

# AWAY FROM CHAOS

The Middle East and the  
Challenge to the West

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*Translated by Henry Randolph*

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To the memory of my father  
Milan Kepel  
(Prague, 1928 – Paris, 2019)

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*Away from Chaos*

# Introduction

## *A Testament for Syria*

FOUR DECADES BEFORE writing this book, I spent the year 1977–1978 in Syria on an Arab language scholarship at the French Institute in Damascus. For budding Arabists, it was the “Open sesame” that would admit us to the cave hiding the grammatical and phonetic secrets of the region that we loved. Careers in those days rarely started without a sojourn in Shām, as we called it among ourselves. This was the Semitic term both for the Levant and its traditional capital in the local dialect. In the orientation of Muslim geography, in which one faces Mecca from the west, Shām was to the left, or north, while Yemen, in the opposite direction, meant right or south.

Neither I nor my classmates could have imagined that, forty years later, this same Shām would become the rallying point in the French *banlieues*, or disadvantaged suburbs, for jihadists ready to join the Islamic State (also known as ISIS, ISIL, or Daesh) and massacre “unbelievers.” Initially, they concentrated on the Alawites, that esoteric sect to which Syria’s president at the time, Hafez al-Assad, belonged (his son Bashar was twelve years old during my Syria sojourn). It would be a mere prelude, however, to the French jihadists returning home and killing their “infidel” fellow citizens at the Bataclan night club and the French National Stadium on November 13, 2015. And, in my worst nightmares, I could not have dreamed that, in June 2016, I would find myself condemned to death for being an experienced Arabist. The sentence was passed by a Franco-Algerian member of ISIS from the cities of Roanne (in France) and Oran (in Algeria). He was then based

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in the Syrian town of Raqqa, designated by the Islamic State self-styled “caliphate” as its short-lived capital. The jihadist’s acolyte, the French-Moroccan killer of a policeman and his wife in the western French town of Magnanville, then posted the threat on Facebook.live. To my utter disbelief, this would force me to live under police protection in Paris in, of all places, the Latin Quarter.

But back in the late 1970s, of course, the internet was not on anyone’s horizon yet. The flat world atlas still consisted of bordered spaces mapped out and divided into so many countries with heavy, black lines. It differed little from the map of the Roman empire tacked up above the blackboard in my college classics course in 1974. This was the map that first set me to dreaming of the Middle East, so that I took ship from Venice the following summer for Istanbul, the Levant, and Egypt on a voyage of discovery to the physical lands I had looked at on the two-dimensional map. Back then, who could have foreseen the endless fissioning of the world’s minds and its imagery that cyberspace and online social networks would set off? Or, for that matter, could anyone have envisioned the mental confusion that would wipe out distance and perspective, blot out spatial and temporal reference points to make us lose our bearings forty years later?

While the Damascus I encountered in the late 1970s was still calm, chaos reigned in neighboring Lebanon. A civil war with its attendant private atrocities pitted the “Islamoprogressive” camp against Christian Conservatives along political and confessional lines that testified to the entanglement of these two identities between Muslim progressives and Christian conservatives. The hybrid labels expressed a conflict over the armed presence of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. It saw the mainly pro-Western, demographically declining Maronites struggle for power with Sunnis leaning toward the socialist camp—tagging them with the “progressive” attribute that today seems absurdly outdated. At the time, few observers were wise to the game played by the Arabian Peninsula’s oil kingdoms and Saudi Wahhabism, made fabulously wealthy by the dizzying rise in the price of oil in the wake of the October 1973 war. Their new riches let them take leading roles in the region’s virulent re-Islamization in attempts to quash the urbane spirit of the Levant of my youth. Nor could anyone have foreseen how the Iranian revolution would stir up the masses. It turned the hitherto marginalized Shiites, radicalized by this competing Islamist ideology, into the major political power in Lebanon and beyond. It was they who would



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now dominate a vast crescent of territories stretching across Syria and Iraq to Persia.

This Levantine civilization fascinated me and my classmates at the Institute in Damascus, and we projected our muddled fantasies on it. Frankly, we had read little, and only had a passing acquaintance with the body of works by travelers in the region since Volney or Chateaubriand, our forgotten predecessors. For the most part, we cultivated a crude leftism, an ideology that had dominated the student microcosm during the decade after May 1968. During the ensuing ten years, however, it had shed its original dogmatism. That left us with an imprecise doxa, a scattershot vision of the world oriented on a few certainties stamped by anti-imperialism and anti-Zionism. In wagering on their collapse, we placed our bets a priori on the Syria of Hafez al-Assad, the tip of the spear in resisting Israel.

Disillusionment was not long in coming. I loved the Syrian landscape, which reminded me of my familial village in the Nice countryside of long childhood vacations. It also evoked the epic of the *Odyssey* I had just read in my college Graeco-Latin humanities classes. However, this romanticized musing on the past could not for long obscure the brutality of a regime and the violence of a society that I experienced or observed firsthand. (Riad Sattouf, born that same year, 1978, captured this reality well in his 2014 graphic novel *The Arab of the Future*.) My classmates and I, used to the unfettered freedom of the Latin Quarter, learned to lower our voices in public and to suspect everyone as we lived life in a dictatorship “of the left.” We avoided speaking of those who had disappeared in the jails, and did not socialize with anyone who knew them. Amid all this, at the French Institute of Damascus, I met the researcher Michel Seurat, eight years my senior (born in 1947). It was a rare privilege. A superb Arabist and sociologist who had studied under Professor Alain Touraine, he dedicated himself to analyzing the Syrian regime. Domiciled later in Lebanon with his wife and young daughters, he would pay for his research with his life. Taken hostage on May 22, 1985 at the Beirut airport by a shadowy Islamic Jihad Organization linked to Teheran and Damascus, he died in captivity in 1986, maligned by his killers as “a specialist researcher spy.”

Even before this traumatic event, which left its mark on me and profoundly altered my outlook, the disillusionment born of the shocking reality of Syria had impelled me to return to Paris. Inspired by the esteem I felt for Michel Seurat, I dropped the by-then hybridized classic humanities-cum-ancient

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Arab civilization program I had been pursuing. Instead, to help me make sense of the drama playing out in the Middle East, which had me questioning my simplistic certitudes, I enrolled in political science studies.

Shortly after my admission to Sciences Po university in 1978, I had to confront another paradox: the onset of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Despite my year in Damascus, I lacked the background necessary for putting into perspective both a revolutionary Islamization in Teheran, at once Shiite and anti-imperialist, and its reactionary Sunni and anti-socialist counterpart in Riyadh. At this time, moreover, started the cycle of turmoil driven by astronomical oil price increases and an intensifying political Islam that would pull the Levant apart. These two correlated phenomena have structured the past half-century, consuming the history of two generations. It was in the land of Shām that they reached a monstrous fever pitch with the proclamation of the ISIS caliphate at the start of Ramadan on June 29, 2014.

That year also saw an unexpected 70 percent drop in the price of crude. It forced a rethinking of medium- and long-term scenarios for developing the region, of its political, economic, and social models, and even of the place religion would occupy in it. This cataclysm had several causes, including shale oil production in the United States that would see it topple Russia and Saudi Arabia as the world's top producer. But also at work were changes in consumer behavior in the OECD countries. There, the increased use of electric vehicles and consequent drop in demand for oil was starting to put permanent downward pressure on its price. These concurrent developments put into play the rentier economy we have come to associate with the Middle East for the past half-century. They also meant that a reckoning was in store for its corollary, the hegemony of political Islam, whose spread the oil kingdoms of the Arabian Peninsula and their Iranian rivals on the opposite shore of the Persian Gulf both had abetted.

A seemingly trivial event in late 2017 highlighted an unprecedented decoupling of the peninsular dynasties and institutionalized Salafism. It had provided religious cover for dynastic power, while it spread with royal backing throughout the Sunni Muslim world. On September 26, over the protests of the ulemas invoking their rigid conception of morality, King Salman of Saudi Arabia ordered that women would be allowed to drive in the kingdom after the end of Ramadan 2018. The royal decree came nearly twenty-seven years to the day—one generation later—when Saudi women

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on November 6, 1990 had taken the wheel in Riyadh, only to be chased down and castigated for their temerity.

Next, enter Crown Prince Mohammad ben Salman, a mere thirty-two years old, a first for this kingdom ruled by old men. He was intent on revamping the Saudi labor market, inclusive of newly mobile women, as an insurance policy for the post-oil era. In November 2017, he therefore launched a broadside against the extremism to which the country had been committed since 1979. That was a watershed year, which began with Ayatollah Khomeini's triumphant return to Teheran and ended with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, setting the stage for jihad in that country. 1979 was also the year Pandora's box opened, unleashing the global Islamic terrorism plaguing us to this day. It is thus the essence of the Saudi-Wahhabite system that is suddenly in question, after dominating the Middle East ever since oil was used as a political weapon to produce a victory in the October 1973 war between Israel and the Arab states. How the two sides referred to that conflict—as the Yom Kippur War and the Ramadan War respectively—was a telling symbol of how religious dogma would invade the political sphere in the years ahead.

The following pages will seek to put into perspective these chaotic decades, and then reflect on possible ways of breaking with them. This half-century coincides with the experience I gained on the ground as witness, observer, and chronicler—to the point of being condemned to death by ISIS for my studies. Hence, these pages will reflect a personalized mindset guiding the selection and organization of the facts. As such, trivial events that I find revealing will be projected against a background scan of the long term.

The four chapters of part I provide a lineal synthesis of the first four decades, starting with the October War of 1973 and ending with the uprisings known as the Arab Spring that became reality in the winter of 2010–2011. These forty years saw the rise of Islamicized politics and jihad gradually spiraling over the planet. They started in the year 1979, with the fighting in Afghanistan and the Americans going in with guns blazing in response to the Iranian revolution. This initial outburst of modern-day jihad would succeed with the USSR's demise ten years later. Successive chapters will deal with the three phases of this jihadism that was visited upon the United States on September 11, 2001 in a backlash that was both stupefying and dramatic. It was an arresting start of a Christian millenary overlaid

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by an improbable Islamist millennium. This retrospective will draw on the half-dozen works I have published on the topic, ranging from *Prophet and Pharaoh* (1984) to *Beyond Terror and Martyrdom* (2008). But, in doing so, I will retain and organize only the material that strikes me as relevant today for interpreting the crucial phenomena marking the 2010 decade.

These perplexing ten years, covered in part II, began with the immense optimism of the Arab Spring of 2011. Then ISIS proclaimed its Islamic State, spurring the generalized spread of Islamist terrorism to European territory. That decade eventually saw the fall of the ISIS caliphate in the autumn of 2017 as Raqqa was liberated on the heels of the reconquest of Mosul. In between, democratic uprisings giving rise to immense hopes were juxtaposed with the sheer horror of ISIS, authoritarian regimes seizing the reins contrasted with the flourishing of rogue states and lawless areas. The analysis of these contradictions will call on field studies and research I conducted on both sides of the Mediterranean.

Fed by questions I addressed in *The Arab Passion* (2013) and *Terror in France* (2015), in these chapters will pass in review the six countries that underwent an Arab upheaval—Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria. I give added consideration to Iraq because the ISIS monster was born where it joins Syria. Thanks to the demise of ISIS in late 2017, we are far enough removed to put the happenings of this tragic period into perspective. I have made every effort to pull together a comprehensive picture from the mass of facts we have only recently come to know—or experienced violently—firsthand. My primary goal is to distill these reflections into teaching points that join the history of the moment in a continuous arc with the long memory of the preceding decades. As the reader will see, it is the Levant—and especially Syria—that constitute the heart of this book and thus have more pages devoted to them. I am convinced that the crises shaking the Mediterranean and the Middle East crystallized in this area and were driven to extremes there.

Part III dwells on the events following the downfall of ISIS and the heralded defeat of the Syrian rebellion, up to Donald Trump's decision to pull out U.S. troops from northeastern Syria in October 2019, to the troublesome reshuffling of regional cards between an assertive Turkey, a defiant Iran, and Vladimir Putin as the regional kingmaker in the wake of American redeployment. In these chapters, I take the measure of the tectonic shifts these events foreshadow. Much of this material I gathered firsthand in

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crisscrossing North Africa, the Near East, and the Middle East. It should allow us to see in sharper relief a set of hypothesized scenarios applicable to both shores of the Mediterranean—for better or for worse. What does the future hold for jihadism and Salafism, the fragmenting of the Sunni bloc, and the wrenching changes underway in the Arabian Peninsula? Will Iran secure its hegemony over the Shiite Crescent, or will confrontation with the America of Donald Trump turn its success into a Pyrrhic victory? How will Vladimir Putin's Russia, its great power status regained thanks to its involvement in the Syrian problem, arbitrage between an improbable set of allies like Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran? And what about Europe, caught in the heart of a crisis zone whose main front is a Mediterranean permeable to terrorists and refugees? Will it overcome its passivity and reassert itself as a geopolitical protagonist? With its institutions at a standstill and Brexit looming, can it only fecklessly watch the centrifugal pressures brought by parties both of the extreme right and of a leftist populism infused with rising Islamism in its marginalized banlieues?

The neglect of the Mediterranean and the Middle East by the American superpower ramping up as the major shale oil and gas producer is building up. It started during Obama's presidency, and his successor Donald Trump has doubled down on it in spectacular fashion. The forty-fifth American president, "making America great again," decided he couldn't care less about the intricacies of foreign policies that had brought unsavory military action from Afghanistan to Iraq, while they had a huge cost for taxpayers and a heavy toll on American lives—more than seven thousand soldiers died between the commencement of the retaliatory attack on Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11 and the final pullout from Iraq in 2016. And a significant amount of the dead came from Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin—three of the swing states that gave victory to Donald Trump in 2016. But would such a focus on domestic policies, aimed at winning reelection in November 2020, lead to some new form of isolationism that could shield America, in the post-9/11 world, from attacks on its soil? Or, on the contrary, would such a pullback be perceived as a sign of weakness signaling the decline of the American hegemon, thirty years after the disappearance of its Soviet rival when the Berlin Wall fell on November 9, 1989? And to that extent could erratic White House decisions strike back with a vengeance, pushing unresolved issues in the Middle East onto the presidential campaign agenda to the incumbent's detriment—as happened in 1980 when Iran cost Jimmy Carter his reelection?

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President Trump took exactly such a step on January 2, 2020, when he ordered General Qasem Soleimani to be killed by a drone as the charismatic Iranian military strongman's convoy was leaving Baghdad airport. Tension had escalated between Teheran and Washington in Iraq—the only country where there was some sort of coexistence between two erstwhile enemies—after a mob under the guidance of pro-Iran militias had attacked the U.S. embassy in Baghdad the previous days. Such one-upmanship raised the stakes of conflict and crises in the Middle East to an unprecedented level, while also involving the U.S. presidential election into the type of foreign military action that the incumbent had previously disdained.

These uncertainties compel Europe to step up and shoulder its obligations. In configuring this effort, restoring the Levant represents a high-stakes necessity. True, the region has been deprived of its lifeblood by the diaspora of its most enterprising people to the shores of the Persian Gulf. But, with the future Gulf impacted by the structural decline of crude prices, they may also return home in the near future. Further, with the opposing forces exhausted by the slaughter, the Levant can reaffirm its role as linchpin between Europe, the West and the Middle East, and as key to their mutual survival. This would pave the way for averting a cultural showdown that can only perpetuate the turmoil of the past decades. By defining the outlines of this imperative, the present work intends to make a modest contribution to foreseeing our future—away from chaos.

PART I  
The Barrel and the Koran

## ONE

# The Islamization of the Political Order

### The Twilight of Arab Nationalism

To begin, we will stake out the October 1973 war as the beginning of the Middle East's era of chaos. Continuing to this day, it spread to the world on September 11, 2001 before culminating with the rise of ISIS (Islamic State) in 2014–2017. But first, we must look back to a major generational split in the political elite that had seized power in the region as colonial rule was on its last legs. Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser and Tunisia's Prime Minister Habib Bourguiba were its most famous leaders, and its most iconic parties were the Baath in Syria and Iraq and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). All distanced themselves from using Islam to legitimize their rule, in contrast to what the Arab and Ottoman dynasties had done for fourteen centuries for imposing their authority. This had been the tradition ever since the early seventh century CE, when the Prophet had preached and established his order in Medina and Mecca, marking the start of the Hegira in 622.

Until the 1960s, the Baath, like the Neo Destour party in Tunisia, embraced a secularism that had nothing to envy in the one Atatürk adopted when he replaced the Ottoman Empire with the Republic of Turkey. The same held true for the version prevailing at the court of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Nasser, for his part, repurposed Cairo's thousand-year old Al-Azhar mosque-university as a tool for his third-world propaganda and multiplied



his anti-clerical swipes. Still, he made a point of openly attending Friday prayers because he wanted to coopt the popular piety of the Egyptian masses. But then he proceeded to mercilessly repress the Muslim Brotherhood, the template for political Islam on the banks of the Nile during the twentieth century.

A teacher, Hassan al-Banna, founded the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928 in Ismailiya, the capital of the international Suez Canal enclave on Egyptian territory and symbol of European colonial domination. The Brotherhood wanted to re-ignite the same torch that Mustafa Kemal Atatürk had just extinguished in abolishing the Ottoman caliphate in 1924. Regarding Nasser as its secular arm, the Brotherhood had initially cheered him on when he took over in 1952 with his comrades, the Free Officers. They fully expected him to install a political regime based on sharia, the Islamic law inspired by the Holy Scriptures. He did not, and, in the end, the one-time allies turned on each other, with Nasser dismantling the organization in 1954 and having several of its leaders hanged. Those who could escaped to exile on the Arabian Peninsula, where they honed their indoctrinating skills. The remaining cadres wound up in Egyptian maximum-security prisons where torture was routine. Among them was Sayyid Qutb, activist and man of letters, who would become the grand ideologue of modern-day jihadism.

However, the splitting of the state power from religious institutions was only a counterfeit of the democratic secularism found in Europe. First, instead of a true separation of the political and religious spheres, the often atrophied religious institutions were merely subordinated to the political power structure. The objective was to exert social control or demonstrate the compatibility of Islam with nationalist or, as it were, socialist ideology. Second, and above all, the elites in control of the independence process had seized power by whatever means required, including force. Despite the promises of democracy proffered in response to their yearning for freedom, the former colonies had merely changed masters. Discipline was now imposed by indigenous military, dynastic, or partisan cliques that frequently were more heavy-handed than even the former colonial masters.

The betrayal of democracy's promise was accompanied by mediocre economic and social performances. Invocations of justice and substantive law became nothing more than the two-faced discourse of despots. In the Arab states, particularly in the Middle East but especially in the frontline states bordering Israel, the urgency of fighting the Zionist enemy was used to

justify this forfeit. Anti-Zionism was, in effect, the third stage of the nationalism first manifested in the nineteenth century against Ottoman domination, and then in the twentieth century against European colonial tutelage. It regarded the implanting of the Jewish state in the Levant's heart and on Palestinian territory as the last stage of the hated colonialism. Eliminating Israel thus became a permanent fixture of Arab nationalist rhetoric.

A number of pivotal events combined to bolster this Arab nationalism. First, there was the humiliation of the *nakba* ("catastrophe"), the defeat of the Arab armies in 1948, followed by David Ben Gurion's declaration establishing the state of Israel on May 15 of that year. Then came the 1956 Suez crisis, when a tripartite Anglo-French-Israeli expeditionary force assembled to challenge Nasser's nationalizing the Suez Canal and ultimately had to withdraw under international pressure. Cairo nevertheless aligned itself with the USSR and practiced socialism on the Soviet model. Finally, the Six-Day War in June 1967 dealt Arab nationalism its ultimate *naksa* ("defeat"). The war had started with a lightning Israeli airstrike in retaliation for the Egyptian president blockading the Straits of Tiran to prevent supplies from reaching Eilat in the Gulf of Aqaba. When it ended, the Israeli army had occupied the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank including East Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights. Territorial losses of this magnitude in such a short period of time represented the ultimate moral failure of the nationalist Arab leaders who had emerged with independence. Their rhetoric had suddenly been punctured like a balloon by the hard military reality on the ground.

For Egypt, the *naksa* was the final blow in a series of domestic and international reverses. After 1962, the Egyptian army had become bogged down in a costly, bloody war of attrition in Yemen where it supported the republican forces against the Saudi-backed royalists. In 1966, Nasser, confronted by growing popular discontent, had Sayyid Qutb, by now the Muslim Brotherhood's chief ideologue, executed. Qutb had just published his manifesto *Signposts*, that would play for the Islamist political movement the role of Lenin's famous *What is to be done* for communist parties worldwide. In this founding document for jihadists of the next generation, he turns the prison in which the Brothers are tortured into the perfect symbol of a hated Arab nationalism. He identifies it with the *jahiliyya*, the age of ignorance or barbarity that the Scriptures say prevailed in Arabia before the Prophet revealed the Koran, and which he then stamped out with Islam.

Qutb calls for a similar destruction of the *jahiliyya* of the twentieth century embodied by Nasserism. He advocated using any available means, including the “movement” (*haraka*), meaning armed jihad. By excommunicating the Nasser regime and declaring it impious (*takfir*), *Signposts* summoned up religious legitimacy to justify holy war against the nationalist state. This master stroke—which not everyone in the Muslim Brotherhood agreed with—would give rise to the radical current in the organization. It would later undergo immense development, from Afghanistan to al-Qaeda. In 1966, Qutb was punished for his manifesto by being hanged. The June 1967 Arab defeat in the Six-Day War convinced many of his disciples that it was Allah punishing Nasser for having His martyr killed.

The president stepped down but returned to power after an immense throng marched across Egypt to shouts of “Nasser come back!” But when he died three years later, the Arab nationalism he had incarnated would not survive him. Political Islam would fill this great vacuum to become the dominant ideological core of the region. It would find its principal lever in the October War of 1973.

Egypt was the big loser in the June 1967 war, and its defeat sank the Nasserite brand of Arab nationalism. For a while, a Palestinian cause seeking to emancipate itself from the Arab states would replace it. In 1969, the new leader of the PLO, Yasser Arafat, shook off Egyptian tutelage. He made Jordan, inhabited by many Palestinian refugees, his rear base for waging armed struggle against Israel. In effect, he established a state within a state that challenged the authority of King Hussein. The tensions the Palestinian organizations stoked in the process peaked on September 6, 1970. On this date, three airliners were hijacked to a Jordanian airport at Zarqa by the PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine), a Marxist group led by George Habache. The ensuing crackdown resulted in thousands of Palestinian deaths.

Negotiation that got underway three weeks later resulted in the Cairo Agreement between Arafat, King Hussein, and Nasser—the latter dying soon after its signature. It meant the armed Palestinian factions would leave Jordan for resettlement in refugee camps in Lebanon, the weakest country in the region. The Palestinians would contribute to that country’s breakdown five years later, and to the progressive destruction of the Levant. All this would unfold in a context completely transformed by the Islamization of politics spurred on by the new Saudi hegemon that emerged after the October War of 1973.

### The Trigger: The Ramadan War of October 1973

Anwar Sadat, who succeeded Nasser in September 1970 as the compromise candidate of a divided general staff, took office under a cloud. Popular *nukat* (jokes) held him out to be stupid. The pressure on him was that much greater because he wanted to erase the humiliation of June 1967 by mounting a counterattack, but he lacked the resources. Still, this wily peasant from the Nile Delta outfoxed everyone who underestimated him—except for the jihadists that eventually assassinated him. Drawn to the Muslim Brotherhood in his youth, Sadat had its members released from prison and discreetly encouraged their activism on university campuses where Marxists and leftist Nasserites were his most virulent opponents. In a few years, they had been eliminated and the *gama'a islamiyya* (Islamic associations) with Qutbist loyalties took control of student activism.

At the same time, Sadat prepared an attack on the lines of the dug-in Israeli forces. Helping him were Soviet military advisors connected with Syrian president Hafez al-Assad, who had come to power, like Sadat, in the wake of the defeat. For maximum advantage, the surprise attack began on October 6, 1973 while the Israelis were fasting for Yom Kippur. The Egyptian army broke through the fortified Bar-Lev line along the Suez Canal, and the Syrians drove into the Golan, occupied by Israel since 1967. The successes scored in this first offensive led the regimes' lackeys to bestow glowing titles on the two leaders. Sadat became the "hero of the crossing" (*batal al-'oubour*) and al-Assad the "lion of October" (*Assad tichrine*), a play on his family name which means "lion."

But the war's outcome, which saved the honor of the Arab leaders, would have turned out differently had Saudi Arabia and the oil kingdoms of the Arabian Peninsula not intervened decisively. The Israeli army had launched a victorious counteroffensive in which they recrossed the Suez Canal and surrounded Egypt's Third Army. Then they had pushed inland 101 kilometers on the Suez-Cairo route while their armored columns simultaneously rolled into Syria to within forty kilometers of Damascus. These advances were supported by an American military airlift that daily resupplied the Jewish state with arms and munitions. On October 16–17, the Arab oil producing countries, meeting in Kuwait, decided to intervene by raising the price of crude by 70 percent and cutting back monthly production by 5 percent.

They vowed to continue until Israel withdrew from the occupied territories and recognized Palestinian rights. On October 20, King Faisal of Saudi Arabia further announced an embargo on oil shipments to the United States and the Netherlands for supporting Israel.

This would be the decisive weapon that saved face for the Arab leaders on the battlefield, but it had another effect beyond this politico-military episode. It turned the world order upside-down by making the price of oil one of the key global stakes, one which gave extortionate power to those who controlled it. Crude prices quadrupled in a matter of days. This economic pressure had an immediate two-fold effect: it made the Israeli-Arab conflict into a domestic political issue in all oil-importing countries, and it short-circuited the Jewish state's counteroffensive. Sadat and al-Assad had been saved by King Faisal and the oil emirs. Israel accepted the armistice under pressure by the United States and the West, both panicked by the inflationary blows to their economies. Thus, the oil kingdoms were able to consolidate their dominance. Using their rentier wealth made fabulous by the soaring prices, they proceeded to finance the spreading throughout the Sunni world of a hardline conservative ideology based on Saudi Wahhabism. But, once out of the bottle, the genie of jihad was difficult to stuff back in, as they would discover. How they ultimately became its victims we will examine below.

A large part of popular Arab literature dwells on the contrasts between the 1967 defeat and the victory of 1973. It attributes the former to the Nasser regime's unbelief and the latter to the explicit piety shown by waging this war during Ramadan. This gave it the legal cover of a jihad. However, fasting from sunrise to sunset—obligatory during the blessed month—is hardly conducive to military operations. Fortunately, this regimen can be lifted for a jihad, because a community of believers that is weakened risks being wiped out by its enemies, endangering the survival of Islam itself. So that the soldiers could eat and drink during daylight hours, the Egyptian and Syrian ulemas, prompted by the ruling powers, proclaimed that the Ramadan War qualified as jihad. Aside from the instrumental dimension of this fatwa, the confrontation effectively became a jihad, paralleling the global oil initiative that gave the final victory to the oil kingdoms known for their strict Islamic rigor. Other enlightening commentaries along the same lines approvingly commented on the soldiers' battle cry of "Allahu Akbar!" in 1973. It helped lead them to victory, whereas the "Land! Air! Sea!" imposed by the unbelieving nationalist regime in 1967 led to an inevitable defeat.

The use of oil as a political weapon during the 1973 war also changed the Saudi-American relationship, which dated back to President Roosevelt and King Ibn Saud. The pair had formalized it on February 14, 1945 on the USS *Quincy* anchored in the Suez Canal. Roosevelt had come straight from Yalta, eager to secure oil supplies in a divided world that was imminent, and would oppose the community of free nations to a Soviet Union endowed with rich Azerbaijani and Siberian oil fields. With this agreement, the United States in effect replaced the United Kingdom, exhausted by World War II, as protector of the Saudi monarchy. In return, the Saudis would let the American firm ARAMCO (Arabian American Oil Company) exploit their country's oil resources. This Valentine's Day pact—always a propitious day for eternal engagements—was the main *raison d'être* for the American presence in the Middle East. It had priority over the relationship with the Jewish state.

Israel's principal arms supplier before the 1967 war had been France (whose loaned Dassault Mirage warplanes were the key to Israel's victory). During the 1956 Suez expedition, the United States had called on Israel to withdraw its troops from the Sinai, and on the British and French to remove their paratroopers from the Suez Canal. This meant that Israel's interests ranked lower for the United States. It took de Gaulle's refusal to continue arming Tel Aviv to change American minds. He announced as much in his famous press conference of November 27, 1967, in which he criticized the occupation of territories conquered during the Six-Day War. Washington now hastened to take over military assistance to the Israelis, thus reversing the priorities of the Quincy pact by prioritizing Israel's defense over the oil deal.

Consequently, the Saudi side felt that much freer to stick a knife in the contract in October 1973, but also because the rise in the price of crude actually favored the medium-term interests of the Texas oil giants. The Zapata Petroleum Company was one of these, founded in 1953 by the future president George H. W. Bush, through which continued fruitful relationships could be maintained with the United States. However, the changed balance of power in favor of the producers did allow them finally to nationalize the international oil companies in their countries. They could now tap the oil revenues directly instead of having to settle for the royalties the seven multinationals known as the Seven Sisters had dribbled out to them. This only increased the wealth of the petromonarchies and their influence on recasting the Middle East in pursuit of re-Islamizing the regional political order.

## Positioning

Spreading Sunni Wahhabite conservative Islam outside Saudi Arabia's borders had been one of the kingdom's key foreign policy priorities. It was designed to counter the missions Nasser sent out from the Islamic Al-Azhar University in Cairo to convince Muslims worldwide of Islam's compatibility with socialism. This competition was a by-product of the Cold War, in which each side tried to enlist the religion in its cause. Crown Prince Faisal founded the Muslim World League on December 15, 1962 in Mecca at the same time as Soviet-trained Egyptian troops landed in Yemen to menace the Saudi frontier. However, before 1973, this organization only played a secondary role in the great ideological conflict between Moscow and Washington, whose vocabulary employed a different register that downgraded religious questions.

With the Nasserite enemy now history, and thanks to the dizzying increase in the per-barrel price of oil, the League had very large sums at its disposal to use in making Saudi influence felt wherever it wished. In the process, this country became the heart of the new Islamic context of meaning for a region and world centered on the Peninsula. What mattered going forward was reinforcing Saudi Arabia's growing hegemony. It also needed to justify, with the help of its charitable and guided patronage, the most intransigent Muslims, that is, the Salafists and other Wahhabis collecting rents as a reward for their extreme religious virtue. However, the Muslim World League refrained from engaging in sectarian squabbles that would have limited its influence. If it made it its task to fight the innovations that deformed the pure and authentic message of the original Islam—a gibe aimed mainly at Sufism—it nonetheless fully accommodated the Muslim Brotherhood. This was because at the time it treated the Brothers as allies in the project of Islamizing societies around the globe. Besides, the Brothers were more knowledgeable than the Saudi ulema establishment about the modern world that was ripe for conversion.

Around this time, the Muslim masses in Europe, most of them immigrant laborers, were severely impacted by widespread unemployment. It was a direct result of the economic crisis in which the quadrupling of the oil price was a major factor. The Muslim World League therefore began opening offices and mosques in Europe during the second half of the 1970s. The goal

was to give structure to the Islamization movement that was starting to surface in these milieus that were experiencing an identity crisis. It grew out of the random resettlement of millions of individuals who hunkered down in their country of immigration while unskilled jobs evaporated.

Egypt, bled dry by its colossal military expenditures and demographic burdens, presented another choice target. However, it was still positioned as a potential pole of opposition to the spread of Wahhabism. This was due to the long, prestigious history of Al-Azhar, where the Sufi brotherhood, despised by the Salafists, remained well represented. The country had to be kept afloat, yet in a state of constant dependency, to exorcise any desire, however weak, for continuing to act as a counterweight to the new Saudi leading role.

Sadat himself had played the Islamization game on his own person. Of course, that was before he was shunned by the Arab world after going to Jerusalem and addressing the Knesset on 20 November 1977. Back then, he even bore the famous *zbiba* (“dry raisin”), the nickname given in Egypt to the brownish callus in the middle of the forehead that identifies the pious faithful. It comes from the believer touching their forehead to the ground when prostrating five times daily during prayers. Sadat had his first name, Mohammed—never used previously—added to his title, to be preceded by his ceremonial praise name. “the President-Believer” (*al-raïis al-mou'min*). Egypt began to sprout immense new mosques, parti-colored with neon, whose loudspeakers turned up to full volume dominated the urban cacophony. Alcohol was prohibited on Egypt Air flights. The Egyptian Muslim Brothers exiled to the Gulf under Nasser were allowed to return to invest their petrodollars in Islamic banks run according to sharia. During the decade of Sadat’s presidency, the country’s human landscape was also transformed by the mass veiling of Egyptian women.

Collectively, these measures had a preventive purpose. They were designed to get the population, force-fed on anti-Zionist propaganda, to accept the turnabout that the peace treaty concluded with Israel in 1979 constituted. Contrary to expectations, the steps taken did not keep the Islamist opposition from radicalizing. In effect, in the future it would own a fertile cultural breeding ground into which it would sink deep roots. The Islamists would sweep away the “President-Believer,” who would be assassinated by the “Organization of Jihad” (*Tanzim al Gihad*) on October 6, 1981 during a military parade celebrating the Egyptian army crossing the



Suez Canal on Yom Kippur eight years earlier. Few tears were shed in Egypt for this unpopular pharaoh, as this author living in Cairo observed firsthand at the time. Among the caustic *nukat* that the humor-loving Egyptians came up with, one of the best-known had a street sweeper cleaning the ground under the presidential tribune the day after Sadat's death. He came upon something on the ground that looked like a raisin: "Hey, what's this now? Ah, yes, it's the president's *zbiba!*" The point of the joke was that the conspicuous mark in the middle of his forehead had, after all, only been glued on.

Lebanon's civil war was another crucial marker in this gradual Islamization of the Middle Eastern context of meaning by recasting the repertoire of political mobilizations into religious categories. Until then, mobilizations had been imprinted by nationalism, sharpened by the centrality of the Palestinian resistance against the "Zionist enemy." They also fit into the global face-off between the Soviet and American blocs. The armed Palestinian presence had been ratified in a secret agreement signed in Cairo on November 3, 1969 between the head of the Lebanese army's general staff and Yasser Arafat. It created a kind of state within a state in the south of Lebanon along the border with Israel.

This is where the Palestinian fighters came after the 1970 Black September massacres in Jordan, as they gradually relocated to Lebanon under guarantee of the Arab states. For them, it was about saving face with their populations by establishing a focal point near Israel from where they could keep pressure on the Israelis through medium-intensity guerrilla warfare. The image of the Resistance was then at its height, much reinforced by the contrast it offered to the lamentable showing by the Arab armies during the Six-Day War. The leftist papers in the Latin Quarter of Paris that I read while in high school during those years carried headlines like, "The Palestinian Resistance will sweep away the Cairo Accords," and "The road to Jerusalem passes through Amman, Beirut, and Cairo." They drew an equivalence between the "Zionist entity" and "the Arab bourgeoisie" in the impending, all-out battle to have socialism reign on earth.

Such grandiose projects of Marxist messianism went nowhere. Instead, Lebanon's fragile confessional balance was upset by introducing an armed movement into it. While it was all Palestinian in its national identity, it fit into the mosaic of the Land of Cedars as a Muslim and Sunni force—in other words, neither Christian nor Shia. The Maronites, for which the French

under the League of Nations Mandate had created Lebanon after World War I, letting many achieve middle class status, had seen their numbers decline in proportion to the country's overall population. Then, there were the Shiite masses: impoverished and marginalized, their hefty birthrate had translated into a huge rural exodus and the creation of an immense disinherited suburb (*banlieue*) in south Beirut.

During the first half of the 1970s—before the Iranian Revolution of 1978–1979 heightened the denominational identity of Shiism as distinct from Sunnism—the Shiites were lumped in politically with Muslims. They were thus regarded by the Sunni elite, on the whole, as part of their flock, from which the prime minister was chosen (the president of the Republic, who then wielded executive power, was a Maronite, as required by the Lebanese constitution). In that context, implanting the Palestinian armed organizations strengthened the hand of the Sunni and of Muslims generally. This let them exert pressure for reforming the political system to their benefit and to the detriment of the Christians. In reality, the Palestinians who had settled close to the border with Israel in the South of Lebanon maintained a complex relationship with the Shiite majority there.

In the mid-1970s, Arafat's lieutenant Abu Jihad had helped to found the first Shiite political organizations, including Amal, or the Movement of the Disinherited, led by Imam Musa al-Sadr. Nevertheless, the tensions were palpable. There were disputes over land and over Israel's indiscriminate bombing of the Lebanese South in retaliation for the Palestinian katyusha rocket attacks from the area. In 1978, during the Iranian Revolution, Arafat offered his organization's help to Khomeini, then requested fatwas from him on behalf of the "Palestinian revolution" for tamping down the tensions with Lebanon's Shiite populations. Nevertheless, when the Israeli attacks became more generalized, starting in 1972, the overall relationship between the Lebanese state, including its Christian component, and the Palestinians deteriorated.

The combination of these factors explains why civil war broke out on April 13, 1975, when a bus carrying Palestinians was attacked by Phalangist (Maronite) militias, resulting in twenty-seven deaths. The response by the Islamo-progressive side, in which the determining factor was the firepower of the Palestinian organizations, let it gain the upper hand militarily, initially with Syrian support. But in June 1976, Hafez al-Assad sent his army into Lebanon to restore equilibrium under his control.

Syria's occupation of Lebanese territory would persist for nearly three decades, until April 2005.

There were many twists and turns in the Lebanese civil war. First came the Israeli invasion of the South in 1978, from which they moved north to take all of Lebanon, up to the capital's southern suburb from 1982 until 1985. Next came the taking of Western hostages and the fratricidal conflicts between Christian factions. But for purposes of the present narrative, two major developments stand out. The first was the creation of Hezbollah in late 1982, and its official recognition in 1985. Instigated by the Islamic Republic, this Shiite party would come to dominate Lebanon's political life three decades later, after it took over resistance against Israel from the PLO. The other development was the Taif Agreement signed in Saudi Arabia in 1989. It sealed the political defeat of the Christians by shifting the center of executive power from the Maronite president toward the Sunni prime minister. The main beneficiary of this maneuver was the Lebanese-Saudi billionaire Rafic Hariri, who would occupy the latter office repeatedly starting in 1992. He would reconstruct Beirut's devastated downtown with the Solidere project to jump-start the economy. That is, until he was assassinated there on February 14, 2005 as his motorcade rolled through the urban space that bore his imprint.

Lebanon's apparent tilt into the Sunni-dominated world was manifested in raising the immense Hariri Mosque on the demarcation line between the capital's Christian and Muslim zones. This was the district of the ancient souks, ravaged by the fighting during the civil war. The mosque rose next to the antique Maronite cathedral, overwhelming it with its bulk. Ironically, the Taif Accords, though explicitly marginalizing the Christians to the benefit of the Muslims, was really a vain Sunni attempt to block the surging Shiite community. The Shiites were now the largest demographic in the country, strongly supported and armed by Iran through Hezbollah. As observers, it is immediately incumbent on us to understand the logic of how a Shiite power could emerge ready to compete with Saudi Arabia in the Islamic context of meaning. It matters, because the outcome of the Syrian civil war in 2018 is one of its consequences. We begin by putting into perspective the events of the pivotal year 1979 that started with Khomeini's return from exile to Teheran in February. Then came the signing of the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt in Washington in March, and the assault on the Mecca Grand Mosque in November. On Christmas, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, which would set off the Sunni jihad in that country.

### 1979, a Pivotal Year: One-Upmanship Between Shiites and Sunnis

Like the other oil producers, Iran had profited handsomely from the price rise of crude, even if, as a non-Arab country, it had no hand in imposing the embargo of October 1973. But, in its wake, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi upped the ante, seeing in the quadrupling of prices a chance to make his country one of the world's great powers. He announced immense ambitions in the advertising pages of the international press, took a share in Eurodif, the European nuclear agency, in the process worrying his Gulf neighbors that he was out to dominate the region. Pahlavi's megalomania had been on display in the sumptuous celebrations at Persepolis in October 1971 when he spent billions of dollars in honor of the two thousand five hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Persian empire's—to which he claimed to be the heir.

However, the principal beneficiaries of the explosive increase in oil prices were his cronies, the army, and the state apparatus, to the detriment of the larger civil society that his police repressed violently. The alienation of the traditional middle classes, embodied by the bazaar merchants, as well as the Shiite clergy that came out of them, set the stage for a grave social crisis. The situation was aggravated by the inflow of peasants attracted to the cities in the vain hope of benefiting from the oil bonanza. They ended up forming an immense proletariat of the disinherited. In this context, even many of the tens of thousands of scholarship recipients the shah sent abroad to be educated for the Iran of the future turned against an autocratic and corrupt imperial regime

The shah visited the United States in November 1977, while President Jimmy Carter was trying to "moralize" American foreign policy after his disgraced predecessor Richard Nixon. He was greeted with violent demonstrations by students and activists, mostly Marxists and progressives. They had invaded the Washington Mall, and the tear gas used to disperse them drifted on the wind to the White House Rose Garden. It forced the monarch to break off his remarks as he was being broadcast live on radio and TV, his eyes streaming with tears. The symbolic effect of these images cracked the authoritarian façade. It encouraged the Iranian opposition to speak up, the more so since the American demands for respecting human rights tempered the repression that followed.

However, just as would be the case in Algeria in 1988, or during the Arab uprisings in early 2010, religious forces kneaded the leftist or democratic yeast into the revolutionary dough. They ended up coopting this movement and diverting it for their own purposes. The modernizing autocrats in neighboring Arab countries had tarnished secularism in the service of dictatorship, compromising the legitimacy of a democratic opposition that appropriated these same ideals for the sake of authenticity. Pahlavi Iran had encouraged dispersing its opposition, using the communist movement as one pole and the most politicized Shiite clergy as the other.

Baffling as it might seem, despite the professed atheism of the communists, these two currents in a sense were structurally similar. Like the Leninists, the Shiite clergy were hierarchical and skilled at relaying slogans and mobilizing their flock. This contrasted sharply with the Sunni world, where religious authority was fragmented between multiple competing ulemas. Hence, this was a precious asset for organizing a revolutionary movement with sufficient staying power to topple the strongman. This congruence was further reflected in numerous hybrid Islamic-Marxist or Islamic-Leftist groups. The best known were the People's Mujahideen, an appellation that combined the notion of jihad with populism.

Credit for this ideological crossbreed belonged to Ali Shariati, an intellectual from a religious family, later educated in France in the Latin Quarter of Paris. In his translation of French Caribbean psychiatrist Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*—then a beacon of third-worldist ideology—Shariati had adapted the celebrated Marxist contradiction between oppressed and oppressors using Koranic vocabulary. He rendered the first term as “disinherited” (*mostadafin*) and the second as “arrogants” (*mostakbirin*). However, this adaptation did not preserve the categories of the original. By adding a strong moral meaning imbued with religiosity, he made it possible to move the lines separating opposing social classes. It meant that the metacategory of the disinherited could run the gamut of the shah's opponents. As we have seen, these ranged from the bazaar merchants to the proletariat born of the rural exodus. They included the pious middle classes and the poor urban youth who, from a strictly social perspective, should have been antagonists. Under the leadership of clerics that shared the same ideology, they all fused now in the revolutionary process.

This was the achievement of the political genius of Ayatollah Khomeini, an opponent of the shah exiled to Najaf, the Shiite holy city in Iraq.

He lived there from 1964 to 1978, then, after Iraq expelled him, at Neauphle-le-Château on the outskirts of Paris. He returned to Teheran on February 1, 1979, seizing the opportunity of making himself the champion of the disinherited. This was the route by which he came to control a clerical apparatus that did not support him initially. He also managed to make a tool of the leftist opposition—until he neutralized it after he had triumphed and proclaimed his “Islamic Republic.”

To help accomplish this, he returned to a fundamentalist, purified form of Shiite dogma, a process that Salafism also went through in the Sunni world. It involved stripping the faith of all the compromises made over the centuries between ayatollahs and princes. Under his doctrine, the Imam Husayn Ibn Ali, grandson of the Prophet, martyred at Karbala in October 680 by soldiers of the Sunni caliph Yazid, represented the sublime incarnation of the disinherited. The shah, on the other hand, personified the arrogant Yazid. By telescoping the foundations of his ideologically revised dogma with present issues, Khomeini succeeded in creating a formidable mobilizing force. It would overcome not only all the other components of the opposition but also the imperial regime.

Khomeini, who from now on would let himself be addressed as the “Guide” of the Islamic Revolution, thus returned triumphantly to Teheran on an Air France plane. Stepping onto the tarmac, he incarnated a particularly powerful competitive force within the Islamization of the Middle East. This was the process set in motion by Saudi Arabia and its allies six years earlier at the time of the Ramadan War and the quadrupling of crude prices. The antagonism between these two entities would become the principal engine of crises and conflicts within and outside the region during the next four decades. It would especially affect Europe through the recurring export of Islamist terrorism to its soil, making hostages of the immigrant populations from Muslim backgrounds living there.

In line with how the price of a barrel of crude fluctuated, the tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia ended up even relativizing the principal faultline that had crystallized Arab nationalism after the independences, namely the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation. It, too, would be annexed to the Sunni-Shiite conflict’s own logics (as Lebanese Hezbollah and the Palestinian Hamas would demonstrate by taking it over, both under Teheran’s influence). The antagonism’s dynamic was one of continuing escalation, at the cost of constantly aggravating the chaos roiling Middle East

societies. Its genesis lay in the political irresponsibility induced by the sustained effects of oil revenues that continued to grow, seemingly without an end in sight, until the second half of the 2010 decade.

The Iranian Revolution posed a considerable challenge for Saudi Arabia and its allies, for it relativized the impact of a Sunni-style Islamization process that lacked both social dynamics and heroism. The knitting together by the oil emirs of an associational international Salafist network was not enough of a counterfire to contain the enthusiasm triggered spontaneously by the Iranian revolutions in the Sunni working-class strata. This was so despite the financial support that most of the emirs provided during this period to the international Muslim Brotherhood.

It was all the more problematic because Khomeinist discourse simultaneously called out two global enemies. First, he railed against the American “Great Satan” (and, concurrently, the French “Little Satan” as an accessory—despite the hospitality shown Khomeini at Neauphle-le-Château). Second, he condemned the collective oil kingdoms of the Arabian Peninsula as mere lackeys of the United States. In targeting the first, in line with Shariati’s ideas, he subscribed to a global Third-Worldist movement which allowed him to transcend the exclusively religious dimension. This stance earned him plaudits from as far away as Latin America with its tiny Muslim populations. By training his sights on the second, Khomeini sought to transcend his relatively narrow Persian and Shiite bases (which represent only about 15 percent of the world’s Muslims). In both instances, his objective was to snatch the leadership of global Islam from the Saudi Arabian rulers, known as the “Custodians of the Two Holy Mosques” for their control over the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina, which is one of the five pillars of Islam.

The American-Saudi response to the Iranian Revolution was one of the components of the global politics of jihad in Afghanistan. The opportunity came with retaliation for the Soviet Army’s invading the country on Christmas 1979, the pivotal year that had started off with Khomeini’s return to Teheran on February 1. The year continued with the Egypt-Israel peace treaty of March 26—which saw the front line shift from the Near East and the eastern Mediterranean toward the Persian Gulf and Central Asia.

The arrival of the Soviet Army paratroopers and tanks in Kabul upset the equilibrium established following World War II. It thus differed from

the Soviet interventions in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. These had still fit into the framework of the division of the world following the Yalta Conference, and so forestalled any military response by the free world. Leonid Brezhnev felt compelled to intervene in Afghanistan in 1979 because, by Soviet logic, the power of the local communists had to be secured against imminent peril. The country's mostly tribal and rural society, very attached to traditional ways generally, was revolting against the policy of promoting atheism.

As for the White House, it could not accept this latest setback, coming on the heels of America's defeat in Vietnam four years earlier and the loss of its Iranian ally in early 1979. The shah had played a considerable geopolitical role as policeman of the Gulf in guarding the area's gigantic oil reserves against Russian acquisitive appetites. Moreover, the United States had just suffered an unprecedented humiliation with the hostage taking at the American embassy in Teheran by the so-called Student Followers of the Imam's Line. The crisis began on November 4, and an attempt to free the hostages had met with total failure. Moreover, the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan clearly breached the Yalta agreement. The country sharing a border with Iran, where the local communists of the Tudeh party were active members of the revolutionary forces (Khomeini would not purge them until the following year), also revived for the Americans the specter of Moscow salient to the "warm oceans". It was a contemporary version of the nineteenth century's Anglo-Russian "Great Game" in southwest Asia.

Finally, in the distinctive Islamic worldview, the end of 1979 saw a drama of paramount symbolic significance unfold. November 20 marked the first day of the fifteenth century of the Hegira calendar. Doctrine held that every hegiric century would see the coming of a reviver (*Muhi*) or messiah (*Mahdi*) of Islam to reestablish purity by confronting worldly deviance. Against this background, a band of Saudi radical jihadists led by Juhayman al-Otaybi seized the Grand Mosque of Mecca. Al-Otaybi belonged to one of the country's great tribes and opposed the corruption of the Saudi royal family, which he faulted for being too connected to the West. He also wanted to have his brother-in-law Abdullah al-Qahtani acknowledged as the messiah of the new hegiric century.

Al-Otaybi had ties with the most unbending fringes of the kingdom's Salafist establishment. He circulated some epistles in which, thirty years later, it would be possible to find a considerable amount of what inspired



the Islamic State of ISIS. It took two weeks to restore order in Mecca, and not until a French gendarmerie SWAT team (GIGN) had retaken the Mosque by assault. Its mission was kept secret at the time, because non-Muslims are forbidden (*haram*) from entering the sacred grounds. Thousands of pilgrims were held hostage and 244 people were killed (the 117 assailants among them)—even though any spilling of blood is prohibited in the Grand Mosque. The affair embarrassed the Saudi king, who was paralyzed by the shock for the first few days. Here he had been outflanked by someone even more Wahhabist and jihadist than himself, and in the very process of Islamizing the region that he had launched at that. The king had proved incapable of keeping Islamic order in the Holy Mosques. This called into question his claim to be their custodian and, by extension, his unilateral claim to supremacy over global Islam.

The Soviet Army entering Kabul barely three weeks after the calamitous retaking of the Mecca *haram* represented another challenge to Saudi aspirations for leadership of the Muslim world. In effect, in the doctrinal geography of Islam, this act of war could be interpreted as an invasion of a land of Islam (*dar al-Islam*) by infidels (*kuffar*). Muslim rulers were bound by the Holy Scriptures to retaliate by calling for, and immediately launching, a mandatory armed jihad to repel the invader—or risk losing legitimacy. First and foremost the Saudi monarch who claimed worldwide Islamic leadership and guidance.

The Soviet invasion could therefore be read in two complementary ways. Seen from Washington, it was a vexing Cold War episode that called for a response. With its long, slow defeat in Vietnam and the humiliation in Iran, the United States risked losing its superpower status. From Riyadh's perspective, it was virtually forced to declare a jihad, especially since the Saudi monarchy aspired to hegemony over global Islam. This was the term chosen to describe the insurrectional guerrilla force equipped and trained by the CIA and cofinanced by petrodollars from the Arabian Peninsula. Its guerrillas, christened Freedom Fighters on the other side of the Atlantic, were so many men with beards for whom "freedom" meant applying sharia once the Soviets were kicked out of the land of Islam.

This confused vocabulary witnessed profoundly to the semantic Islamization of what would become the last battle of the Cold War. It would also be the first of the Islamic wars of the modern era—whether we call them jihad, raid (*ghazu*), lawful terrorism (*irhab mashruʿ*), or martyrdom operation

(*‘amaliyya istish.hadiyya*). Eventually, the Soviet Army withdrew from Kabul on February 15, 1989 and the next shoe dropped with the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9. Once the USSR had dissolved, the conflict between the Islamist East and the secular West (labeled “impious,” “Jewish-crusader,” and so on) took the place of the struggle between the communist East and capitalist West.

The Afghan jihad killed two birds with one stone. First, it delivered the final blow to the USSR, exposing the debilitated Soviet Army as a paper tiger. The deep reasons for the failure of the Soviet system varied and traced back farther in time. They included an arms race with the United States that ruined the USSR’s economy and policymakers who ignored the functional flaws inherent in the planned economy versus the free market. Regardless, finishing off the USSR would earn the jihadists immense prestige among their fellow Muslims. They would use it to assert themselves on a global level as a previously unknown type of terrorist military force to which bin Laden gave a face. Also, in the Islamic symbolic order, the Sunni jihad victory for now served to counter Khomeinist propaganda—it cast the Saudis and their allies as the saviors of a Muslim country invaded by the atheists in the Kremlin. As we will see, this was met by a novel response from Teheran. It involved relegating the victory to the background by saturating the media landscape with news of the fatwa condemning Salman Rushdie to death. It was cannily sprung on the world on the eve of the Soviet retreat from Afghanistan. The ensuing sensational global coverage all but drowned out news of the Soviet Army withdrawal from Kabul, pulling a Persian carpet under the feet of Washington and Riyadh and frustrating them symbolically of their military success.