

West Asia: From Non-State Radicalism to State Revisionism

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The crater left by the decimated ISIS proto-state has become the epicentre for a new wave of turmoil in West Asia. As shell-shocked jihadist groups struggle to regain their footing in the region, some of their shadowy patron states have decided to militarily step into the hollowed out geostrategic space, even as US forces continue to draw down their troop levels from the region. With Turkey and Iran making blatant incursions into Arab lands as part of their revisionist imperialism, Gulf monarchies seem to be dumping their Salafi-Wahhabi extremism in favour of a fledgling Semitic neologism, envisioned as ‘Abraham Accords’, to keep non-Semite powers out of bounds. Meanwhile, the scattered jihadist forces are scouting for safer havens in sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, and the Af-Pak region. Thus, non-state radicalism appears, for the time being, to be giving way to state revisionism, and a more conventional form of militarism in West Asia.

The first half of this paper focuses on the causes for the current phase of evident decline in jihadist activity in West Asia, while the second half hones in on the incipient haggling for hegemony between Turkey and Iran which has started to arouse historical strains of imperialist rivalry. In making these propositions, the paper is not oblivious to the outward facade of cooperation within present-day frail alliances; nor does it claim that the stated historical hostilities would invariably manifest in the future. This paper is merely a Rorschach reading of West Asia’s shifting sands: that is, the study of a few inchoate trends that might strengthen over time.

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Lull in the Jihadist Storm

After major reversals for ISIS in 2019, transnational jihadism seems to be closing in on itself and is developing incipient new strains. The COVID-19 pandemic and the global economic downturn seem to have thrown terrorism off its high perch on the list of major international challenges for the time being. For instance, in the US presidential election debates held late last year, the word ‘terrorism’ was not uttered even once by either candidate, in spite of the terrorist killings taking place in France and Austria around that time¹.

Way back in July 2016, when ISIS held large swaths of Iraqi and Syrian territories, US citizens had polled 3 (in a Pew survey) that they considered terrorism as the second most important issue after the economy for that year’s presidential elections². Curiously, terrorism did not even feature among Pew’s questions to Americans before last year’s presidential elections³.

Statistics from the recently published Global Terrorism Index (2020) provides us with more evidence on this major shift. Figures show that fatalities from terrorism fell for the fifth consecutive year in 2019 to 13,826 deaths. This represents a 15 percent decrease from the prior year, and a 59 percent fall from 2014 till the end of 2019⁴.

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Russia and Eurasia, South America and South Asia regions – all recorded falls in deaths from terrorism of at least 20 percent. In fact, seven of the ten countries with the largest increase in terrorism were in sub-Saharan Africa, and not West Asia. Although the Taliban remained the world’s deadliest terrorist group in 2019, deaths attributed to the group declined by 18 percent to 4,990. Some experts attribute this to the effect of peace talks in Afghanistan.

A decline in jihadist violence was also registered in Europe for four years until 2019, which may continue in spite of periodic spikes in terror attacks over political controversies, like cartoon publications, etc. The still unconfirmed death of Al-Qaeda supremo, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, and the gunning down of Abu Muhammad al-Masri, Al-Qaeda’s second-in-command in Iran in 2020, are recent examples accentuating the serious leadership crisis facing the global jihadist movement.

However, the return of Taliban to power, infighting within its ranks, the growing strength of ISIS in Afghanistan, etc. may register a spike in terrorist incidents in the Af-Pak region. Still, the FATF’s increasing economic squeeze on Pakistan could inhibit its support for proxy terrorist groups.

Thus, almost two decades after the 9/11 attacks, Al-Qaeda and ISIS appear to have been stripped off their erstwhile resources or militants to disrupt international peace and security in a major way, in spite of the few surprises they might spring, like the 2019 Easter bombings in Sri Lanka, or a major lone-wolf attack in the West.

In fact, from September 2019 to August 2020, the USA and its allies have also been successful in removing some of the key henchmen of global jihadist groups. These include⁵:

- Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi, the self-styled caliph of ISIS, was killed by the US Special Operations Forces during a raid in Syria on 26 October 2019.
- Abdelmalek Droukdal, head of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, was eliminated by French Special Forces in Mali on 3 June 2020.
- Abdullah Orakzai, the supposed founder of ISIS in Afghanistan, was arrested by Afghan intelligence officials on 4 April 2020.
- Khalid al Aruri, de facto leader of Al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate Guardians of the Religion Organization, was killed by a US drone strike in Syria on 14 June 2020.
- Earlier, Qassim al Rimi, founder of al-Qaeda's Yemen affiliate, was killed in a US airstrike in Al Bayda Governorate of Yemen on 29 January 2020.
- Again, in November 2020, *The New York Times* reported the gunning down of Abu Muhammad al-Masri, Al-Qaeda's second-in-command, by two Israeli operatives in Tehran⁶.
- Unconfirmed reports of Al-Qaeda supremo Ayman Al-Zawahiri's death from natural causes appeared in the noted Saudi daily, *Arab News*, on 20 November 2020⁷.

There is no denying that jihadist non-state groups remain a serious threat as they try to re-assert their presence around the world. As the USA continues to shift resources and redeploy troops to new theatres, the Idlib Province in Syria which is in the control of terrorist groups – such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the Al-Qaeda-linked Hurras al-Din - can still stir up turmoil in the Levant. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, ISIS managed to carry out 126 attacks in Syria, and expanded its control in southern Raqqa. It is even feared that ISIS attacks would increase further in the year ahead.

Internecine Feuds among Jihadists

However, it is noteworthy that bitter infighting among jihadist groups, both in Syria and Africa's Sahel region will continue to dog transnational jihadism in the future, and may become the most potent factor behind its growing unpopularity and decline.

Internecine bloodletting among jihadist groups is not a new phenomenon; still, the extent and intensity of the problem has increased manifold in recent years. Ironically, the biggest split in the Salafi-jihadist ranks came when ISIS was itself thrown out of Al-Qaeda's fold in February 2014⁸. Favouring Abu Mohammad Al Julani (leader of the Al-Qaeda affiliate then titled Jubhat Al Nusra), Al-Qaeda chief Ayman Al Zawahiri disavowed Al-Baghdadi and the ISIS group nearly six years ago, when the latter refused to comply with the head honcho's decision to stop operating in Syria. However, Al-Zawahiri's bonhomie with Al-Julani was also short-lived.

The deep divisions within jihadist groups became evident when fugitive ISIS leader, Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi, tried to take advantage of the feud within Al-Qaeda affiliates - Hayat Tahrir Al Sham (HTS) and Hurras Al Deen in Syria - when he took shelter in the latter's compound, but was killed there by US Special Forces in October 2019⁹.

Al-Qaeda and ISIS affiliates are also fighting each other in other hotspots, such as in Yemen and Somalia, as they compete for declining influence, recruits, and resources. However, it is in sub-Saharan Africa that a raging hostility amongst them has claimed many innocent lives as well. There was intense fighting between these groups in Mali and Burkina Faso in the summer of 2020. The broader Al-Qaida-aligned coalition called Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), have been engaged in turf wars and the control of resources¹⁰.

A Shift Towards 'Post-jihadism'?

There is also a growing public disillusionment with some of the more cherished ideals invoked by jihadist groups over the decades to gain recruits. Although Al-Qaeda often raised the slogan of a Caliphate, it never worked toward its creation, preferring it to remain an idyllic concept in the Muslim imagination. However, ISIS's attempt to practically manifest it exposed the hollowness of the jihadist vision. This seems to have disillusioned the many who migrated and lived in that dystopian reality.

Evidence to this effect comes from many of the returnees from ISIS itself. About two years ago, law enforcement agencies in Europe were apprehensive that a new wave of jihadist attacks would sweep through the continent as ISIS fighters were surreptitiously returning to their countries of origin. After a couple of years, however, experts have found an overwhelming majority of returnees from Syria keeping themselves away from radical activities. In a report published in *The Washington Post* last year, Joby Warrick and Souad Mekhennet reported: “Despite initial fears, an overwhelming majority of the returnees appear to be shunning extremist causes so far, and many avowedly reject the Islamic State and its violent tactics”¹¹.

In the words of Thomas Renard, a Belgian terrorism researcher and author of a forthcoming study on prison radicalisation, “A number of signs point to disillusionment among returning fighters and released offenders.” He adds: “They don’t seem to be reconnecting to their previous networks or returning to violent extremist activities. We are seeing reports from the security services that confirm this”¹².

As the scale of atrocities, destruction, and devastation caused by the votaries of jihadism become evident, “the understanding that Islamist ideology cannot solve the region’s problems has started resonating”, writes Yishai Fleisher in the Jewish News Syndicate. He admits that “post-jihadism has a long way to go, to be sure. But the old thinking is being challenged”¹³.

In fact, there is a perceptible shift in public support for peace and reconciliation in the Arab world, even with the traditional ‘arch-enemy’, Israel. Writing in the noted magazine, *The Spectator*, Jake Wallis Simons points out:¹⁴ The most stunning development has been the change of feeling on the Arab street. Traditionally, levels of anti-Semitism have soared across the Middle East, with a seminal 2014 study finding that 74 percent of adults across the region harboured anti-Semitic beliefs. But as country after country has made peace with Israel, these attitudes have softened significantly. Recent polls report that about 80 percent of Saudis are now in favour of normalization, and 40 percent of citizens across a range of Arab countries want their leaders to take an active role in encouraging peace.

The recent novel coinage ‘post-jihadism’, used by many commentators like Fleisher, seems to be a derivative of a well-known political trend, already acknowledged and being studied among experts on political Islam as ‘post-Islamism’. First propounded by Professor Asef Bayat, the phenomenon has been corroborated and studied by such noted scholars like Olivier Roy in “Le post-islamisme” (in *Revue des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerranée*),

Henri Lauzire “Post-Islamism and the Religious Discourse of Abd al-Salam Yasin”, and Gilles Keppel ‘Islamism Reconsidered’¹⁵. In his edited volume (2013) titled *Post-Islamism: The Many Faces of Political Islam*, Asef Bayat defines post-Islamism as “political and social conditions where following a phase of experimentation, a rethink about the Islamist project takes place, leading to emphasizing rights instead of duties, plurality instead of a singular authoritative voice, historicity rather than fixed scripture, and the future instead of the past”¹⁶.

A Catherine and Bruce Bastian Professor of Global and Transnational Studies, Bayat contends that the Muslim world is, on the whole, already living in a post-Islamist and post-Jihadist phase in its history, which is obfuscated by the headline-grabbing activities of only a handful of jihadist groups, which are desperate to revive a losing cause.

Reclaiming of Radical Ideologues

From post-Islamism, the trend seems to be moving towards post-jihadism. In 2018, Julie Chernov Hwang wrote about this dynamic in her compelling book: *Why Terrorists Quit: The Disengagement of Indonesian Jihadists*¹⁷. Then, there is Omar Ashour’s seminal work, *The De-Radicalization of Jihadists: Transforming Armed Islamist Movements*, which corroborated the trend as early as 2009¹⁸.

For many years, these researchers have been suggesting that several jihadist groups have been disbanding or mending their ways even when Al-Qaeda and ISIS were on the ascendant. Prominent among such disbanded groups have been the once-notorious Gamaah al-Islamiyah (GaI) of Egypt, the Armée Islamique du Salut (AIS) of Algeria, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), Tandheem al-Jihad (TaJ), and Indonesian Laskar Jihad. It is averred that the process of abandoning Islamist militancy has only increased in recent times, while the feedback loops of propaganda and recruitment that allow terrorist organizations to grow have been notably disrupted¹⁹.

Even many violent extremist leaders of the past, like ‘the mastermind of Al-Qaeda’²⁰, Sayyid Imam Al Shareef (popularly known as Dr. Fadl), who was a member of Al-Qaeda’s top council, as well as the religious guide and associate of Bin Laden and Ayman Al Zawahiri, completely changed his religious and political philosophy. He called on Al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups for a stop to violent jihad activities both in Western and Muslim countries.

In his earlier work, *The Essential Guide for Preparation* (1988) that is

deemed as “one of the most important texts in the jihadis’ training”, he wrote that jihad is the natural state of Islam. Muslims must always be in conflict with nonbelievers”.

However, his later book titled *Wathiqat Tarshid Al-'Aml Al-Jihadi fi Misrw' Al-'Alam* (Document of Right Guidance for Jihad Activity in Egypt and the World also translated as “Rationalizing Jihad in Egypt and the World”) vigorously proclaims: “We are prohibited from committing aggression, even if the enemies of Islam do that”²¹.

Like ‘Dr. Fadl’, many radical scholars of the past have either completely changed their views on violent extremism and terrorism or have tempered their belligerent ideology to a great extent. For example, former Jordanian member of Al-Qaeda, Abu Qatada, recently spoke out against the killing of women, children, and civilians²². Abu Muhammad Al Maqdisi, the dubious mentor of Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, after his release from jail, has spoken on several occasions against ISIS’ barbarity on Jordanian television²³.

In this respect, the efforts of mainstream Islamic scholars and religious institutions, who have been preaching against violent extremism and radicalism, deserves commendation. These include scholars such as Saudi Arabia’s Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdulaziz bin Abdullah Al Sheikh; Imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca Abdul Rahman al Sudais; Egypt’s Grand Mufti Shawki Allam; Iraq’s top Shiite cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al Sistani; Mauritanian Professor of Islamic Studies Abdallah bin Mahfudh ibn Bayyah; and many more.

Arab Spring: Double-Edged Scimitar

Another cause for the apparent decline of jihadism in West Asia is the near zero-tolerance it has received from within Sunni Arab states in recent years. The defining moment that marked a clear break for many Arab countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and other GCC states, against any form of sponsorship or support for Islamist terrorism came in the aftermath of the deeply unsettling ‘Arab Spring’ upheavals. It was now clearly understood by most Sunni Arab states that radical Islamist ideology is more of an existential threat to these countries than it is a security hazard for the non-Muslim world. It is from this time onwards that these states began to show greater resolve in clamping down on all forms of radical religious organisations, and provided greater support to the global campaign against terrorism. Ironically, Iran has been dubbed as the “state sponsor of terrorism”²⁴ around the world, even for supporting Salafi-jihadist Al-Qaeda

and the forces of the Taliban.

The recent decline in jihadist activity, particularly in West Asia, has also been attributed to the fall in global oil prices. With the price of crude crashing in recent years, the extra wealth in the hands of the private donors as well as some regimes funding terror groups appears to have diminished substantially.

Even the lure of capturing oil wells, which had previously incentivised upstart radical groups to become powerful overnight, does not seem so feasible anymore. For instance, it was the ISIS capture of Mosul city and the oil-rich adjoining area in 2014, which gave it international notoriety overnight, and even helped it capture more recruits and territory across Iraq and Syria. A repeat of that phenomenon seems highly unlikely and less of a windfall today. In fact, the slump in oil prices appears to be in secular decline because of increased production by non-OPEC members, the rise of shale oil, the emergence of non-oil energy technologies, the launch of hybrid cars, etc.²⁵

It has also been contended that the presence of US forces in the region has been the main trigger for terrorist violence in the region. The anticipated withdrawal of US forces from West Asia (whether real or perceived) has also reduced the motivation among Arab youth to fight the Western military presence.

In addition, a new generation of Arab leaders, who have received modern education and wish to build a post-oil knowledge economy over an already thriving economic base are charting future policies. This young leadership – led by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, the Crown Prince of the UAE, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Amir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, among others – was raised after the historic Six Day War of 1967, and in a geopolitical environment quite different from that of their predecessors. These leaders have witnessed Israel as a powerful West Asian state from the time of their birth, unlike the earlier generation of Arab leaders had resisted its creation in the 1940s. The young Sheikhs are also more dedicated to their newly forged national identities, and they like to identify themselves as Saudis, Emaratis, Qataris, etc. – unlike the previous generation that remained beholden to the larger Arab national identity and causes. Thus, trite ideological slogans invoking Arab and Islamic references fail to resonate with this breed of Arab millennials as much. They have become deeply suspicious of these after the Arab Spring, and are anxious to secure

the economic gains derived from oil revenues in order to build an equally prosperous post-oil future²⁶.

As Saudi Arabia moves ahead with its Vision 2030 economic blueprint, the real security threat to its development goals issues not from Israel but from the revisionist expansionism of Iran, Turkey, and the several jihadist actors in the region. This realisation marks a major shift in the threat perception of most Sunni Arab states, including GCC monarchies, Egypt, and other countries of North Africa.

Abraham Accords: The Fledgling Semitic Neologism

In fact, the threat of Iran looms large as USA completed its troop-level draw-down to 2,500 each in Iraq and Afghanistan by 15 January 2021²⁷. The fact that Tehran already holds greater sway over at least four major capitals of the region – Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, and Sanaa²⁸ – and can instigate dissensions and unrest even within GCC states (such as in Shiite majority populations of Bahrain and in some Saudi regions), points to a greater sense of insecurity in the Sunni world – perhaps unrivalled in its history, with the arguable exception of Mongol invasions in the 12th and 13th centuries.

It is this sense of foreboding that has resulted in the coming together of former arch-enemies – Israel and Sunni Arab states - under a Semitic banner to stave off the imperial challenge posed by the neo-Safavid and the neo-Ottoman hegemons. In fact, the moniker ‘Abraham Accords’ seems more exclusivist than inclusive, as the Semitic Israelis and Arabs (purported descendants of Abraham’s grandfather Shem, from where the word Semitic originates)²⁹ seek to keep out non-Semite Iran and Turkey from their territories.

Another curious astringent to the fledgling neologism-cum-agreement is the Israeli-Arab distrust of the USA itself. Both the Obama and Trump administrations³⁰ have been favourable to the idea of the so-called ‘Pivot to Asia’, which refers to US plans for a shift in its focus away from the so-called Middle Eastern sphere and towards a greater diplomatic, military and economic investment in East Asian countries, some of which are in close proximity to the People’s Republic of China³¹. With US President Joe Biden’s recent appointment of Kurt Campbell (known as the brains behind the ‘Asia Pivot’ concept),³² as Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific in the National Security Council, it is believed that the new American dispensation would speed up its delayed ‘rebalancing’ *out* of West Asia. This makes the Sunni Arab states -

particularly the GCC sheikhdoms – and Israel highly uncertain about US intentions in being their longstanding security provider. In fact, both Israel and the GCC were critical of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), known commonly as the Iran nuclear deal, signed under the Obama presidency.

When the Trump administration withdrew from the JCPOA in May 2018, these newly reconciled Semitic brothers felt more reassured, and less apprehensive that the USA might be tempted to make Iran a possible US geostrategic ally against Russia and China, at the expense of Israel and the GCC. In fact, the prospect of the Biden administration reviving the JCPOA can be surmised as the bait Trump dangled for these two feuding US allies to normalise relations, and put up a united front against any prospective US-Iran rapprochement. In fact, the Gulf States and Israel have recently asked the Biden administration to grant them a seat at any imminent talks over the revival of an Iran nuclear deal³³. However, news in the media about the forthcoming release of a US intelligence report on the Khashoggi murder³⁴, and the adverse views of Biden's incoming team on Israeli settlement activities³⁵ do not seem reassuring signs to the traditional US allies.

Iran's 'Land Bridge' to the Mediterranean

In fact, any prospective rapprochement between the USA and Iran would strengthen the latter's rising sway over much of the Levant, and several other theatres across West Asia.

On the pretext of clearing ISIS remnants in Syria and Iraq, Iran is said to have sent in tens of thousands of its military personnel (particularly from its Quds Force) into Syria who, along with Shiite fighters of the Lebanese Hezbollah, have taken direct combat roles in that country since 2012. There are also US reports that Tehran is building a supposed 'land bridge' that links Tehran to the Mediterranean, as it passes through the cities of Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut.

"The regime continues to seek a corridor stretching from Iran's borders to the shores of the Mediterranean," claimed former US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo. "Iran wants this corridor to transport fighters and an advanced weapons system to Israel's doorsteps"³⁶. Former national security adviser, Ambassador John Bolton has also said on record: "Iran has established an arc of control from Iran through Iraq to Assad's regime in Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon." He claims that this "invaluable geo-strategic position" enhances Tehran's ability to threaten Israel, Jordan, and US allies in the Persian Gulf³⁷.

Initially dismissed as an implausible proposition, Western assessments began to change in the wake of increasing evidence to the contrary. By early 2018, there was a general consensus on the meaning of "land bridge," even though its significance was disputed. It was then understood as essentially three main road routes cutting through Iraq and Syria, ending at the Syrian coast, southern Lebanon, and even Israel's border. However, since 2019, the 'land bridge' is being understood as a land corridor used for transporting people, resources, and weaponry deep into Iranian-backed militias across various parts of the region³⁸.

In fact, the stretch of this corridor has extended further eastward, with Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, stating in December last year that the Iranian-trained militia Liwa Fatemiyoun, currently fighting in Syria, might be deployed to Afghanistan to help a future Afghan government with counterterrorism operations³⁹.

Many commentators liken Iran's 'land bridge' into the Levant and beyond, to the Achaemenid extension into the Mediterranean,^{40,41} as well as its growing sway over West Asia as reminiscent of the Parthian and Sassanid hegemony over the region. But, more than the 'land bridge' or 'corridor to the Mediterranean', Iran has, over the decades, developed a worldwide conglomeration of proxies, surrogates and partners, now known as the Iran Threat Network (ITN), which are a major cause of Western concern.

The main poster child of this enterprise is the Lebanese Hezbollah, which by itself maintains a global outreach, with operatives active in several countries as far as central Africa, Latin America, and even Southeast Asian countries. The ITN also has groups trained and supported by the IRGC as well as the elite Quds Force, and includes the Houthis in Yemen, the Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria (part of the Popular Mobilization Forces), and the Afghan and Pakistan Shia militant groups – the Liwa Fatemiyoun and Liwa Zainebiyoun battalions - some of which were transported to Syria in recent years⁴².

Today, the ITN is said to be a key pillar of Iranian grand strategy, and its most effective means of force projection. Thus, Iran is able to wield tremendous influence far from its borders to hurt the vital interests of its adversaries.

Iran's revolutionary and revisionist outlook also gets a fillip from its version of Shiite Islamism, which is born out of Ayatollah Khomeini's doctrine of Vilayat-e-Faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist) as well as Shiite millenarianism that envisions the coming of the Awaited Mahdi to liberate Jerusalem.

Neo-Ottomanism and the Neo-Safavid Antithesis

However, Iran's imperial revisionism in the region finds a major contender in President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey. In 1923, the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the modern Turkish state came about with the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne. Following this treaty, Turkey oriented itself towards Europe, and geopolitically turned its back on West Asia. However, Turkey's failure in being accepted as a member of the European Union brought in the rule of the Islamist AKP by the turn of the millennium.

Over the last 15 years, the Turkish government under Erdogan has drifted away from the spirit of the Treaty of Lausanne in an attempt to revive a pre-Kemalist Ottoman outlook, showing greater interest in its Islamic identity, and making more ingress in the affairs of West Asia⁴³.

For instance, in 2020 itself, the Turkish government converted the historic Haga Sophia into a mosque meddled with Greece in the Mediterranean waters, insulted the French president over his counter-terrorism policies, launched a military offensive in support of Azerbaijan in its war with Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh region backed Islamist GNA coalition fighting Egypt-backed Haftar forces in Libya, continued its military incursions into Iraq and Syria, hobnobbed with Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Palestinian territories, backed Pakistan premier's vitriol against India, and spurred its military and business influence in countries of Central Asia and Central Africa.

In fact, Erdogan's maverick policies seem to have antagonised not only its erstwhile allies the USA and Israel in recent years, as Turkey seems to be foregoing its NATO commitments and pursuing its own plans at variance with Western interests. It has also emerged as a threat to Russia and Iran, following his support for Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Iran, in particular, has been incensed by the Turkish president's participation in the Azerbaijan victory celebrations over the 'liberation' of Nagorno-Karabkh from Armenia, where Erdogan recited a line from the controversial Azeri poem 'Aras'. The line runs thus: "They tore the Aras [River] and filled it with rocks and sticks, I will not be separated from you. They have separated us forcibly"⁴⁴.

Tehran took exception to Erdogan's recitation, with its Foreign Ministry issuing a harsh warning. In fact, both the Iranian government and its media found the recitation an attempt to arouse Azeri-Turkish nationalists to foment separatism among Iran's restive Azeri population. Interestingly, the editor-in-chief of Iranian daily, *Sazandegi*, Mohammad Kuchani, reacted to Erdogan's recitation thus:

As an Iranian, I believe that the only answer to neo-Ottomanism is ‘neo-Safivism. [I am not advocating] reviving the Safavi rule (which made many mistakes), but [reviving] a reformed [version of it] and reviving its heritage in the modern age, just as Erdogan shifted from Ottomanism to ‘new’ Ottomanism⁴⁵.

It is noteworthy that, throughout recorded history, Ionian and Persian rulers have fought legendary wars against each other to carve out their empires across much of West Asia – an archetypical rivalry which harks back to the Achaemenid conquests of Cyrus and Darius, followed by the Alexandrian victory over Persia, the Byzantine-Sassanid wars, and the Ottoman-Safavid hostilities.

Therefore, the Russia-backed Turkey-Iran cooperation brought about by the Astana talks in 2017 is already starting to fray at the seams, with both countries objecting to each other’s actions in Syria, Azerbaijan, and other places. The rivalry is, in fact, quite old and bitter in that it is believed that Iran’s conversion from majority Sunni Islam to Shi’ism was mainly the result of the Safavid dynasty’s (1507-1722) opposition to their Ottoman overlords, which led to such extreme animosity that Safavid Iran forged for itself a new and different sectarian identity^{46,47}.

Thus, even the seemingly religious and sectarian fault lines in West Asia, often have deeper and more hidden nationalist, racial, and historical roots – sometimes predating Islam – which may now re-emerge as the pressure exerted from extra-regional powers gradually lifts from the region and a new wave of historical revisionism rises among old imperial powers. At this time, one can only hope that the incoming Biden administration at the White House manages to heal the deep sectarian and nationalist fissures running through the West Asian geostrategic arena and the regional balance of power is set on a more even keel.

Notes:

- ¹ Peter Beinart, ‘Trump Couldn’t Play the Tough Guy This Time’, *The New York Times*, 28 October 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/28/opinion/trump-biden-foreign-policy.html>
- ² US Politics and Policy, ‘Top Voting Issues in 2016’, Pew Research Center, 7 July 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2016/07/07/4-top-voting-issues-in-2016-election/>
- ³ US Politics and Policy, ‘Important Issues in the 2020 election’, Pew Research Center, 13 August 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/08/13/important-issues-in-the-2020-election/>
- ⁴ ‘Global Terrorism Index 2020, Measuring the Impact of Terrorism’, Institute for

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- ⁵ Andrew Hanna and Garret Nada, 'Jihadism: A Generation After 9/11,' Wilson Center, 10 September 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/jihadism-generation-after-911>
- ⁶ Adam Goldman, Eric Schmitt, Farnaz Fassihi and Ronen Bergman, 'Al-Qaeda's Abu Muhammad Al Masri Secretly Killed in Iran', *The New York Times*, 27 November, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/13/world/middleeast/al-masri-abdullah-qaeda-dead.html>
- ⁷ Baker Atyani and Syed Salahuddin, 'Al-Qaeda Chief Zawahiri has Died in Afghanistan – Sources', *Arab News*, 20 November 2020, <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1765746/world>
- ⁸ Daniel Byman, 'Comparing Al-Qaeda and ISIS: Different Goals, Different Targets', Brookings, 29 April 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/comparing-al-qaeda-and-isis-different-goals-different-targets/>
- ⁹ Rukmini Callimachi, 'ISIS Leader Paid Rival for Protection but Was Betrayed by His Own', *The New York Times*, 30 October 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/30/world/middleeast/isis-leader-al-baghdadi.html>
- ¹⁰ Mina Al-Lami, 'Africa's Sahel Becomes Latest Al-Qaeda, ISIS Battleground', BBC Monitoring, 11 May 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52614579>
- ¹¹ Souad Mekhennet and Joby Warrick, 'The Appeal of ISIS Fades Among Europeans Who Returned Home From Syria', *The Washington Post*, 15 June 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/the-appeal-of-isis-fades-among-europeans-who-returned-home-from-syria/2020/06/14/754b3e0e-acb9-11ea-9063-e69bd6520940_story.html
- ¹² Ibid.
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