring Novelist Who Became Obama’s Foreign-Policy Guru’, *The New York Times Magazine*, May 5, 2016

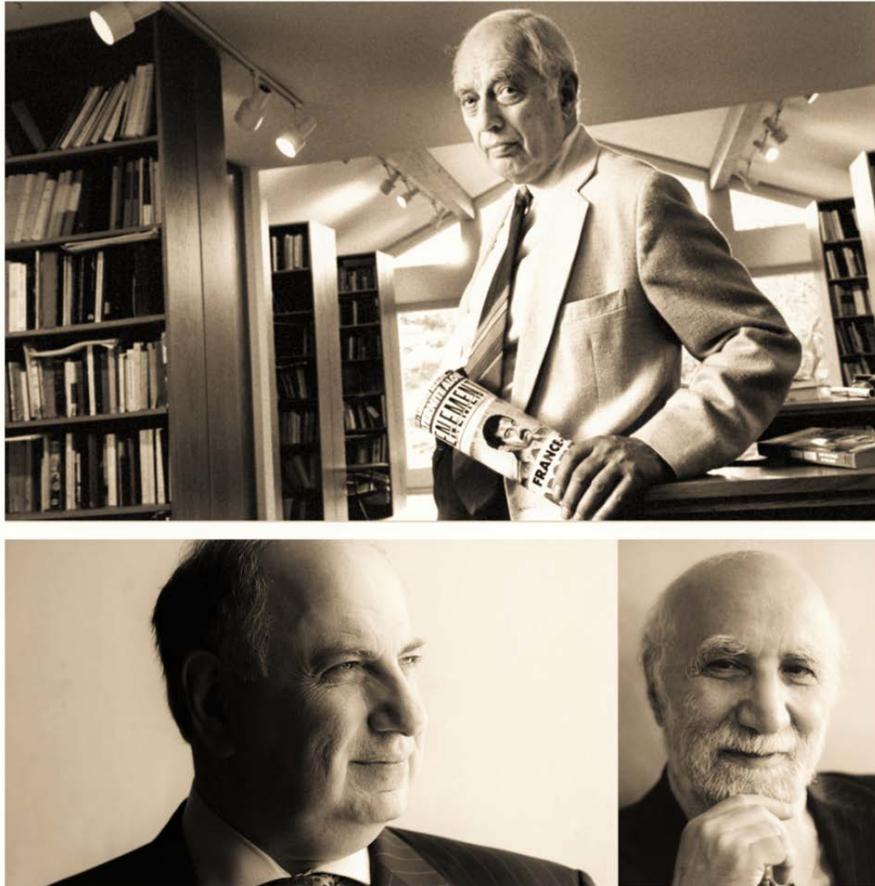
Even after the extremists are defeated in Iraq and Syria, the problem will persist. “We’ll be in a perpetual state of suppression for a long time,” [Clapper] warned. –David Ignatius, ‘The U.S. can’t fix it’: James Clapper on America’s role in the Middle East’, *The Washington Post*, May 10, 2016

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I wonder how many stopped reading after seeing the names Lewis, Ajami and Chalabi above? I wonder, too, how many will continue reading out of sheer antipathy towards the trio, to mine this essay for new ‘evidence’ of a misguided and discredited legacy? And that, right there, is a troubling symptom of the long-standing Manichean conversation in America about what to do in the Middle East.

For those who have been part of the conversation long enough, one’s opinion of the three generally defines where one stands in the conversation. The pitch of the debate rose prior to the 2003 Iraq War and petered off beyond it as Lewis, Ajami and Chalabi were deemed mistaken by the consensus view. Each had respectively played the role of the interpreter, the true believer and the activist to varying degrees. It also got ugly and ad hominem, with agenda inferred, and malice suggested, from all sides unto all sides. They became lightning rods; their supporters also pushed back with similar tactics. I contributed to the acrimony, and I did my share of inferring and suggesting. I am not sure that what I now feel is remorse. Heated intellectual debates, ones that may go on to shape the destiny of millions, understandably

unleash a sense of urgency and self-righteousness. But we are now at a point in the conversation where the tone must change or else the debate becomes largely irrelevant.



Clockwise: Bernard Lewis (Getty), Fouad Ajami (Hoover Institution), Ahmad Chalabi (Getty)

This essay is not an apologia. This essay does not seek to rehabilitate the reputations of the three men. I do not seek controversy. I do not seek to goad the 'other side'. This is not about settling scores or tallying the score, even though a journey through the near past may sound like it. This is a call for a ceasefire between all sides, for a parley at the sidelines, in the Middle East debate. The essay is, too, a pilgrimage through the stations of the debate that I had personally experienced. I have been around the block a number of times to know by now that catharsis by heartfelt candor marks an optimist's folly. It may even be presumptuous to suggest a ceasefire, given my modest station in the hierarchy of the debate. Nevertheless, I deem this proposed parley and revision necessary given how much the terrain, both in

Washington and in the Middle East, has changed. And since I don't see others making the case, here goes.

I cite these three men for one reason, and that is because America's new line of thinking about the Middle East is premised on 'lessons learnt' from its experiences with Iraq. President Obama boasts that he has learned them well. I think we need to revisit these lessons before drawing absolutist conclusions. Because the conclusions that Obama arrived at, that Iraq and some other parts of the region are irredeemable, and that America must diminish its role there, diminishes us all—all of us who have been part of this debate.

Why did we enjoin the debate in the first place? Because many of us care, for a variety reasons and motivations. Because many of us hope that America can wield its power and influence better, over there. That should be the lowest common denominator undergirding our cease-fire.

It doesn't matter how we got into the debate, whether we were born into it, or called to it. All of us, whether we be traditionalists or iconoclasts, 'martyrs' or excommunicates, the ascendant or the defeated—we're all stuck. Obama can presume to disentangle America from the region, but those who, for whatever reason, have staked our names to the American project in the Middle East cannot. Obama *et al* also expressed contempt for us, disdain for our internecine wrangling. To them, we were wrong on the fundamentals: that is, the Middle East can be fixed; that America can do much of the fixing; and that it is worth a superpower's time and effort. We were outdated and defunct, pedantically arguing whether it should remain 'fixed', or get fixed, when the routes and means of trade had changed, the world changing with it. Five centuries ago, technology expanded the horizons of maritime commerce, and the Middle East suddenly seemed smaller to all those who had coveted it. The Suez Canal, and the fuel needed for ships, redeemed the value of the region for a while, but nowadays high-def digital technology, beaming out of Seoul and Bangalore, has left the region we care about a mere blur on the spectrum of human exuberance. Those who were always against the American project in the Middle East, who fought it, must be feeling very smug.

Obama's conclusion is analytically clever. Consequently, we need to determine, as honestly as we can, whether it is strategically wise. It could very well be so. This is an unprecedented challenge for our craft, and all our various visions. We must reflect on our methods of interpretation, question our closely held beliefs, adapt, and synthesize new answers as to why the region should matter more than other places, why it requires more of America's bandwidth, and what would constitute verifiable and deliverable benchmarks of success—if those benchmarks and answers are actually out there and realizable.

To do so, we must divorce ourselves from the natural habits of sentimentality and self-preservation, hard as it may be. If our once-exalted guild has been eclipsed by the forces of technology, opportunity and hope, then we must own up to it. If we are indeed the Middle

East contingent of the ‘The Blob’ as Ben Rhodes labelled the wider foreign policy crowd, then maybe we deserve to putrefy into a pool of tepid irrelevance. Irrelevance won’t come overnight, but the inelegant descent into it has begun. Reporters, commodities analysts, spies, congressional aides and defense contractors will keep calling, but less so the West Wing. The conversation will turn static and generic, normalizing and justifying dysfunction and disorder, transfixed with the notion that that place over there and its people are ‘exceptionally’ ill-omened and troubled, and that we have to make our peace with a Middle East perpetually at strife. Ideas about how the region could possibly rejoin a happier human story will likely be met with polite and patronizing nods. There will be little interest in follow-up. Yet some of us will chafe at that. This won’t be enough. Lewis, Ajami and Chalabi did not resign themselves to ‘how things are’; they cared too much. They argued that there is more to see and do there during a preceding era of resignation, and they bore the polemical scars for it.

The danger is that in our twilight we would become even more sectarian, brandishing mutually assured *takfir*, and hence more redundant, much like those two remaining Jews in Kabul that some reporter found in 2001, the caretakers of two empty synagogues, who wouldn’t talk to each other. As such, dismissing the Lewis-Ajami-Chalabi triumvirate as birds of a feather, as carrier pigeons of neo-conservatism, is too restrictive of a pigeonhole, and it is ultimately unfair. So too is castigating their intellectual opponents as cold-hearted, predatory Realists. The Manichean clash of ‘isms’ in Washington needs to be tempered with nuance and a dose of sympathy. Our descent into irrelevance should engender mutual empathy. We can begin by revisiting the polarizing legacy of these three men.

Obama seems to believe that it will take the passing of a generation to burn through their furies and mythologies. He believes that the rest of the world can watch the bonfire from a safe distance, and still prosper. Much of that distancing is irreversible. With the current nature of the debate, a new administration, whatever its ideological inclinations, may find it very difficult to argue for walking back towards the inferno. A lot can happen from here on out until the next summer that justifies the distancing before the incoming administration is up and running with new plans.

When we argue, somewhat shrilly, that the inferno will follow the rest of the world to whatever safe distance it deems itself to be—whether it be the sparks of terrorism or a humanitarian crisis that would waft towards them, or a billow of smoke that suffocates trade, and blinds reason and liberalism—then we are implicitly confirming Obama’s despairing thesis about what lies ahead. We need to come up with another pitch. A new pitch for new wares. We have to sell hope, if there’s hope for the taking.

Those men that I count as my former mentors had high hopes for a new Middle Eastern generation, the same generation that the Obama administration seems to have given up on. Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi had hopes for them too, and so does Qasim Soleimani. The choices

those 20-somethings make over the next decade or so will shape the region for generations to come. Is there hope that one of their choices will break them out from the cycle of despair and degeneration? Does America have a role in shaping such a choice?

What's in a generation?

So what were the last five years in the Middle East all about? Was it a mere commotion, the likes of which we have seen many times before, or was it the opening act of an upheaval? Are the tens of millions of 20-somethings we are talking about living through revolutionary times that extend into the near future, or have they already transitioned into a post-revolutionary era? The Arab Spring (and that of Beirut's and Iran's, earlier, and Turkey's Gezi Park later), the sectarian bloodletting, the dramatic return of the caliphate—was that the extent of it? Has the fury exhausted itself? Is revolution a spent force? If it has, then that's good news. It means that the next American administration can leverage many tools—cultural, economic, educational, diplomatic, etc.—short of military intervention, to smooth out the hangover of 'The Great Sobering' that the current crop of 20-somethings are going through. Things can largely go back to where they were, and Obama's steady approach, from afar, would be thoroughly vindicated, earlier than even he himself had predicted, and a sense of calm and realistic purpose will descend upon this generation. A "cold peace" as Obama put it, in the wake of a cold shower of lowered expectations. Maybe an independent Kurdistan is in the offing that can finally stand itself up after the forces that had long denied the Kurds their independence have been exhausted and depleted? And that may be it.

Or maybe there is more to come. Maybe the commotion of the last five years resembles the 1905 Revolution in Russia, and upheaval is just around the corner? A lot is riding on this commotion-upheaval determination, and it is not just Washington that needs to plan contingencies for either scenario: determined actors in Tehran, Ankara, Riyadh, Damascus, Moscow, Cairo, Jerusalem, Baghdad, and even in Raqqa and Mosul, have a lot riding on it too.

Should we even be talking about a 'Middle Eastern generation'? There is no such monolith. After all, how much do young Turks, Israelis, and Saudis have in common, for example? For that matter, there is wide disparity, and varying stages of prosperity and angst even within the states of Turkey, Israel and Saudi Arabia. Each locale throughout the region has its own set of conflict triggers and communal glue. Take the Beirut Spring (2005) that drove out the Syrian Army, for example. It had all the elements to spark a region-wide wave of protest and hope. Yet it didn't. The Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979) sent governments in Iraq and the Persian Gulf scrambling in fear of a spillover. However, the 2009 protests in Tehran did not inspire the same across the region. There are many good arguments to be made that would compel us to not think of the Middle East as a 'whole' but rather a sum of many parts. However, we must be mindful of the cross currents that seem to motivate many young people across their respective

locales. How important was Tunisia in the popular mind of young Aleppines? I wouldn't think very much. But an act of self-immolation by a Tunisian street vendor moved something across wide expanses, sparking protest across Northern Syria and elsewhere. The ensuing war in Syria also drew thousands of Tunisians to the fight. Thousands of Iranians, Iraqis, Lebanese and even Afghans faced off against them. Saudi policemen patrol the streets of Manama, while Saudi fighter pilots bomb Sana'a and Saudi suicide bombers prowl for targets at Iraqi markets. In 2009, at Davos, a Turkish Prime Minister could excite many youths, back in his country (as well as among Muslim Brotherhood affiliates across the region), by exchanging heated words with the President of Israel over the situation in Gaza.

Maybe we should be talking about three broad categories of generations in the Middle East. One of which is anchored in its locale, and in its local issues. Another, transnational, willing to pick up and leave to fight for non-local causes in distant lands. The third is a generation that lives astride the fault lines of standing and emerging conflicts; their locale is the epicenter of a transnational reckoning with history and geography.

I worry mostly about that transnational generation. I worry about their shifting numbers. I worry about their unabated zeal, or their spiraling dejection. They are whom we speak of when we talk about a 'Middle Eastern generation' that co-inspires or co-conspires across borders. Their trajectory may ride upon a 'big idea' that brings real constitutional reform and good governance back to their locales, or their trajectory can head towards a messy, physical reconstitution of the region in the service of other 'big ideas' like the caliphate, or Vilayet el-Faqih, or Greater Kurdistan, or whatever comes over the horizon. Together with the youths who were born into conflict zones, they could provide the critical mass that takes much of the region to chaos and uncertainty. Again, there are determined actors on the scene who may want to see that happen, they are actively and cleverly pursuing such goals.

Obama seems to believe the trend is running in favor of this revolutionary generation. If he's mistaken, then he would be effectively turning his back on the other two categories of generations. If he's right, then he has arrived at the same conclusion drawn by the extremists, but whereas he is hands-off, they are hands-on.

The numbers of Islamic State jihadists in Sinai today is puny compared to the numbers of young Egyptian men and women who had congregated in Tahrir Square five years ago, or even the ones who showed up in Rabi'a Square a couple of years later. Yet there is an inverse equation here. When the public spaces where the 'locally-minded' revolutionary generations had gathered begin to contract, then the spaces that the 'transnational' revolutionaries claim for their cause may expand. We can reclaim those territories through warfare, but the distempered zeal of revolution will break out elsewhere.

It all boils down to who gets to read the vectors that drive this new generation best. I would agree with Obama. My gut tells me that there's more revolution to come, for the fundamentals

and the issues facing this 'Middle Eastern generation' have not changed. Only their choices have, and not for the better.

The dynamics of how members of this generation understands what is happening around them, and therefore choices at hand, do not bode well. Large sections of the populations that make up the Middle East are ill-equipped with the tools of critical thinking that are necessary to sift through and digest the cacophony of information and events that they are being exposed to. They are not unique in this respect, but there are long-existing and new factors that contribute to the disproportionality of the problem when compared to other population groupings around the world. Unprepared by educational systems that rely on memorization and that do not encourage critical thought, and pressurized by an onslaught of media (satellite and internet), the news consumer of the Middle East is experiencing a crisis of cognition; rendering him or her vulnerable to the clear-cut, redemptive narratives emerging from the caliphate and from Iran's retro-revolutionaries. After successive ideological failures, and the failure of the Arab Spring to live up to its promise in the public imagination, these societies have become unmoored. The comfort and hope engendered by the succinct narratives and the clarity of purpose advanced by the jihadists and the likes of General Qasim Soleimani—in the face of what are being propagated as existential challenges—will draw larger and larger numbers of recruits to their causes . These numbers are expected to further expand the overlapping spheres of chaos and disorder in the region, while the forces of the status quo, the regimes of the Middle East, are unable to construct an effective counter-narrative, or alternate, convincing choices. As such, the conditions for a 'Great Sobering' are not yet there.

Many elements contributed to the despair and disillusionment of these populations: the bankrupted ideology of pan-Arabism, the failure of the popular uprisings, and the relapse of democratic reform. Other elements have made them angry, such as the perception that the ruling elites are corrupted and are working in collusion with the West and Israel, and that the West is at war with Islam, while undermining it through conspiracy. Wealth disparities have made them desperate. Within the span of a mere decade and a half, they have witnessed the attacks of September 11, 2001, American troops toppling Saddam's statue, Shia and Iranian ascendance, Kurdish resurgence, choreographed beheadings, and several conflagrations with Israel. They have seen footage of more regimes being overthrown, ancient cities such Baghdad and Aleppo turning into war zones, minorities taken into slavery, moderate Islamists turning to autocracy or being ejected from power through military coups, and Turkey reasserting itself. At this moment, they have to wrap their minds around the return of the caliphate, the return of Russia, and the spectacle of the Saudis bombing Yemen to pieces. Such is the scope of sensory overload that the Middle Eastern news consumer must grapple with. So when a radical idea emerges to explain to this consumer why all these things are happening in simple and easy terms, and proposes a revolutionary remedy that he or she has already been primed for,

given his or her [familiarity with a certain version of history](#), then we are facing a potential recruit for extremism.

One particular ‘type’ of would-be recruit is especially worrying: young, talented, probably well-educated Middle Eastern men and women who may be inclined to participate in a grand state venture, such as the caliphate, or an expansion of Vilayet-el-Faqih. These are the would-be leaders of their generation and the next; if they choose revolution then revolution will make a comeback, time and time again. Should they be drawn to revolution, then such angry young men with Master’s degrees would constitute the middle management of revolutionary ventures, and would be a reasonably resilient source—a pipeline of talent—for replenishing the ranks of the top leadership should it be depleted by targeting. As such, this talented individual wants to be part of creating a new order—a grand, and in some respects, imperial vision for the future—rather than merely and nihilistically tearing down the old order as had been the hallmark of earlier generations of jihadists such as Bin Laden’s Al-Qaeda, for example. A new venture needs an infrastructure of talent, a scaffolding to prop-it up. In any institution or corporate body, talent is always the limiting factor. The question is how vulnerable is this talent when we have bands of ideological poachers hunting about for them?

When the propagandists of the Islamic State heralded the ‘Return of the Gold Dinar’ in a slick tutorial video last August, they were not merely providing a pretense at statehood by minting their own currency; they were suggesting the *possibility* of a global economic revolution. They claimed that the economic might of America stands on the perceived strength of the dollar, prodded as it is by the connivance of Muslim petrodollar states in selling the region’s most valuable commodity, oil, through that currency. The Islamic State was going to boldly shake the foundations of the dollar by shifting trade into gold and silver coins. For it to work, they must tear down the Persian Gulf regimes that are currently allied with the United States. Not only were they going to bring on a new era to the Middle East, but their revolution will change the world. Not many of their rank and file would get the intricacies of this audacious plan, yet the kind of talent they seek to recruit may. After all, what globally-aware angry young man or woman wouldn’t want to be part of a grand plan that remakes the world?

Whither Mariam and Rami?

Let us imagine and fictionalize two models that may represent the ‘talent’ of this generation: the moderate advocate, and the would-be jihadist. One represents our best hope for pushing back against the darker revolutionary ideas sweeping the region. The other may become a midlevel manager in the jihadist enterprise.

The Moderate Advocate: Mariam is in her mid-twenties. She lives in Kuwait, working in an insurance company as a statistician. She is single. Her parents were leftists in the 1970s who

were employed by the state's oil industry. She is an observant Muslim, but she is disgusted by what the jihadists are doing. She is an internet 'star' among young Kuwaitis. Her Facebook posts garner 150-300 likes, usually. Her musings are retweeted dozens of times on Twitter. She writes about local Kuwaiti issues: corruption, elections, and the rights of women, unemployment, and so on. Once in a while she will express her revulsion at a particular terrorist attempt, such as the jihadist attack on Kuwaiti Shia worshippers. She found an opportunity here to question the lack of accountability when it comes to anti-Shia narratives that predominate in the media and in the curricula. She will also question why some private Kuwaiti citizens are donating funds to extremist groups fighting in Syria. Mariam would like to write more about jihadist extremism, and to delve deeper into foundations of the extremist narrative. She wants to ask, 'is this really what Islam is about?' But she is impeded in doing so. She has no training in Islamic theology, historiography or jurisprudence. The jihadists may shrug at her disgust, and counter that they are merely following what the first generation of Muslims did 1,400 years ago. The jihadists may argue their attack on the Shia house of worship is warranted because it follows a particular historical precedent that the early Muslims had set. Mariam cannot deny that the text being referenced by the jihadists exists, and she cannot reject it lest she be deemed a heretic by conservative elements of society. She usually tunes-out the government's messaging, even that emanating from clerics in the employ of the state, who are trotted out to counter extremism; she doesn't trust them because she can't trust the wider system. She senses that the pace of positive change in Kuwait is too slow for some of her audience. The system is rigged, the change cosmetic. By counseling a slower pace, by pointing out that 'change' coming too quickly may singe her country as it did in countries nearby, some commenters may accuse her of being an enabler of the corruption that she criticizes. She may feel helpless, for she cannot provide a meta-narrative as succinct and as compelling, even as revolutionary, as that of the extremists. Mariam does not have a 'big idea' to preach to her flock. She may opt for exile in London, or Dubai.

The Would-Be Jihadist: Rami is in his late twenties. He is a Jordanian citizen of Palestinian descent, from a respected family. He currently resides in Beirut. Growing up in Amman, Rami attended an elite school. He was a bright student, but he kept to himself. However, he exhibited leadership qualities among the youth of his neighborhood, where he was viewed by his peers as tough and chivalrous. Rami studied IT in the United Kingdom. His English is impeccable. He also speaks some French. While living and working in Lebanon, he began turning to religion, experimenting with different strands of Sufi mysticism. But it also made him more of a recluse. For the past decade and a half, Rami has had to absorb immense changes and events happening around him in the Middle East. He already bears the ancestral anger at having been dispossessed by the Arab-Israeli conflict. He is angry at the corrupt regimes and oligarchies that control states and economies. His own IT business may have

suffered because he was unwilling to pay out a bribe to a local official towards securing a contract. Rami was heartened by the Beirut Spring, but was then disillusioned by the factional politics that followed. Similarly, his hopes were raised by the Arab Spring, before they were dashed by the messy consequences.

A new, younger cleric had begun delivering sermons at Rami's local mosque. The cleric is a Salafist, and a jihadist sympathizer, if not an active recruiter, but Rami doesn't know for sure. Rami keeps his distance because he doesn't want to get scrutinized by the watchful eyes of the security services, but once in a while he overhears the discussions taking place in a corner of the mosque, and is intrigued by the arguments made by the sheikh, and how he correlates historical incidents from early Islam with contemporary events. The sheikh has noticed Rami listening in, and asked one of his acolytes about him. The Sheikh is told that Rami is a harmless and disciplined Muslim, who is unlikely to be an informant for the security services. He is also told that Rami commands respect in the neighborhood with his quiet and imposing demeanor, and that he is an IT whiz. The sheikh thinks to himself that the jihad would need IT specialists, and that Rami's age, temperament, and background would make him an ideal candidate for a mid-level position in the Islamic State. Who knows, one day Rami may be promoted within the ranks and become one of the state's leaders. The Sheikh begins to amplify his messaging, saying that if Muslims wanted to regain their dignity on the world stage, and redeem their greatness, they must fight for it, and they must follow the example of the early Muslims in how they built their state, one that brought great empires crashing before it.

The sheikh is implying that the jihadists are building such a state in nearby Iraq and Syria, and that their newly established 'caliphate' is not simply a tool for angrily lashing out at the world, but is in fact the beginning of a new world empire. Those who join it now are getting in on the ground floor of a grand imperial project. To seal the deal with Rami, the sheikh begins citing the story of a heroic early convert to Islam, who was a chivalrous recluse too, but went on to become one of the faith's greatest generals. He may even link this historical figure to a decision taken by the early Muslim conquerors that the jihadists cite today to justify one of their recent acts, which may have been condemned by the mainstream media. Rami had heard about this Muslim hero before, in school or in a TV miniseries about Islam. He hadn't known that this hero had been responsible for the same act that the jihadists are citing. Rami is further intrigued; he is getting closer and closer to a snap decision to talk to the sheikh about going to Syria and joining the fight.

What can we do for Mariam? How can we intervene with Rami? If Rami decides not to join the jihad simply because its cost to him is prohibitive, that it may land him in jail or have him killed in a drone strike, then he will still be around when a better opportunity for jihad presents itself. If Mariam is not empowered by a 'big idea' then her appeal will diminish as

more of her digital flock turn inwardly to despair and disillusionment. She herself may despair, and decide that it is all for naught. What it also means is that more of those young men and women that she could have influenced would turn into another crop of Ramis.

The urgency to understand these extremist narratives, why they are flourishing in the current cognitive atmosphere, and where they are likely to go and take root, are especially compelling now, since their endgame visions may lead to threatening and disrupting critical energy and maritime routes that serve the global economy. Given the current atmospheric, these disruptions may not be as far off as many observers of the region would have us believe. The very nature of these redemptive, revolutionary ideas is fast burning, and fast acting. The inferno may catch us by surprise. Thus, one needs to look at why these ideas are attractive to so many people, and why the extremist narrative aligns with how these people think. Long-term observers and interpreters of the region are failing to imagine the damage that ideas can engender in desperate and traumatized societies. It is the difference between understanding the chain of events as a mere commotion, the likes of which have often been seen in the Middle East over the last few decades as many of these observers are saying, or as an upheaval that may even redraw borders and topple long-standing political orders.

Bernard Lewis, the master trend spotter

It is not easy to spot new trends, much less so to be able to extrapolate their future trajectories. From 2005 to 2010, I wrote a series of papers and monographs about what is now retroactively called by many scholars as 'the Zarqawi exception'. They dwelt on the revolutionary changes that Abu Musa'ab al-Zarqawi had introduced to jihadism as he launched his audacious and bold undertaking to confront the United States and Shi'ism in Iraq. I began with a look at how Zarqawi understood the world around him, and how he interpreted the shocking event of bringing down the Saddam Hussein regime; I came to the conclusion that Zarqawi was a new phenomenon that we had not seen in the previous generation of jihadists, most notably, the founders of Al-Qaeda. Consequently, I tackled the genesis of Zarqawi's line of thinking among his ideological forerunners (the 1979 Mecca uprising), and how his unique and original approach led him towards exploiting anti-Shi'ism as a fast burning fuel to further jihadist expansion. Then I mapped out how this way of thinking would be geared towards preparations for announcing a caliphate and, beyond Zarqawi's demise, how his ideological heirs would eventually take the fight to Syria. The 'Zarqawi exception', and the trends he unleashed, was dismissed by the majority of Middle Eastern watchers at the time, and the nascent subfield of jihadist studies had a difficulty in absorbing it. Ten years on, as the Zarqawists have come back from the near death of their vision to occupy a large swath of territory straddling both Iraq and Syria, these ideas are now part of the scholarly mainstream in the West and in the Middle East.

In doing so, I was inspired by the example of Bernard Lewis. Lewis even graciously took the time to edit [my paper on the proto-caliphate](#). He turned to me at one point and asked, “Are you absolutely sure that this is what it is?” I was. I imagine he was trying to spare me the pain of coming out too early ahead of the consensus view, risking my reputation and career on a hunch. Vindication may never come, and even if it did, it may not feel like it. But I felt compelled to put the message out, for maybe someone out there would take heed. I was following in Lewis’ footsteps, for he saw the Islamist challenge way ahead of the consensus view, back in the late 1970s.

Lewis turned 100 on May 31. It was an occasion to celebrate his life’s work, and influence. His disciples, former students for the most part, [wrote much to vindicate the man who had inspired them](#). Their general tone was one of defiance against those who questioned Lewis over the years. Yet I was somewhat saddened. Why would Bernard Lewis need vindication? Why was the tone of the conversation about him still so biting and acrimonious? Lewis is a scholar’s scholar. The languages he had mastered, the laborious groundbreaking research that he had undertaken, the erudition he had accumulated, the gorgeous words he used to communicate what he had learned, all this was surely testament to what should be his status as a scholarly giant.

Lewis’ detractors skip all that, or make a perfunctory note of it, for in their eyes he committed the sin of leveraging his knowledge towards a revolutionary shift in policy. He left the confines of academia and took his warnings of what was coming to the larger public. His pre-existing academic stature afforded an outlet for his predictions in leading publications. He even proselytized the powerful to do something about it. What I can’t understand about this reaction is that if one cares enough about a place to study it, despite the difficulties inherent in that field, then how is one supposed to mitigate how he feels about how it may turn out, especially if it seems that it is heading towards calamity? Lewis turned alarmist because the situation in the Middle East was alarming. He wasn’t serving some hidden, Zionist agenda as some of his critics insinuated by highlighting his Jewish ‘outsider’ roots. He was an unapologetic Zionist, but one can be one and still author fair, objective scholarship about the rest of the Middle East, as Lewis’ career demonstrates. Alternatively, some even suggested that his being originally British (he came to the US in 1974) connoted a yearning for imperial hegemony, hoping that his adopted country would take on that role as the British receded from the Middle East in the seventies. Inferring some nefarious motivation in Lewis was ultimately useless, for it turned out that he was right, and he was right because he was uniquely situated to pick up on the signals. I wonder how many young scholars drew different lessons from Lewis’ story, that it was not wise to come out so early ahead of the consensus, that a hunch is no cause for vocal, Quixotic alarmism, however erudite, however premised on good research.

Their silence, or silencing, impoverishes our conversation. It is hard to spot new trends as it is, let's not make it harder by snickering at a minority, dissenting view. In fact, we need to be asking ourselves: how can we replicate the next generation of scholars in the mold of Lewis? I once asked Lewis why he thought he became so good at spotting trends. He replied that his experiences as a military intelligence officer stationed in the Middle East during World War II, bolstered by the rigorous, classical academic training that preceded it, constituted his own formative experiences. War puts erudition to the test. Information has to be prioritized and adapted. The study of indigenous basket-weaving techniques in a village near Hamah might be interesting, but how does it serve the war effort? War can visit this village and eradicate it. Scholars may feel squeamish about their craft being weaponized, but they should be mindful that an inferno in the Middle East may forever destroy all the things they found so fascinating about the region to begin with. Lewis was both a historian and an analyst, and he felt compelled to warn of what was coming. He knew that the failure to pre-empt it would mash up the cultural idiosyncrasies of the Middle East into an orthodox, generic pulp.

The difficulty of spotting trends has been compounded by the role of the internet's echo chambers in amplifying extremism and calls for revolution. The sheer amount of information out there is staggering and understandably overwhelming for Middle East watchers, who are accustomed to research processes involving official communiqués, intelligence and newspaper clippings, and sociological and anthropological studies. Man-on-the-street 'color', formerly the purview of journalists (back when there was an extensive network of foreign bureaus) and expatriates, rounded out that picture for the watchers. However, they have not been trained to follow the chatter on internet chat rooms, for example. One of Zarqawi's earliest enabling factors was his ability to use the internet as a tool to propagate his message without having to rely on state media—an advantage not available to earlier generations of terrorists or jihadists. As such, understanding how extremism uses social media, and how it is used by the extremists to form public opinion, is of vital importance. A subset of Middle Eastern studies has emerged, calling itself jihadist studies, to address these shortfalls of traditional research.

The study of jihadism has improved significantly over the last two years, as Zarqawi's heirs found their second wind in Syria's civil war, which enabled them to re-expand into Iraq with incredible success. However, it still seems that Western observers are reactive in their analysis, and are falling short of the predictive component. It could be that their ability to warn of what is coming is impeded by the wider atmospherics of the conversation about the Middle East, one that does not look kindly upon alarmist contrarianism. We can extrapolate what jihadist objectives may be by understanding how they think. This may also allow us to steal a march on any new narratives and visions they may seek to deploy, as the terrain of the battlefield changes. Understanding the steps, martial and ideological, that they seek to take is critical

towards understanding their end goal, for the actions of the jihadists follow the narratives they have constructed for themselves and for their audiences.

The nascent field of jihadism, though, is experiencing growing pains. The field is overwhelmed because it is attempting to define its scope in the midst of an unprecedented inundation in data arising from what the jihadists say, write and do. The young scholars of jihadism are doing a stellar job in translating, tabulating and explaining the granularity of the jihadist message and its actions. This is a sea change from the period of 2004 until 2011 when Western policy and academic circles seemed disinterested in understanding the nature of the jihad, its origins and its goals. It is not an easy task. It is not helped by the media pressure placed on those young scholars to give snap judgments on attention-grabbing and surprising events. The inherent risk is that instead of studying the news cycle, they would be forced to follow it. They also risk getting lost in too much granularity, relishing erudition at the expense of the grander, big-picture predictions. At times, they seem infected by the tone of the general conversation, turning sectarian and breaking into self-congratulatory cliques. Trolling and the general 'snarkiness' pervading the internet, where this discipline was born, don't help either. Jihadist studies provides one of our best hopes in understanding what comes next. We should do what we can to protect it from the pitfalls of the past.

Fouad Ajami, the great orator

This week marks the second anniversary of Ajami's passing, leaving a wide gap in our debate. The late Ajami was an orator's orator. Ajami rendered erudition into poetry. His soaring prose, crafted in English, an adopted language for this native Arabic speaker, could make sense of that region to any American audience. Had he been a mere pretentious poseur, he would have found that the lamentations of cynicism and despair would lend themselves even more poetical. Yet he chose the difficult medium of speaking and writing about hope in the Middle East. Those among the literati, who were in a rush to write-off places like Iraq as wastelands forever lost, were offended by his optimism. It got venal, and ugly.

George Packer, an Iraq War recanter, insinuated [in the New Yorker](#) (August 2008) that Ajami was merely a tribal poet. Ajami was born a Shia, and his motivations must be Shia triumphalism rather than his own intellectual journey, Packer suggested.

With Ajami, something else is at work. Of Lebanese Shiite origin, he has a deep knowledge of Middle Eastern politics...This isn't a case of the normal heartlessness of abstract thought. The *[Wall Street] Journal* piece, along with his recent work in *The New Republic*, make it clear that Ajami has taken sides in Iraq, and that his pleasure comes from his sense that his side is winning...But Ajami is already declaring

victory, because it turns out that he has a different idea altogether: Shiite Arab power.

Ajami was happy that then Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki had trounced his fellow Shia Sadrists during the spring 2008 battles in Basra and Baghdad. Ajami, among many, believed that Maliki had turned a corner away from blind Shia sectarianism towards building upon an Iraqi national identity and a state for all Iraqis. In doing so, Maliki seems to be breaking away from the Iranian embrace. Ajami was all for it. This hardly seems like closing ranks along myopic tribal lines.

In fact, several months earlier, Ajami had written favorably to the Editor about one of my columns that argued that we would be in for a new Iranian strategy, one that would play up sectarianism to match that of the jihadists, launching itself in Ajami's former hometown of Beirut (he had arrived in the United States in 1963). Ajami was worried by this new trend, and he wanted to draw attention to it:

Nibras Kazimi's column, "Iran's Shifting Strategy" (*New York Sun*, May 12, 2008), is one of the most insightful readings of the Middle Eastern landscape to appear anywhere in a very long time. Its analysis is as subtle and shrewd as the ways of the region. The linkage he makes between Iraq's success and Lebanon's troubles is nothing short of brilliant. The *Sun*, and Nibras Kazimi, are to be commended for cutting through so much of what has been said about these matters of late. An essay that should be required reading by all those who want to understand, let alone comment on, the contest between order and mayhem in Arab and Islamic lands.

Had Ajami been a mere Shia triumphalist then he would have wished to sweep such embarrassing inter-Shia machinations—the topic of my column—under the rug. If he were a mere Shia triumphalist then he would not have become one of the leading and most eloquent advocates for helping the Syrian people (Sunni Arabs for the most part) to overthrow the Asad regime (pseudo-Shia Alawite, for the most part) when the Arab Spring came calling in the Levant. Actual Shia triumphalists rallied to Asad's side, unanimously branding the likes of Ajami traitors to their kind. One of them, it turned out, was Maliki, who had disappointed Ajami, and others, when in later years he carried the banner of Shia triumphalism further than anyone could have predicted in 2008.

Ajami, dying of cancer, would still rouse himself to go on the air, to tell the world that the horror of sectarianism, as practiced by Bashar al-Asad in tandem with the jihadists, was going

to set the Middle East on fire. Despite his best efforts, few took notice of the trend that Ajami was trying to alert them to. It still remains under-scrutinized by trend-watchers, even though it has had immense impact across Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. I subsequently called it 'Shia chauvinism'. We need to ask ourselves whether dismissing Ajami has led to a wider dismissal of what he was trying to draw attention to, and what the long-term consequences of that disregard are.

Shias have responded to the jihadist ideological challenge by crafting a counter-narrative of their own that is no less revolutionary. In April 2012, I wrote an essay, in Arabic, titled '[Modern Shia Chauvinism: Origins, Features, Goals](#)'. It was my assessment then that Maliki's popularity in his second term stemmed from what was at first an ad-hoc, and then a systematic, campaign to reorient Shia political identity. I addressed the historical precedents, the modern triggers, the symbolism, and the implications such a reorientation would have on policy and Iraq's trajectory. This political vehicle is still viable as a propellant for ambitious politicians—with or without Maliki—and it will continue to influence Iraqi politics. Shortly before the 2014 elections, one hardline Maliki supporter demanded, on TV, the empirical equivalency of seven Sunni lives for every seven Shia lives. The electoral commission did not exclude her from running; she went on to win over 90,000 votes in Babil Province. The political end-game of the chauvinists is a Shia driven partition of Iraq. Since Maliki's second term in office, this phenomenon has increased in scope, and in the clarity of its messaging and stated goals, pushing Shias towards extremism across the Middle East. The trend may have begun in an ad-hoc manner, but since its inception it has been developed and formalized as a new political creed by the likes of Iranian general Qassim Soleimani. It is no longer limited to Iraq, and has expanded into Syria and Lebanon, and may even find traction in places such as Yemen and the Shia communities of the Persian Gulf, notably in the oil rich territory of eastern Saudi Arabia.

Another troubling trend, which is essentially a spiritual corollary to Shia chauvinism, is the return of messianic, ritualistic extremism as a threat to the mainstream of Shi'ism. The moderating scholars of Najaf, such as Sistani, represent the mainstream and they have been consistently counseling their followers against Shia chauvinism. But they have been surprised by how much their authority has eroded; they now understand the mechanisms by which the extremists are achieving that.

The realization of the threatening nature of this new trend and its portents only began emerging through hushed references from Najaf over the last year. Messianic extremism has deep historical antecedents in Shi'ism, and for the last five centuries, what later became known as traditional Shi'ism with its current leadership in Najaf, has been striving to eradicate it, achieving mixed results. However, the contemporary prevailing notion that Shi'ism is under attack from Sunni Islam, has generated a popular desire for salvation and redemption through excessive ritualism, and a revisiting of messianic 'visions' and accounts about the End of Days.

This desire has interpreted current events in Iraq and Syria in the popular mind according to a timeline that leads to the emergence of the Occulted Imam, the Mahdi. It has been seized upon by forces anathema to Najaf, who find within it a convenient way to undermine traditionalism, and to promote Shia chauvinism as a political vehicle. These forces run the gamut from the supporters of Khomeini's Vilayet el-Faqih (Rule of the Jurisprudent) to mystical orders of Shi'ism that had experienced persecution and abuse at the hands of orthodoxy. It may also be a vehicle by which retro-revolutionaries such as General Soleimani would cleanse and reinvigorate a revolution that they feel has lost its vitality. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was an early forerunner of this trend, before it really took hold as it is doing now.

This extremist Shia reaction to jihadism, through Shia chauvinism and the undermining of traditional religious authority, is actually feeding into the jihadist narrative. It empowers it, and, as the jihadists go a step further in their anti-Shia campaign, they in turn empower Shia chauvinism. Maliki's harsh policies towards Sunnis, and Assad's response to the Syrian uprising, breathed life back into the jihadist cause. The expansion of ISIS, and then the caliphate, allowed Qasim Soleimani to expand the scope of his hardline strategy. These actions and events have generated new and competing narratives that address root causes of the conflict—from the perspective of each protagonist camp—and propose maximalist solutions. Both are colored by eschatology and the promise of divine empowerment and redemption. Much of these narratives and visions are playing out furiously and cyclically on social media, reflected, for example, in the large numbers of Iraqi Shias who cast their votes for Maliki, or the thousands of European-born Muslims flocking to the caliphate, while moderate and reasonable voices stagger behind, hobbled by the atmospherics of cognitive confusion.

That is what I think is happening. My lament is that Ajami could have said it *way* better, provided that people would have listened to him. His loss, too, impoverishes our conversation. People like George Packer stopped listening because they deemed that Ajami was wrong on Iraq. Not only that, but they suspect that he could have misled them intentionally. After all, wasn't he a pal of Chalabi's, that other Shia 'triumphalist'?

Ahmed Chalabi, the dangerous instigator

Policy circles in Washington had to revisit the lessons of Iraq back in November due to the passing of the man who they hold responsible for poking the status quo in the eye: Ahmad Chalabi. The at times mean-spirited, at times gauche, tone of the conversation about him, even after death, has not matured, and the flawed misunderstanding of what he had unleashed was left to stand for the most part. The prospect of Chalabi's vindication, within this storm of vilification, is distant.

Writing [in the Washington Post](#) a few days after Chalabi's death, veteran columnist David Ignatius had this to say:

Among the remarkable facts about Ahmed Chalabi was that after turning Iraq and the United States upside down and unleashing all the gods and devils of war, he died of natural causes in Baghdad this week.

Few people have changed the course of the past few decades more, through the force of personality, than did Chalabi. Historians will argue the causes and consequences of the Iraq war, but my own guess is that if it hadn't been for Chalabi, Saddam Hussein or one of his odious sons or henchmen would be ruling Iraq today.

Philosophers have debated for centuries what truly drives history. Is it great men and women and their world-historical ideas, as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel contended? Or is there a deeper force embedded in technology and economics (the "means of production," as Karl Marx had it) that determines the story? Does God, however named, have a plan?

Chalabi's life led Ignatius to believe that it was individuals who made the difference, "There was nothing inevitable about the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the catastrophic consequences that have flowed from the decision. Like most big things in life, this happened at the margins."

Chalabi may have worked in the margins, but the cause and effect of the Iraq War happened right at the center of the stage when the status quo of the Middle East buckled on September 11, 2001.

The myth that the Iraq War was Chalabi's doing had a long run-up. Greg Jaffe of the [Washington Post](#) also wrote: "Few figures have been more loved and loathed in Washington than Ahmed Chalabi, the Iraqi expatriate who charmed American politicians and built the case for the war in Iraq." Two negative-leaning English-language biographies were authored about him while he was still alive, with grand titles such as *The Man Who Led America to War*, and *Arrows of the Night: Ahmad Chalabi's Long Journey to Victory in Iraq*. [Side note: Rhode's boast about engineering an echo chamber for the Iran deal may sound familiar since Chalabi was accused of creating that model fifteen years ahead of him. Of course, it is much easier to pull off if one carries the title of 'Deputy National Security Adviser'.]

I have fond [memories of Chalabi as a one-time boss and mentor](#). Others who interacted with him do not. One leading [Washington policy analyst wrote about his](#) experience as a young Central Intelligence Agency officer meeting Chalabi for the first time; he felt he needed

to take a shower afterwards. A former ambassador, now at a DC think tank, [recalls what his colleagues at the State Department](#) had to say about Chalabi, even before the Iraq War, that the Iraqi opposition leader “was as bad if not worse than Saddam.” BuzzFeed would [carry a headline](#) ‘Ahmad Chalabi, The Man Who Gave Us ISIS’ to announce his death. That’s a bit of a stretch, but it demonstrates the tone of the conversation about him. I know of several people in DC who wanted to eulogize him but did not do so because they felt intimidated by the atmospherics.

But it wasn’t Chalabi “who gave us ISIS” and he wasn’t even the man responsible for lighting the spark of the Iraq War, or at least that is how he and those around him understood it at the time. It was Muhammad Atta, the lead conspirator of 9/11. Prior to that terrible Tuesday, I had started to lose hope that anything would ever change for the Iraq.

After the Iraq Liberation Act was passed in 1998, which mandated regime change into US law, a reluctant Clinton administration successfully drew the Iraqi opposition into a mundane bureaucratic battle in the execution of the law. It was a battle of redundant training and office supply receipts. The battle extended into the first year of the Bush administration too. This is my first-hand experience: Chalabi introduced me at one point to a sympathizer at the Pentagon, and told him that I had recently completed a month-long course in ‘Newspaper Editing’ at the military facility in Ft. Meade, MD. The Pentagon official asked me what I thought about it, and I replied, “It’s didn’t bring us any closer to overthrowing Saddam.” George W. Bush was in power, regime change was on the Republican Party’s election platform, but nothing had changed. Institutional bias towards maintaining the status quo was still winning.

Throughout 1999-2001, I would ask Chalabi: “What is all this for? Why are here in Washington fighting the Central Intelligence Agency and the State Department when we should be fighting Saddam?”

He would answer: “We are railroad engineers. We are laying the tracks for a new American policy in the Middle East. America travels on another route right now, but that will change. The status quo is unsustainable. Something will give. We have to be ready for that.”

This is how I imagine what happened subsequently: On September 11, 2001, Mohammad Atta flipped a switch. America’s engine diverted to the track that Chalabi had laid down. Saddam, being Saddam, obstinately tied himself down to the rails further down the track, challenging America to come at him. Hundreds of people, with varying motivations, stood alongside the tracks and tried to signal to that engine to pull the brakes. Had anyone else other than George W. Bush been driving that engine, it is probable that the train would have come to a screeching halt. I even think that a Cheney would have stopped short. But not only did Bush not pull on the brakes, he pulled the train whistle just as he ran over Saddam.

I went to bed on September 10 thinking that Chalabi was to be on American Airlines flight 77 the following morning, the one that hit the Pentagon. When I saw the flight number on the ticker scroll on TV, my heart sank. I spent half an hour trying to get to anyone. Cell phone networks were overloaded, and calls weren't going through. Chalabi eventually answered, he was sitting in Santa Monica, following the news. He had made the last flight out to Los Angeles the night before after I had bid him goodbye, telling him "there's no way you'll catch your flight, but there is flight so and so tomorrow morning that you should book."

Chalabi was right. The status quo did eventually buckle. On the following September 19, 2001, he was back at the Pentagon, showing the Defense Policy Board Advisory Committee his new railway map. He took an MIT-trained nuclear scientist with him, who had defected from Saddam's nuclear program. The implication was clear: America could no longer live with a status quo in which a rogue actor with possible access to WMD technology may find common cause with an enemy such as Al-Qaeda. It is undeniable in my mind that Chalabi was a Hegelian agent of change, a radical ion, as Ignatius had argued. But he was only successful because change was coming, as he predicted. His radicalism catalyzed a chemical reaction that was already percolating. The status quo was falling apart.

Chalabi's vision for what should come next was not Shia triumphalism. He had [articulated his expectations and plans for an Arab and Islamic renaissance](#). He was no dummy or wide-eyed optimist. If anything, he was a brilliant strategist and conversationalist, who would draw from history, art, music, and even recipe books to make his case that the promise for such a revival was there, hidden among the minutiae and granularity of a Middle East boiling over, but it would take a whole new approach to thinking about the region—by fostering democratic institutions—to unleash it. That is why the likes of Lewis and Ajami were drawn to him. Chalabi did not understand the triumph of the Shias to come about by subjugating Sunnis; their prize, after a long history of agony, would be first class citizenship under vibrant, dynamic democracies. He hoped that the Iranians would turn out to be the pragmatists he thought them to be and would actually help the process along. Chalabi's failure to bring it about should not be confused with his intent, retroactively discerning malice by judging the ensuing results. Nor should his authorship of these ideas stigmatize them. Hoping for too much shouldn't be a cause for vilification.

Many of the lessons learnt from Iraq have been lost in recriminations about Chalabi's legacy. The fog had worked to the advantage of the status quo, masking its inability to answer for 9/11. The fog also blurred the opportunity when the status quo argument was undermined once again by the Arab Spring. Similarly, the West's understanding of the challenge posed by the jihadist Islamic State has been clouded. If anything, the 'folly' of hoping for too much should be on par with the folly of expecting, or foreseeing, too little.

Would things have turned out differently had the Obama administration embraced the Arab Spring early on, instead of prevaricating? Let's not be too hard on President Obama. The democracy agenda had already withered under President Bush's second administration. The prospect of the Iraq 'quagmire' had defanged it. I attended a [conference for global dissidents in 2007](#) that was convened in Prague by Vaclav Havel and Natan Sharansky. President Bush was the keynote speaker. He said all the right thing but his audience was ill at ease, for they could sense that his words no longer carried a punch. By alphabetic order, my seat was next to that of Russian dissident Gary Kasparov. I asked him, moments before Mr. Bush took the podium, whether he expected the president to address the belligerent threat made against the West by Putin just days ahead of the conference. Mr. Kasparov responded, "If not now, then when?" In the event, Mr. Bush made an oblique comment about the slide backwards in the anti-democratic direction that the world has been witnessing in Russia. Mr. Kasparov's first reaction as the audience rose to give Bush its last applause: "I'm appalled. He said nothing."

At the Prague conference, many dissidents would come up to me, as a former Iraqi dissident, and ask, sheepishly and sympathetically, about how things are going in Iraq — more in the way of holding my hand than serious inquiry. "It's very unfortunate how things went," they were saying, by demeanor.

Writing off Iraq as irredeemable has turned into a decade-long tradition by now. But if there is room to consider the argument that the malaise of the Middle East led to the Iraq War and not the other way around, as Chalabi's successful bid for policy realignment showed, then isn't it time to revisit the 'irredeemableness' of Iraq as sacred dogma in the conversation? What if something was missed as many rushed to a conclusion about that country? If Obama and Rhodes can premise their distancing from the region on lessons learned from Iraq, then their conclusions should be scrutinized since the implications do not concern Iraq solely, but the wider troubles of the Middle East too. Can rational, sober lessons be drawn while the gusts of acrimony and venality still drive the conversation as evidenced by what was said and written at the time of Chalabi's death just a few months ago?

Why would a troubled nation like Iraq matter?

Because in the dichotomy of order and disorder, Mesopotamia has always mattered. That dichotomy seems especially relevant in today's Fertile Crescent. The inhabitants of the land that was to become Iraq thought very hard about why disorder breaks out, and how order can be restored. Their conversations enriched human thought for millennia. A more recent conversation that they have been having holds much promise too.

The story of civilization there begins as an engineering problem. The topography and climate of Mesopotamia conspire to make large-scale agriculture a difficult prospect. The Euphrates and the Tigris rivers do not flood with the regularity of the Nile. Tilling the land,

and staving off the salination of the soil, requires the digging of canals; large public works beyond the capacity of a stand-alone village. A state had to come into being, to plan and execute such infrastructure. There had to be buy-in from disparate clans and bloodlines into a supra-project, one that needed a bureaucracy (writing) and engineering (mathematics). The first cities of the world came to be in the service of agriculture. Bigger cities comprised of scribes, scientists, and rulers developed bigger appetites, cascading into larger and larger projects. Civilization needed order. It needed a stable status quo. It all began in Iraq.

But there was a geographical problem. Order was emerging while those who did not wish to buy-in into it found refuge not far from it. They were 'free spirits' who chafed at the thought of rulers giving them orders. These self-segregating groups could turn to the marshes, deserts and mountains of Mesopotamia, much as similar groups did in Southeast Asia per the pioneering theory set forth by James C. Scott in *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009). Whenever they sensed that the order was buckling, they swooped in for bounty and mayhem. A cyclic saga of order and disorder began.

Thinkers who had to grapple with the precarious state of order and disorder would gather in the date groves around the towns away from the prying eyes of the rulers, to ponder the question of "What does it all mean?" They came up with many parables and explanations that still resonate throughout the souls and minds of mankind, ranging from the fatalistic tale of godly capriciousness and human resignation that is Gilgamesh's (which sounds a lot like that of Realism), to the stark and unambiguous tenets of Manicheism (see the *Star Wars* franchise). Abraham left those date groves looking for answers further afield in the Near East, whereas his descendants, forcibly returned to Babylon, developed the Jewish yearning for redemption. The Battle of Karbala lent Shi'ism a faith of protest against unjust authority. The wisdom and sciences of Greece were rediscovered and retransmitted to the modern era through 'Abbasid Baghdad. The land served to incubate ruminations on Gnosticism, alchemy was tinkered with, and the febrile urgency of Islamic thought and mysticism was unleashed. Thinkers grappled with the idea of original sin, not far from where they imagined Eden to lie, at the confluence of the two great rivers. They found the allegory of chaos in Noah's flood, and set its events in their land.

Mesopotamia had tried to answer many of the big questions on behalf of mankind, a process that ended, in the popular imagination, when the Mongol horde arrived out of the east in the thirteenth century, sacking Baghdad and burning its libraries. Interestingly, the invasion coincided with (or resulted in) the disruption of the intricate canal systems. They have not recovered since. Saddam, Zarqawi and others likened the Iraq War to a second Mongol invasion. If historians are still arguing as to why Baghdad fell in the thirteenth century, is there really any hope for clarity in the understanding the dynamics of twenty-first century Iraq?



A minaret in Aleppo

My own lessons learned in Iraq informed me that Syria was next.

It is no accident that it all broke down in Iraq and Syria. If Iraq is the incubator of revolutionary ideas and systems of government then Syria is the drawer where all the leftover screws and bolts are kept after assembling and disassembling regional empires. The topography of the Levant is littered with the bits of shrapnel left in the wake of revolutionary outbursts. The Alawite creed was born in the date groves of southern Iraq, it survives nestled up in the mountains of the Syrian coast. One lost cause after another populated one discreet valley from the next; the Druze, the Ismailis, bits and pieces of Christianity. A crowded landscape of determined survivalists overwhelms the observer with color and variety. This sort of diversity would look so charming and life affirming should we forget how it came to be.

There is another way to look at the Iraq-Syria problem.

We can draw two conceptual lines across the Middle East, two parallel axes. The first axis begins in the Balkans and ends in Baluchistan, running through Anatolia, Kurdistan and Persia, and drawing the Caucasus into its orbit. People forget that the Caucasus are part of the Middle Eastern story; Georgian slave-soldiers ruled Iraq for seventy years in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Circassians, their ancestors displaced by Russia, are overrepresented in the security bodies of Turkey and Jordan. Armenians look west and yearn for glories and

countless generations lost; the bleached bones of their kin strewn in the Syrian desert. I would maintain that Russia is in Syria today because Russia is back in the Crimea—the rulers of Moscow have long coveted this axis too. Within this axis, Anatolia and the Persian plateau had sustained ambitious dynasties playing at empire, pushing out along the course of the axis and on either side of it. They have also sustained markets eager to trade in all directions.

Another similar war-trade axis runs from North Africa and Egypt-Sudan through Arabia and far across the sea into the Indian subcontinent. Once in a while, a fevered idea grips a point along this axis, and it takes its revolution far and wide, as Islam did, as well as the many schismatics that faith had spawned. Sometimes weird cross-pollinations occurred between the two axes, as when a Balkan dynasty assumed control of Egypt and went a long way towards creating a modern national state there. This dynasty was twice tasked with snuffing out the Wahhabi rebellion in faraway Nejd. Later rulers of Egypt and Saudi Arabia duked it out in Yemen in the 1960s.

Sandwiched in between these two lines is Iraq and Syria, and there's the rub. Not only are these two places fully capable of tearing themselves apart by inimitable habit and historical trajectory, they are also contest zones for the two aforementioned axes. When the two centrifugal sets of forces—from within and from beyond—gather, an epic mess is to be expected. That, to a large extent, is what happened. Iraq needed to come up with new ideas to reconstitute itself after the 2003 war. There was internal pushback. But the two axes around it also had their designs. Added into this potent brew, or emerging from within it, new revolutionary ideas—democracy, jihadism, Shia chauvinism—bubbled through. Syria was splattered, and almost inevitably followed suit.

In light of this pattern, is it not strange that Obama, even though he considers himself to be cognizant of all that history, would counsel the two axes to simply “share” that space?

I travelled around Syria during 2006-2008 to beat two inevitable deadlines. One was that I was sure that I would get barred from entry into the country at some point, and another had to do with what I expected was coming. I was busily proselytizing the idea that ‘a storm is coming’ to whoever would listen—security dons, dissidents, journalists, bookshop keepers, what have you. I would also argue that Syria needed to democratize fast for it to survive the storm. In a place like Bashar al-Asad's Syria, that sort of talk was bound to get me in trouble. Trouble caught up with me as I crossed the border from Kilis in August 2008—the same border point preferred by subsequent waves of jihadists—only to find a ‘detain’ warrant waiting for me when the passport officer entered my name into the database. An auspicious set of circumstances, and some bluffing, got me released after a number of hours. However happy I was to be free, I was also saddened by the fact that my larger project, to soak up as much granularity from Syria before the storm scatters it away, had come to an end. I can visualize many of the locales mentioned in the annals of the Syrian civil war because I had

been fortunate enough to see those places. To watch the Druze of Qalb Lozeh heading to communal prayers for the dead, or to light a candle in the Sednaya shrine, or to sip tea with Shia converts in a village near Aleppo—that was an itinerary that I can no longer repeat, even if my name is removed from the regime’s watch-lists, or the regime itself is removed. Much of this tapestry has been destroyed, parts of it for good.

Forehead to windowpane, I would look on with prying awe as the Aleppo-Latakia train slowly ambled through a valley refracted in mist. Why do those clutches of villages not have any mosques? Why do the houses look different? Why do the faces I glimpse here and there look different? What’s up with their costumes? I would tell myself, “There’s a secret here, and I want to come back to tease it out.” I marked the location of the valley on a map with that apprehension that travelers know too well: “What if I never have the time or the means to come back?” One would hope that another travelogue would have covered it well. One would hope to pass on the tip to a colleague who can go there and check it out. But the bushfire of identity wars had radiated through this particular valley a few years back, probably burning through its seemingly unique identity. I now wonder what’s left of the secret.

This was the Middle East that I cared for. This was the Middle East that fascinated me as a historian. I knew it was in danger. I felt compelled to sound the alarm. Ajami would have me fill in for him to teach his Masters class at the School of Advanced International Studies at John Hopkins University. On a couple of occasions I would speak to the students there about the darkness that was about to descend upon Syria. Ajami encouraged me to author a monograph about it, which was consequently published as *Syria Through Jihadist Eyes: A Perfect Enemy* by the Hoover Institution (2010). In later years it was described as “incredibly prescient” after the horrors of the Syrian civil war came to be. Again, there is no value in vindication. What drew me to the story, what made me care, was going up in flames. I would like to imagine that many of those who were unconvinced by my argument back when it seemed far-fetched would likewise be pained by what followed. Let us commiserate together, to move beyond the acrimony, towards a new American approach to the Middle East.

Whither ‘The Blob’?

I must admit that I felt a bit of *schadenfreude* when I read what Obama *et al* had to say about the foreign policy community, the legion of experts, academics, spies, diplomats, business interests, lobbyists, and journalists, who interpret the rest of the world to America’s leaders and its general public. Specifically, someone at the White House described think tanks with a Middle East focus as “Arab occupied territory” within the center of Washington, in reference to the “free riders” such as Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf countries that fund them. These places housed much of the priestly class that had led the inquisition into the ‘crimes’ of Lewis, Ajami and Chalabi, whose ‘sin’ it was to get Iraq wrong. They deemed

themselves the overseers of accreditation; only they could exercise the prerogative of deeming so and so credible, or discredited. Their black list of excommunicates, following the Iraq War, was meticulous and long. [Another side note: it can be argued that the spigot of Persian Gulf monies flowing to such think tanks, as part of a comprehensive approach to influence DC, really got going after Chalabi demonstrated how effective such an approach is in commanding the attention of U.S. policy-makers.]

But if we're tallying up the hits and misses, then many of the doyens of the foreign policy establishment got much wrong too: the failure to anticipate the Iranian Revolution; the failure to foresee what Khomeini would do with that revolution; the failure to ascertain the challenge posed by resurgent Islamism; the failure to arrive at a workable peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians; the failure to anticipate Saddam's invasion of Kuwait; the failure to reckon with the consequences of leaving him in power beyond it; the failure to anticipate the Arab Spring; the failure to anticipate the far reach of jihadism into Syria and beyond—and those are just the biggies. But who's counting, right?

For this class, Obama was supposed to be the high priest presiding over an establishment that finally gets it right. What with his international upbringing, his keen attunement to the Islamic heritage, his supremely analytical mind, the establishment would finally get a president who didn't need to climb a steep learning curve. Little did they expect that he would use the shorthand term of 'The Blob' to dismiss them. He deemed them dangerously incestuous, intellectually lethargic, compromised, and short on new ideas. Obama judged *them* discredited. Obama had other plans: retrenchment, disengagement, disentanglement. He may not call it that, but that is what it seems to be to many in Washington and in the Middle East. The Middle East simply didn't warrant Obama's, or America's, attention, or at least to the extent that the establishment wished it would. He had emancipated himself from the "Washington playbook"—the manuscript itself may have gone up in flames.

His signature legacy for the region was the Iran deal. It didn't help much when he essentially described this deal as America's parting gift to the region's warring factions; that it was a dose of reality that would compel them to live with Iran's primacy, and to "share" the turf. Notwithstanding what we think about the mechanics of the deal, I think many of us can agree that its timing was off, adversely confirming the optics of America shedding its long-standing alliances with the Saudis and Israelis, for example. Even more problematic is the timing of the president's "premature unburdening"—as one friend described it—to *The Atlantic* as to his motivations for doing what he did.

In light of the Obama years and the doctrine exercised throughout them, my *schadenfreude* is a pyrrhic one. All our clans lose. All our banners are besmirched. It will be difficult to shed 'The Blob' appellation; blood has been drawn from our cheeks, the prestige

and esteem of the priestly class has been questioned. We have tripped, and our exalted scepter had rolled off into a gutter. We lie, face down in a murky puddle, and should we look up, there would be many “more grinning faces than helping hands.” We can pretend it never happened, but the crowds outside the temple will long remember what transpired over the last eight years. We have all been diminished, all of us from all sides of our ecumenical convocation. What’s the value in any of us being right if we can’t be influential, if we can’t do much to help the region we care about?

As interpreters, or the class of dragomans as Lewis framed it, we know interpretation goes both ways, for we also have to explain Washington to interlocutors, friends and acquaintances in the Middle East. And it is so hard to explain America’s disinterest to them. Many would infer conspiracy—that all-powerful America is up to something. Probably more of the “creative chaos” theory that they had heard about. Or is it [revenge for September 11, 2001](#) by purposely setting the region on fire? To think that America is washing its hands of their destinies is too scary a thought even for those who bristled at its heavy-handed interventions of the past. They know that an absent America is just as dark of a prospect as a present America making a mess of things. The anti-American forces, those who put sentiment to action, and have been pushing for an American withdrawal for decades, are doing a victory lap. America had mitigated and stunted their revolutionary prospects—socialist, Islamist, nationalistic, now jihadist. They justified their means, and their legitimacy, by decrying America’s reliance on a retrograde and morally indefensible status quo. America could not even be trusted when it began speaking about democracy and liberalism as its new motive for reshaping the region. Nowadays, America showed its hand by cutting and leaving, lacking the stamina and belief in itself that the forces hostile to it had long underscored. We stand there in the middle, unable to advise, flailing at explaining. Not only do we have to be mindful of reorienting America’s interests and consequently its general interest, we are saddled too with responsibility of articulating a hopeful vision for what America will do for the many millions awaiting its yearned-for benevolence and wisdom. They want to believe in it despite its lackluster track record, or what they had been told. After all, what’s the alternative?

Dragomans were not content with merely interpreting words and cultures; they set out to shape international relations. I contend that our craft is heavy on analysis, short on strategy. Analysis is reactive, its scope is to interpret and manage uncertainty, while strategy seeks to pre-empt uncertainty. Washington’s policy knife-fights have engendered an atmosphere of extreme caution for those understandably seeking career advancement. After all, what’s the point of being right if one can’t pay off a mortgage? I would cite a book called *The Human Factor: Inside the CIA’s Dysfunctional Intelligence Culture* (2010) by the pseudonymous Ishmael Jones to demonstrate the contours of the current atmosphere and what it does to policy making and implementing those policies. Attempts at institutional reform have been made,

but the real problem lies within how the debate has been managed. There is too much prevaricating, too much of the ‘on the one hand, then on the other hand’ hedge. There is too much dramatic eye rolling and raspy gasping when presented with ‘dangerous’ knowledge and alarming projections, for boldness blots a resume. Which is odd to my mind since the paradigm of American diplomacy at the country’s founding—when the Founding Fathers such as Franklin, Adams and Jefferson served as ambassadors during the revolutionary war—serves as an exceedingly bold example of hoping for too much, and going ‘big’. The establishment (‘The Blob’) must regenerate itself by leaving more room for those who can leverage analysis into strategy, and do so boldly and confidently, as Lewis, Ajami and Chalabi did. The impulse to vilify new and original thinking of the ‘risky’ variety should be tempered and discouraged.

Conflagration, slow burn, or dying embers?

If we look really hard for a silver lining, then one incoming presidential candidate may understand the power of prestige, given his commercial branding ventures, and may want to project US power again in the region to ward-off upstarts and competitors. I’ve heard from several otherwise thoughtful men and women in the Middle East say that they prefer candidate Trump because “he seems crazy enough to scare off the bad actors in the neighborhood.” Trump may even make the case that a portion of America’s wealth is premised on how that prestige overpowers competitors in world markets, and losing that share may adversely affect the future prospects of an American lower middle class that he claims to worry about. The other candidate brings deep knowledge of the situation and a chip on her shoulder: she may want to reenact the policy battles she had lost to the president she served under, especially the ones that stepped back from taking a more activist role in places like Syria. Clinton and her staffers may keep the Iran deal in place after taking ownership for it, but rather than a parting gift it would be stepping stone of hers (see the [CNAS recommendations that may inform](#) for what a ‘Clinton Doctrine’ may shape up to be). Candidate Clinton may even see herself as a card-carrying member of ‘The Blob’, given that Rhodes included her in that category, and would consequently seek to redress the contempt levelled at her own, to rehabilitate her legacy and theirs.

Yet I can’t but sense that much of the ground that America has ceded by its studied ‘departure’ will not be reclaimed easily. It may take a ‘crazy’ flexing of moxie to recalibrate perceptions, the appetite for which isn’t there, neither within the establishment nor among the general public.

Perceptions may solidify over the next year or so, and get acted upon. Would the Turks and Saudis, for example, wait around long enough for that silver lining to manifest itself while their people watch Kurdistan taking shape or Iran walking off with the spoils of Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon? Unlikely. And why should they? Where’s the payoff in patience? They feel that they

had been patient while waiting for Obama to do something, only to be surprised when he boldly and confidently confided to *The Atlantic* that he never had the intention to.

And if the Kurds part ways from Iraq, by tabling a referendum on independence to be held this year, then why would Shia chauvinists want to stay in the remaining parts of Iraq with Sunnis in their midst? They—probably with Maliki at their helm as he plots a political comeback—would argue for a further partition of the country, leaving the Sunnis to their own devices.

Obama's intent solidified in conjunction with his solidifying views on Iraq. Which is sad really, since by looking away from Iraq, he missed out on spotting a number of opportunities. For whatever disappointments and trepidations that Iraq may prompt when the subject is raised, Iraq is the only place in the Middle East that can still claim to have a robust conversation. Oil is not Iraq's key point of relevance; its political process is.

Did Obama draw the correct lessons from Iraq and apply them while still having to manage Iraq during the past eight years, however reluctantly? The results suggest that he did not. One of Obama's policies seems to have been one of expressing steadfast support for Maliki, even when the latter began adopting Shia chauvinism as his narrative and guiding policy during his second term. The political process in Iraq reacted and tried to address the polarization that Maliki had introduced into the Iraqi conversation. It was partly for this reason that a number of politicians began maneuvering to unseat the prime minister through parliamentary and constitutional procedures in the summer of 2012. The Iranians would have none of it, but so too the Americans. An opportunity had presented itself, but what clinched the outcome in Maliki's favor was the perception that the Americans also did not want to see him changed. So not only was a trend misinterpreted—Shia chauvinism, which led consequently to the resurgence of Sunni jihadism—but the opportunity to stem it before it could lead to disaster was not acted upon.

What were Obama's take aways from his experience with Maliki? Again, the evidence suggests that the president and his staff did not factor in the importance of politics throughout their evolving plan to do something about the Islamic State. Belatedly, they signed on to the consensus that Maliki should not enjoy a third term in office after having lost a third of the country on his watch. Yet what followed did not build upon that realization. The one thing that the Americans had to get right was not to conflate the defeat of the jihadists with the defeat of the Sunnis in the public mind. To do so, there was plenty of politicking to do. There were many opportunities to make it seem less so of a Shia triumphalist and revanchist campaign. Or a Kurdish hegemonic one for that matter. It is my view that many of those opportunities were missed. What we are left with is the current toxic sectarian and ethnic narratives swarming around an otherwise successful military campaign to take Fallouja in Iraq and Manbij in Syria, for example. Much of this toxicity could have been mitigated and

contained through politics and media, even if it were cosmetic in essence. But they weren't. So one needs to ask, what will the long-term consequences be?

It is not as if the Obama administration did not have the time, bandwidth or influence necessary to plan and execute better. A major Middle Eastern city, Mosul, had fallen in the hands of an enemy, whose malevolence and the need to address it should have been an easy sell to Western societies. I appreciate the reasons that prevented the administration from taking a more activist approach—sending tens of thousands of troops to war—and its preference for incrementalism, a policy that was actually put into effect before Mosul fell (imbedding 'advisors', providing drone strikes, while accelerating the delivery of armaments to the Iraqi military, all began months before Mosul). But once a decision for a cautious and measured approach was taken, then the long term consequences of leaving the enemy in control of said major metropolis for two years should have been considered, and provisioned for. Providing a convincing and compelling political answer to 'What would life after the Islamic State look like?' should have been a priority as important as making it clear that living with the Islamic State would bear prohibitive costs to the populations living under them. That answer still eludes us. It eludes largely because the possibilities of a political life in Baghdad were not thoroughly explored. The Obama administration may throw its hands up in resignation to suggest that America has very little leverage remaining in the country. But it is simply not true. I know it not to be true because every Iraqi politician I speak to asks me, with bated breath, "What do the Americans think?" I'm expected to give an answer being a dragoman between the two worlds. What should I say? That "America thinks that the importance you assign to its opinion is misplaced"? America can still do a lot with the prevailing perceptions of its power. It has chosen not to for the most part, at least when it comes to shaping Iraqi politics, or harnessing its fluidity.

And what should the Saudis do when the proto-jihadists in their midst watch Aljazeera and Al-Arabiya spin the Fallouja operations as yet further examples of Sunni or Arab impotence? Wouldn't a Saudi version of Rami assign some of that blame and impotence to his own rulers? Do we think that the Saudi royals can live with that? What are the long-term consequences of that perception solidifying?

Or why, for that matter, would Arabs in northern Syria 'normalize' the prospect of being liberated by ethnic Kurds, even if that liberation bore the fig leaf of Arab participation? There's a 1000-page tome, written in Arabic and published in 2013, by Syrian historian Muhammad Jamal al-Barot under the cumbersome title of *A Contemporary History of the Syrian Jazeerah: Challenges of Urban Transition for Nomadic Communities* that can help us answer that question. Those Arabs are unlikely to normalize Kurdish hegemony, for there is preceding three hundred year saga of warlords, clans and ideologies asserting themselves in that space, a saga recalled and amplified with every dispute over local water rights, or a lamb gone missing.

Using Kurds to take Manbij is militarily convenient, but with the politics going unaddressed, politics that can only thrive when space for a conversation is available, then the victory won't hold, or turn 'normal' for quite a while. The indefensible alternative of keeping Manbij under the Islamic State was not the only other option; there was time and leverage to manufacture options ahead of it. The lessons of al-Barot's book went unlearned too.

The Baghdad Playbook

One of the earliest narratives that solidified about Iraq concerned de-Ba'athification, mainly that it was a mistake, a mistake approaching the magnitude of 'original sin'. That it was employed as sectarian revenge against Sunnis and in effect precipitated the insurgency and made it inevitable. Contesting this narrative would be tantamount to tinkering with an established dogma of the Iraq debate in Washington. Interestingly, I was fortunate to be part of an Iraqi debate about it that unfolded on Facebook. See, some leading Ba'athists had formed the impression that de-Ba'athification was my idea. It wasn't, but given my hardline on Ba'athists, one that I expressed publicly and widely on all sorts of media platforms, and my role in establishing the Higher National Commission for De-Ba'athification, as well as my association with Chalabi at the time, then one can understand why that impression may have come to be.

It all began when Dhafir al-Ani, a vocal Arab Sunni politician (now spokesman of the main Sunni bloc in parliament), who is perceived to be an apologist for Ba'athism, responded to a Facebook post that I had written on the ninth anniversary of the Iraq War falling on April 9, 2012. I, naturally, still celebrated Iraq's 'liberation', and I wrote thanking the Americans for bringing it about. Ani was indignant, asking: "would a family whose daughter was raped by American soldiers be thankful too?" He then challenged me to a debate, and I agreed to it, conditioned as it is on him debating me as an academic (which he was, previously at the Political Science faculty of Baghdad University) and not a point-scoring politician. What followed [was a debate which lasted for eight days](#); with hundreds of posts and comments exchanged between the two of us on my Facebook wall, and many other participants chiming in. Early on, we settled on a title for our talk: 'A Dialogue Whose Time Has Not Lapsed: The New Iraq; Original Sin, or the Hour of Creation?' Naturally, too, Ani began with citing the 'fact' that de-Ba'athification was purposely designed to punish Sunnis. I'll spare you my retort, not that I thought it convinced him otherwise, but what was exciting at that moment was the fact that we could still have a conversation about it at all. An anti-Ba'athist and a pseudo-Ba'athist (or crypto-, or neo-, opinions about Ani vary) were discussing de-Ba'athification in a candid, open, non-vindictive manner, within a decade of the event. We didn't stop there, we went back in time to the Saddam years, and then visited the sectarian bloodletting of 2004-8, and

then brought things back to the reign of then Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. We discovered, much to our mutual amazement, that there was room for both of us to reject Shia chauvinism.

Ani and I met in person a couple of months later. We had figured out that a family that we were both friends with was having a wake for one of their dead in the Mansour district of Baghdad. We agreed to meet there, pay our respects, and then head to the nearby book show at the Baghdad Fairground. We walked around, talking and browsing. I got him a gift: the autobiography of Hashemi Rafsanjani, translated into Arabic. This was one little way I could tell him that his read of Iranian politics should be more nuanced. A mutual friend, making the rounds with us, spotted Muqtada al-Sadr's nephew, thought to be his uncle's political heir apparent, and decided to introduce both me and Ani to him. Accompanying the nephew was an important Sadrist strategist, who immediately volunteered, once the niceties had been exchanged, "It seems we now have a ceasefire with you, Nibras." He was alluding to another societal and political sector, the Sadrists, some of whom deemed me a fiery opponent. Most recently to this chance encounter, the acrimony between us concerned my stance on wanting US troops to stay, even suggesting that [Iraq should join NATO in some capacity](#), while singling out the Sadrists, committed as they were to rejecting any American presence, as dangerously misguided. I don't know whether this fellow had followed my debate with Ani, or had read some other of my writings, but at that moment, there was common ground between us on an anti-Maliki platform. A ceasefire was indeed in effect. But that's the magic of politics and the possibilities and opportunities that present themselves when there's room for a conversation.

For Kanan Makiya, original sin came to pass when, a few days after the Americans liberated Najaf, the followers of Sadr murdered Majid al-Khoei. The sin pervaded Iraqi politics as Shia politicians decided not to hold one of their own, Sadr, accountable for a crime committed against another of their own. Makiya made his case very recently in the form of a novel, *The Rope*. The case is both correct and compelling. Yet what is amazing is not that Makiya wrote this book, but that its Arabic language version is selling briskly in al-Mutannabi, Baghdad's 'street of books'. Dozens of favorable reviews have been written about it in Iraqi newspapers and on Facebook. A conversation about Makiya's premise has folded in within the larger conversation about Iraq's recent past and prospects. The very paradigm of a 'street of books', where religious polemics jostle alongside the Arabic translations of Richard Dawkins, is in itself a marvel, especially given the traumas collectively experienced by the multitudes of young and old, men and women, who throng the street on Fridays. Conversations abound at the margins, in cafés and impromptu gatherings.

One conversation thread came up with [the idea, or rather the brand, of madaniyya](#). An indigenous term that connotes civicism and cosmopolitanism. One whose definition [is still being hashed out](#) in the Iraqi conversation. It is used by Grand Ayatollah Sistani's crew during Friday sermons, as well as by the Iraqi version of Mariam. Arguably, it ignited last summer's

protests, or at least framed their demands. Even Sadr has latched onto those protest in recent months, aligning himself to some degree with its more vocal 'liberal secular' proponents, one of whom is second in command, so to speak, in the Iraqi Communist Party. Mesopotamia is still coming up with some good ideas, applicable not only to Iraq but maybe even to Northern Syria, maybe further beyond. It is happening because the Iraqi conversation about Iraq is ongoing and dynamic. Encoded within the Iraqi constitution, passed in 2005, is one of the best formulas that can address that country's issues and the Middle East at large: federalism. It is unique in that regard, a conceptual leap forwards. The question is, is Washington missing out on a phenomenon such as *madaniyya* and the [promise of functional federalism](#) because its own Iraq conversation has grown rigid and stagnant? Does that imply its inability to learn new lessons from Iraq that may help Iraq, and points north, south, east and west across the Middle East?

In the same vein, are enough people in Washington taking the [Beirut Madinati movement](#) seriously? Or are the 'lessons learned from Lebanon', arrived at in the 1980s, too dogmatically entrenched to be questioned and reconsidered? There too, a Lebanese conversation is beginning to find its space. A conversation that began over garbage collection. What chance would such a conversation have in that most superficially cosmopolitan, yet deeply tribal of a society, the pessimists may argue? We are eventually going to find out. Yet the very least we can do, all of us, is keep it in mind. Dismissing the phenomenon, this early on, seems to be unfair, and hasty.

[Here's a thought: I'm sure that the Iraqi *madaniyya* movement, as well as that of Beirut Madinati, would greatly appreciate a cascade of leaks concerning the bank accounts and wire transfers of Iraqi and Lebanese politicians. It is the dollar that is being fleeced and dyed in the back alleys of Middle Eastern finance, not the gold dinar of the Islamic State. Having the legal tender of the United States mishandled in such a manner should prompt America to take action. I'm sure the US Treasury has a fair idea of where to look for that kind of information, and the wherewithal to get it.]

Managing the Fire Pit

My assertion that Iraq is the only place where a real, no-holds-barred conversation is still occurring may be a tall order for some to accept. I welcome arguments that may contest it. But I look around the region, whether towards Iran, or Turkey, or Egypt, or the Persian Gulf, and I see very little of it. The many Springs that came and went in Beirut, Tehran, Cairo, and Istanbul were about trying to start a conversation. But in the current static landscape, it may seem that the conversation hangs in mid-sentence, on mute. A decade after its own Spring, only Beirut seems to be bucking the trend, again. Israel is a democracy, but surely a democracy without a conversation about the fires surrounding it cannot be thought of as

normal. In fact, the Obama Doctrine as it relates to the Middle East [seems eerily copied from that of Netanyahu's](#): stand back, let it burn out, pivot to India and China, and prosper in the meantime.



N. Kazimi, Civil War 1, 2014, 36" x 48"

If the best that can be hoped is a new Middle Eastern generation led by young lieutenants, princes and religious adepts who can keep Rami in prison, or somehow keep him distracted by the flashy wares on display in an entrepôt along the lines of Dubai, then that seems to be an unreasonable gamble. This line of thinking is betting on a slow-burn within the fire pit, eventually petering out into embers and ash. We should all truly wish that Prince Muhammad bin Salman knows what he is doing with his radical plans to overhaul Saudi Arabia. Let's hope that radical change ushered in by that young prince there does not whet the appetite of the radicals within his peer group. They, such as Rami, may have other ideas as to what constitutes radical change. And it is no surprise that jihadist extremists, as well as Shia chauvinists, have [big plans for Saudi Arabia](#): it is there where they can make their ventures 'permanent', for there are many prizes for the taking in the Arabian Peninsula should their revolutions conflagrate beyond the confines of the fire pit. The decisions that a young Saudi Rami may take over the next decade there shall set the course of history in the region we care so much

about. The problem is, we don't know too much about him. There's a fantastic book out there with the nifty title *Joyriding in Riyadh* (2014). It takes an anthropological approach to the study of urban alienation among Saudi youth. I can't believe that the author, Pascal Menoret, got funding for his research and its write-up, for it is a decisively personal account, at points verging on stream of consciousness. I applaud the thesis supervisors and publishers of Cambridge University Press who let this through the academic cordons; it is bold, it is risky, and it is supremely illuminating. I can't speak for Lewis, Ajami or Chalabi, but I think they may have enjoyed it. What it tells us though, is that we should be very worried about Bin Salman's prospects, however deftly his plan is executed.

Having to click through a snazzy and well-designed website explaining what the [Saudi 2030 Vision](#) is supposed to be, drawn up as it was by slick international consultants and thorough economists, seems to be a far easier prospect than having to sift through the raucous, rambunctious noise of Iraq's *madaniyya*, or trying to follow the digressions of Lebanese intellectuals. I don't begrudge Bin Salman getting much choreographed face-time with the movers and shakers of 'The Blob'; actually I would say better him than some other vestiges of the Middle Eastern status quo. What I do lament is that there is very little sounding out being given to Mariam, whether she is of the Kuwaiti, Lebanese, Iraqi or Iranian variety. There is no infrastructure that reliably tracks her trajectory, or judges its viability.

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

[I also worry about the sustainability of a "perpetual state of suppression" as Clapper put it. I think he is suggesting that air superiority—satellite imagery, drones, F-16s, etc.—will continue to be the most handy tool in America's as it puts a lid on the security challenges presented by the jihadists. But as technology 'democratizes' and spreads, how can we be

assured that a talented young Rami wouldn't figure out a way to counter it over the next decade or so? The technology is there; the Russians have it, for example. We should not assume that this situation of technological disparity will remain static.]

My [last column for the now-deceased *New York Sun* ended](#) with this paragraph:

Going back to Afghanistan is an abhorred historical regression, and certainly the pride of the Zarqawists, the most radical and once most successful of the jihadists, will not allow them to hide away in some cave in Waziristan after they had attempted a project as historically grand as the new caliphate in Baghdad. They will come back bigger, deadlier and far more audacious, as is their style, the next time around. Mr. Obama and his European hosts need to update what they think they know about the enemy before the enemy catches its breath.

I wrote that in the summer of 2008, as candidate Obama was touring Europe during an election season that would later win him the presidency. Back then, I was sure that the jihadist insurgency in Iraq was dying out. I was also sure that it would make a comeback if 'victory' was mishandled. I credit my past apprenticeship under the guidance of my mentors with the ability to spot this trend. I confess that I felt a numbness, a hollowness when the comeback happened, when I saw so much of the mysteries and idiosyncrasies of Mosul—ancient Assyrian temples, Sufi shrines, the manuscripts of early Christianity hidden away in cliff-hanging monasteries, Yezidis performing their rituals—adventures that I had never had the chance to explore, erased. How frivolous was I to care about such things, when basic human decency was being systematically assaulted?

Yet I refuse to wallow in despair. I refuse to care less.

Again, should we warn time and time again that the region may conflate into a wider inferno, then all we do is to implicitly confirm the talking points that the Middle East is hopeless, that America should give that fire a wide berth. Our self-immolating counter-recriminations will devolve into irrelevance, confirming our 'Blob'-ness.

There must be another way. Those of us who know the Middle East, who care about it and its people, know that there's hope for the region, and by extension hope and redemption for ourselves too. We may have met many Ramis, but we are also finding many Mariams out there.

For their sake, and for ours, let us extend the ceasefire. There will much room for snarky repartees later, should that element of the debate be missed. But we may find them witty then, rather than biting and venomous. Another crypto-Ba'athist Iraqi politician, Saleh al-Mutlag, finds much joy in addressing me as 'comrade', in the Ba'athist sense—needling my

sensibilities—but whereas many years ago I would have been offended, nowadays I can needle him back by using comrade in the Communist sense. All it took to make that transition was a conversation.

If the two of us can have such conversations, then why is it so difficult to imagine a sober reflection over the legacies of Lewis, Ajami and Chalabi in Washington without breaking ranks into angry tribes? It just seems doctrinaire and pedantic. Let our hyper-sensitivity towards that legacy, as detractors and supporters, jolt us into realizing how sour the conversation has turned. Let what Obama told *The Atlantic*, and what Rhodes added to it in the *New York Times Magazine*, with Clapper chiming in to Ignatius, alert us as what that sourness has wrought.

Beyond that, we can begin asking the sorts of questions, and finding the lowest common denominator, as to how to enable Mariam to become a leader of her generation, and what America could reasonably do for her, given its distancing, given its unwillingness to do much. The very least we can do is to talk about her.

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