

**TEN YEARS AND ON – RECKONING WITH A SUI GENERIS
ANNIVERSARY AS ELUSIVE AS NON-CELEBRATORY**

*Glosses on Markers and Symbols Defining the MENA Region's
Profile During the Years 2010s, and the Passage
to the 21st Century's Third Decade too*

*An Exploration Guided by a Tool Kit Including Some Iconoclastic Lens,
Useful when Requested by the Political, Diplomatic and Geopolitical
Circumstances, Nationally, Regionally and Internationally*

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Abstract. The compound of glosses included in the present article are aiming at reaching a better “digesting” of two of the main *markers* imprinted on the MENA region by the years 2010s, with the corresponding *dual legacy* relayed to the Century's third decade:

(i). The Arab Uprisings, a.k.a. Arab Spring, in what appears, ten years later, at best as a work in progress if not a foretold failure: a lot of hope at the beginning, meagre achievements along the way, finally tempering the initial enthusiasm;

(ii). New dynamics and evolving structural changes in the traditional interests and actions with regard to MENA by international and regional powers.

Along our own perspective on the issue on the subject-matter, the article includes takeaways from some of the most relevant studies and books from the plethora published over the period, dealing with the two markers, holistically or in their particular dimensions, providing as such a substantive part of the *tangibles* for the present article.

Given the very nature of the theme considered, touching also on the *intangibles* would enlarge the approach's vision, hence what could be called our exclusive contribution in terms of a couple of basic *symbols*, coming to complete MENA's portrayal for the time.

Keywords: *Arab Spring, MENA, Markers, Symbols*

Mottos:

“Ten years ago, much of the Arab world erupted in jubilant revolt against the dictatorial regimes whose corruption, cruelty and mismanagement had mired the Middle East in poverty and backwardness for decades. Ten years on,

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*the hopes awakened by the protests have vanished – but the underlying conditions that drove the unrest are as acute as ever.”*¹

*“The political and social impact of these popular uprisings remains significant today, years after many of them ended.”*²

*“An introduction into the Middle East in the twenty-first century will have to grapple with the Arab uprisings that are transforming the region in profound ways. It is still unclear what long-term impact these popular revolutions will have, but it is clear that the game has changed, and that the Middle East will never look quite the same.”*³

*“... the narrative of the Arab Spring being driven by an overeducated and underemployed youth.”*⁴

*“The 2010-2020 decade of protests should be seen not as a one – off “Arab Spring” by citizens who feel degraded, but rather as a new iteration in a century-long quest for dignity and political representation across the entire region.”*⁵

Introduction

Motto:

*“The history of the Arab Spring is yet to be written.”*⁶

With the 21st Century’s second decade’s “loop of time” firmly closed by now and having the continuum of its core essence resolutely relayed to the 2020s, one can examine without much constraint some of “*the markers*” which were imprinted, over those fateful ten years, on MENA by the “work” of the respective portion of time. In other words, *the second decade of the Twenty First Century* proved a consequential chapter of History and that at least through two of *the markers* it left on the region, both of them structural components of MENA’s profile, which proved also an enduring “relay” passed to the next decade.

First *marker*, *the Arab Uprisings*, known also as “*Arab Spring*”, a resonantly metaphoric appellation though not unanimously accepted, being largely contested in the very Arab fold. Indeed, beyond the privileged denomination used by the local analysts, namely that of “*Arab uprisings/revolutions/awakening*”, if a more general metaphorical denomination was to be given to those evolutions, the foreign observers obliged almost without delay – *the Arab Spring*. And that in

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2021/arab-spring-10-year-anniversary-lost-decade/>.

² <https://www.history.com/topics/middle-east/arab-spring>.

³ Lucia Volk (editor), *The Middle East in the World. An Introduction*, New York and London, Routledge, 2015, p. 38.

⁴ “Moments that changed the Middle East. Where the Arab Spring began”, *Arab News*, 14 May 2020. https://www.arabnews.jp/en/45thanniversary/article_20930/.

⁵ Rami G. Khouri, Rami G. Khouri, *The Decade of Defiance & Resistance: Reflections on Arab Revolutionary Uprisings and Responses from 2010 – 2020*, Global Perspectives Series, The Soufan Center, May 2021, p. 6. https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/TSC-Global-Perspectives-Series_The-Decade-of-Defiance-Resistance-MENA-Protest-Movements_May-2021_FINAL.pdf.

⁶ <https://www.american.edu/sis/news/20210406-10-years-later-what-is-the-legacy-of-the-arab-spring.cfm>.

spite of the “seasonal” connotation of the word “spring”, coming in contradiction with a *process* unfolding, in varying degrees, over several years.⁷

Of course, more than semantics is at stake. With the “the biological inception” in Tunisia, at the end of the Century’s first decade, *the Arab Uprisings/ Spring* further expanded as rapidly as extensively, by the beginning of the 2010s, with Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Libya, constituting a *sui generis* “*uprisings first wave*”⁸, followed toward the end of the decade, by the “second wave”, which included Algeria, Iraq, Sudan, altogether representing resounding landmarks of what would become a tortuous and rather inconclusive destiny journey for a good part of the region’s people almost instantly involved in episodes of uprisings and protests, in cases at least apparently pursuing a domino paradigm, and generally not strange to violence and use of force from the authorities (still) in power. Eventually, a fundamental dimension of the second decade’s legacy to its successor is that “The various Arab uprisings have not followed a single trajectory. Moreover, they have resulted in a wide range of outcomes, despite common grievances and protest methods underlying them. Only Tunisia transitioned into a constitutional democracy, and Sudan is in the midst of a novel three-year transition to pluralistic democracy by 2022, co-managed by civilians appointed by the protesters and elements of the old military regime. Egypt returned to harsh military rule, as Field Marshall-turned-President Abdel-Fattah Sisi harnessed local and regional Arab support to overthrow the democratically elected Islamist government of President Mohammad Morsi. Bahrain essentially accepted Saudi Arabian tutelage and protection. In destructive turns, Yemen, Syria, and Libya suffered civil wars that quickly attracted many regional and foreign interventions. Some country protests were more localized and intermittent over many years, and triggered replacements of presidents and prime ministers without altering the basic power structure or socio-economic policies in any tangible manner (i.e., Jordan, Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania). A few governments fought back fiercely to suppress the uprisings, usually with Arab or foreign military support (i.e., Syria, Bahrain).”⁹

Hence a sound bite that captures the glaring reality of all these: MENA’s arc from December 2010 & January 2011 to today – the people once hopeful, now mainly frustrated.

⁷ Against such a backdrop, the term “Arab Spring” is seen with some reservations by western analysts too. In James L. Gelvin’s opinion, the respective term has seemed appropriate in the early, heady days of the uprisings. Today, however, it appears more ironic than descriptive. There are other problems with the term as well. From the reality that the uprisings were not entirely Arab (the case of Berbers in Libya), to the fact that events in the Arab world during 2010-2011 cannot be viewed as a discrete phenomenon that might be isolated within the span of a single “season”. Not only did some uprisings continue in one form or another afterward, others began long after the arrival of the 2011 summer solstice. James L. Gelvin, *The New Middle East What Everyone Needs to Know*, New York, Oxford University Press 2018, pp. 27-28.

⁸ Gelvin reminds that another term used to describe what has been happening in the Arab world since the self-immolation of the Tunisian Bouazizi is “wave”, as in a “revolutionary wave”. From this perspective, other observers consider that presently, what has been happening in the MENA region, here and there, could be considered as “a second wave” of the Arab upheaval started with events in December 2010-January 2011. Thinking of the Arab uprisings in terms of a wave is useful if it is understood that what happened in the Arab world in 2010-2011 not only had a region-wide dimension, but a local one as well. James L. Gelvin, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-28.

⁹ Rami G. Khoury, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

Second marker of the MENA region for the period of the 2010s was represented by the particular dynamics cum changes also, politically and strategically, in some cases a resurgence, in others a true “retreat”, of the perennial interests and actions with regard to MENA by regional and international powers, plus some non-state actors.

Notably, the number of those “powers” was rather small, first in the regional framework: mainly the non-Arab ones – Israel, Iran and Turkey, in addition to a few emergent or assertive Arab powers – Saudi Arabia and the UAE, plus Egypt, seemingly in the reconstruction as a regional power. As for the global powers with interests and corresponding movements in 21st Century MENA, *the quartet* made of the United States of America, the Russian Federation, the European Union and China has remained the prevalent “format” but with notable changes in the “magma” of interests followed, politically and geo-strategically, as well as the pattern of operational/practical interventions. Non-state/ proxy actors have been prevalently local but working in direct connivance with the outside forces’ goals, as depending largely on their support – material, financial, military.

PART I

A Portrait of Today’s MENA – Nuances Brought in by the Two Markers

By its geo-strategic weight in the global “concert”, the MENA region might had appeared, during the 2010s and at the beginning of 2020s, as that part of the world most intensely scrutinized and “portrayed” and that in a dynamic drive, inherently mirroring its inner characteristics, in their evolution, on one hand, and in accordance with the involved portraitists’ “talents”, on the other hand. As a matter of example, here there are the main lines of such a picture, as of the 2021 summer: *“a region beset by widespread upheaval and civil war, shifting geopolitical alignments, and the competition between rival coalitions seeking to expand their spheres of influence and determine outcomes in weak and fractured states of the region, this dynamic has taken on a powerful strategic imperative for the Gulf side, in particular.”*¹⁰

Undoubtedly, MENA’s picture would be enriched with specific “lights and shadows”, becoming as such, in the end, a more “nuanced” one, and that due to particular perspectives brought into the fore by the above-mentioned *two markers*, individually taken, but also following their many points of intersection, structuring as such a kind of unique *MENA geopolitical brand* for the twenty century’s second decade and its relay to the next decade. Hermeneutically, through the prism of a two-dimension negator paradigm we could have a core nuancing for the respective region’s picture: neither the Arab Spring/Revolution/Uprisings/Upheaval, nor

¹⁰ Omar H. Rahman, “The emergence of GCC-Israel relations in a changing Middle East”, Brookings Doha Center, July 28, 2021. https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-emergence-of-gcc-israel-relations-in-a-changing-middle-east/?utm_medium=email&_hsmi=148816056&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-_UtPofX_PhoTuWY78_W8E9f7EmTr-.

the external interests and influence, have been evolving along linear processes, as MENA do not appear as a homogeneous region, 10 years on: “Variations in local history, state structures, and state capability shaped the course of each uprising. Those variations made it impossible for Libyans, Yemenis, or Syrians, for example, to replicate the relative peacefulness and quick resolution which marked the initial phase of the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings... And there was an additional factor that shaped the path of a number of the uprisings: foreign intervention. States both outside and within the region had an interest in the outcomes of the various uprisings and acted accordingly. Some wanted one or another uprising to succeed, others, to fail. Indeed, in Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, and even Egypt, foreign assistance proved decisive for successes enjoyed by insurgents (Libya), counterinsurgents (Yemen, Bahrain, Egypt), or both (Syria).”¹¹

We have here a topic which has been widely dealt with and intensely debated through hundreds of studies elaborated by respected scholars and published in referential IR magazines, in parallel with dozens of books printed by reputable publishing houses.

Practically, we will follow some relevant considerations and assessments on key-nodal points of the two markers as extracted from referential studies and books published along 10 plus 1 years, which, for “operational” considerations, will be distributed along three clusters, each with distinct and specific contributions to an overall portrait of the MENA region, including a balance sheet of lessons learned and “unlearned”. Being also aware of a specious caveat coming as a must: especially with regard to the Arab Spring/Uprisings/Revolution, one could be faced with a lot of talk, in some cases to the limit of sophistry and *circumlocution*, while the real aims of the international and regional powers’ interests and movements with regard to MENA could be sometime flying under the radar, not escaping on moments jeremiads on outsiders’ vacillations.

Cluster 1 (C1): covering developments during 2011-2015, the first half of the 21st Century’s second decade, as a period of inception and further expanding for the two markers, with the coalescing profile of the Arab Spring/Revolution through components of its *first wave* and their multiple causations, respectively a time for the international and regional powers’ first reactions. Not excluding possible which could had proved later unwarranted. Take the case of Robin Wright, otherwise an outstanding commentator especially on Middle East and Islamic issues, who in an inciting book published in 2011 (hardcover)/2012 (paperback), with the title *Rock the Casbah: Rage and Rebellion Across the Islamic World*, described the Arab Spring as “the fourth in a series of pivotal turning points of the Middle East over a century: the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the formation of Turkey and the Arab states; the 1948 creation of Israel and displacement of Palestinians; and Iran’s Islamic revolution that codified fundamentalist dogma. The Arab Spring, it seems, is the swan song for the

¹¹ James L. Gelvin, *The New Middle East What Everyone Needs to Know* New York, Oxford University Press 2018, pp. 28-29.

Ottoman legacy of despots – a transition of power from the old guard to a younger, more democratic-minded generation.”¹²

Today, ten years later Mrs. Robin Wright’s vision is yet to be confirmed, taking shape effectively and structurally, beyond an uncontested virtual projection. Similarly, “*the swan*” expected to perform the song invoked hasn’t yet arrived. Instead, a swarm of “*black swan*” have been visited the MENA region, bringing with them the specific “*gifts wrapped in black*”: devastating civil wars, millions of refugees, hunger and health crisis. *Eventually, being not anticipated, the entire Arab Spring process could be labelled as “black swan”.*

C1: On the Arab Spring/Uprisings 2011–2015

Motto:

“Revolution 2.0: The Power of the People is Greater than the People in Power.”¹³

If the outburst of popular protests on the Arab streets, with December 2000 (in Tunisia) but mainly with January 2001 (Egypt), appeared as a complete surprise for everybody, from inside the region and outside it, equally surprising would be to speak about “experiences/lessons” just 5-6 months into the historic developments. Seemingly, such an approach didn’t look too challenging for the French researcher Jean-Pierre Filiu, *The Arab Revolution: Ten Lessons from the Democratic Uprising*: “History is on the making in the Arab world, with all its turmoil and expectations,... this Arab revolution already (by May 2011) offers a fascinating body of experiences and data from which ten lessons can be drawn and discussed: 1. Arabs are no exception {If there is an Arab exception, it is an exceptionally young population... a “youth bulge” and unemployment hitting the youth hard all over the Arab region, at a rate of 20 to 40 per cent (twice the world average), without mentioning underemployment or de-qualification, a standard feature of young graduates, the “youth bulge” leads to a steady growth of a less employed and better educated population, it (also) leads to a very disturbing feeling of estrangement from one’s own land, where the “system” and the “regime” are but one word in Arabic, *nidham*..., it is a painful reality for a whole section of the Arab youth. For many, there just seems to be ‘no future’}; 2. Muslims are not only Muslims; 3. Anger is a power for the younger; 4. Social networks work; 5. Leaderless movements can win; 6. The alternative to democracy is chaos; 7. Islamist must choose; 8. Jihadis could become obsolete; 9. Palestine is still a mantra; 10. No domino effect in the renaissance... The Arab revolution is a heterogeneous mix of movements of various extents, depths and scope... The Arab revolution inspires a heterogeneous coalition of movements which share all over the region the same radical slogan: ‘The people want to overthrow

¹² Quoted as such by Phil Karber in his book *Fear and Faith in Paradise. Exploring Conflict and Religion in the Middle East*, New York, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, INC., 2012, pp. XIV-XV.

¹³ Wael Ghonim, *Revolution 2.0: The Power of the People is Greater Than the People in Power*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012.

the regime'... The Arab revolution is at the same time democratic, popular and inclusive... The Arab revolution is a democratic renaissance. It will suffer backlashes, betrayals, defeats and vicious repression... History is in the making. This Arab renaissance is just beginning."¹⁴

Other analysts weren't so mavericks, being content to focus on aspects related to the causation behind the events or concrete shapes and manifestations they embarked upon. That is the case of James L. Gelvin, with *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know*, a book published also rather early – 2012, underlined that, "Overall, on a scale measuring the quality of political and social life, not one Arab state provided a high 'standard of human welfare' to its populations. Seven small Arab states, representing 8.9 percent of the population of the seventeen countries surveyed, offered a medium standard of human welfare to their populations. The remainder, with 91.1 percent of the population of the 17 Arab states surveyed, were marked by a low standard of human welfare among their populations."¹⁵

In her turn, Samia Mehrez as an editor ambited to *Translating Egypt's Revolution. The Language of Tahrir* shedding light on "One of the most remarkable accomplishments of the various uprisings in the Arab World since January 2011 (which) has been the radical transformation of the relationship between people, their bodies, and space; a transformation that has enabled sustained mass convergence, conversation, and agency for new publics whose access to and participation in public space has for decades been controlled by oppressive, authoritarian regimes. Like other uprisings and revolutionary moments whose histories have first been written in great public spaces – from Place de la Concorde during the French Revolution to Occupy movements around the world today – people in the Arab World have reclaimed the right to be together as empowered bodies in public space exercise their right to linguistic, symbolic, and performative freedom, despite the enormous price in human life that continued to *be paid*. In the case of Egypt, the successive waves of the January 2011 uprising with its initial mesmerizing eighteen days in Tahrir ('Midan al-Tahrir')"¹⁶. Notably in this regard, the considerations displayed in the book go beyond the intellectual sophistry, among the mix of elements playing in the respective "space" being identified the one with particular specificity for Egypt – the jokes. "The Egyptian Revolution has been labeled 'al-Thawra al-daHika' (the Laughing Revolution) not only because of the avalanche of jokes it has generated but, perhaps more importantly, because of the very structure and instant dissemination of the jokes themselves, which were inspired to a great extent by both traditional and social media discourses, forms, and languages. During the January 25 Revolution, people used jokes as a venue to freely express their opinion and to sustain the ongoing uprising by absorbing unfolding events and making fun of them. The steady stream of comedy flowing through Midan al-Tahrir allowed people to defy the

¹⁴ London, Hurst & Company, 2011, pp. 3-148.

¹⁵ New York, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 6.

¹⁶ Cairo, New York, The American University in Cairo Press, pp. 14, 45, 183-184, 191, 200-201.

regime in nonviolent ways... One of the jokes that was widely circulated in the early days of the revolution tried to capture the power of new media and its devastating impact on the regime: 'Nasser and Sadat (the two late Presidents of Egypt, the first rumored to have been poisoned and the second was assassinated during a military parade) are joined in the afterlife by the third president (Mubarak) and they compare notes on the reasons for their respective fates: Nasser and Sadat ask Mubarak: 'Poison or assassination? He replies: 'FACEBOOK'. A second joke came in response to the revolution's main slogan 'The people demand the change of the regime', which was one of the largest banner that fluttered in Tahrir during the January-February sit-in, The joke inverts this demand as a way to mock Mubarak's shock and refusal to accept the people's uprising against him: 'Breaking News: President Mubarak was seen holding a big banner that read: 'The president demands the change of the people'."

On a more serious note, a number of referential works dealt with substantive elements proper to the "revolutionary situation" the Arab world embarked upon, elements which were not present, for various reasons, during previous uprisings periods, in the MENA region or in the areas of the world:

– Lin Noueihed and Alex Warren, *The Battle for Arab Spring*. Revolution, Counter-Revolution and the Making of a New Era: "On the eve of the Arab Spring, a new generation was coming of age. It was the generation that had grown up watching satellite television in Arabic, with a deluge of political opinions and news spin... It was a generation that was connected by mobile phone, by Black Berry and by iPad. It was a generation that was internet-savvy; that harnessed e-mail and Twitter and Facebook to build networks with like-minded young people in other Arabic-speaking countries and beyond. It was the 61 per cent of Arabs who were under 30. Unlike their parents, swathes of whom were illiterate, most of this generation could read and write... and benefited from a cultural and communications boom in recent years... (among them) a new generation of dissident bloggers, who harnessed the internet and social media to raise awareness of strikes and generate wider public support. Once the protests began, despite government efforts to close down the internet, ban specific sites or cut off mobile phones, they would not be able to halt the momentum..."¹⁷

– Toby Manhire (Editor), *The Arab Spring*. Rebellion, revolution and a new world order: "If circumstances differed from country to country, some common themes stood out. Security 'solutions' do not work for long – or not unless followed by meaningful concessions. Activists across the Arab world spoke of breaking through the barrier of fear so that even the harshest repression no longer deters. And one revolution inspired another in a domino effect of sympathy and solidarity: Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Syria, and so on. A common language worked its unifying magic; crowds everywhere chanted the same simple demand: Ash-sha'ab yurid isqat al-nizam (The people want the overthrow of the regime)... 'The revolution can be tweeted' someone quipped, 'but the transition cannot.' Forecasting is risky, but the political weather in the Middle East and

¹⁷ New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2012, pp. 56-58, 307.

North Africa will stay turbulent... far beyond. Yet if much remains to be decided, it is clear that the genie of Arab people power is out of the bottle. It does not look likely to be stopped up again any time soon.”¹⁸

– 2013 Lina Khatib, *Image Politics in the Middle East. The Role of the Visual in Political Struggle*: “Perhaps the most notable characteristic of all the uprisings in the Arab world in 2011 is that they were leaderless. Unlike Nasser’s, Qaddafi’s, Hafez al-Assad’s and Saddam Hussein’s revolutions, the Arab Spring revolutions were not led by a single man. They were people’s revolutions, in which the image of a singular leader was erased, to be replaced with the image of the multitude.”¹⁹

– Nayef R.F. Al-Rodhan, Graeme P. Herd and Lisa Watanabe, *Critical Turning Points in the Middle East 1915-2015*: “The Arab Spring heralds a turning point which validates the notion that governance paradigm that fail to meet fundamental dignity needs are unsustainable in the long run. Dignity deficits generated by combination of dogmatic visions of the world, human rights abuses, more often than not committed by state security services, lack of accountability and transparency, failures of justice, and lack of opportunities, innovation and inclusiveness, perpetuated in part by external actors, had produced a combustible mix... What happens in the MENA region, positive or negative, will have a spill-over effect elsewhere.”²⁰

– Paul Danahar, *The New Middle East. The World After the Arab Spring*: “The ingredients that sparked the uprisings existed throughout the region. Nearly every country has a massive ‘youth bulge’ with half its population under the age of twenty-five. That made the competition even tougher for the meagre opportunities available to young people. The aspiration of the youth across the Middle East and North Africa were the same... The ‘youth bulge’ didn’t need to be a problem; it could have been an opportunity if the old Middle East had not been so dysfunctional. In the Middle East the state knew how to turn out graduates, but not how to create an economy to usefully employ them. Even worse, the graduates it did produce didn’t have the right skills to fit the opportunities that were in the markets.”²¹

– For Ilan Pappé, in his book *The Modern Middle East. A Social and Cultural History, by the middle of the decade*, it appeared “very difficult to state with any certainty whether this is a spring or a winter, a European or an Islamist revolution... The transitional period is enigmatic in two major ways. First, we do not know how long it might last; and second, we do not possess a clear vision of where it might lead in concrete and definable terms. (Also, one has) to find a way to deal with emotions since they are far more potent than anything else one has witnessed in spectacle being currently observed in the Middle East... the emotive element happens to be the main factor behind an amazing human revolution.”²²

¹⁸ London, Guardian Books, 2012, pp. VII-XIV.

¹⁹ London-New York, I.B. Tauris, 2013, pp. 207-208.

²⁰ New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013 (in paperback), pp. 215-218.

²¹ London, Bloomsbury, 2014 (paperback edition), pp. 6, 16.

²² London and New York, Routledge, 2014 (Third edition), pp. 25, 325-326, 336.

C1: On the international and regional powers' interests and actions

– Aspects of the interplay between regional powers, on the one hand, and between regional and international powers, on the other, in the context of the Arab uprisings were dealt with rather early by John R. Bradley in a book he entitled *After the Arab Spring. How Islamists Hijacked the Middle East Revolts*: “If the Arab Spring had even a remote chance of ushering in a wave of progressive change, it would have had to challenge, in concrete and progressive ways, the internal power structures and regionwide influence of both Iran and Saudi Arabia. A tall order indeed. Instead, the opposite occurred. The Iranian and Saudi Islamist regimes nipped in the bud their own brief and very limited unrest, then exploited the turmoil to further their geopolitical reach... for decades, Lebanon has provided a faraway playground for them to test each other’s strength through their Sunni and Shia proxies there. When the Shia rebellion in northern Yemen broke out, Saudi Arabia bombed them with the Yemeni government’s blessing while Iran was arming them on the ground. The Arab Spring allowed for the extension of this great game to Bahrain and the Syria... Yemen’s usefulness and importance, like Bahrain’s, is its strategically crucial location. But neither country has a significant oil reserve, while Libya does. This allowed the Saudis to make a deal with Washington: Let us invade Bahrain and we will vote for U.N. Resolution 1973, which kick-started the NATO intervention in Libya... America needed Saudi support for the resolution. This way, Obama could present his Libya war as a humanitarian mission, rather than yet another oil grab, into which he had been half-dragged by his insistent European allies...”²³

– Tariq Ramadan reconfirmed, with his work *The Arab Awakening. Islam and the New Middle East*, what other analysts had commented on too, namely that, “Well before the uprisings themselves, the work of opposition bloggers had been extraordinary; they had all but colonized the web, informing, criticizing and spreading the message of non-violent resistance, of opposition to dictators and of the imperative of liberation. Their style of communication had a powerful impact on young people who had been informed and brought into action through social networking.”²⁴ But the same author went further, enlarging the perspective of approaching the Arab uprisings from their very early inception, the ear 2012: “For the sake of history and for the future of these movements, it would be both inconsistent and shortsighted not to look closely at the connections and the work of preparing the terrain that preceded the upheavals in the Middle East and North Africa.” For an answer to a legitimate interrogation, Tariq Ramadan came to share what other analysts cited: “the direct involvement of powerful American corporations. In point of fact, Google, Twitter and Yahoo were directly involved in training cadre and disseminating information promoting pro-democracy activism on the web. A conference called Internet Liberty 2010, organized by Google on 20-22 September of that year, in Budapest, with the participation of American and European government representatives, saw the launch of the Middle East

²³ New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 20-121, 135-136.

²⁴ London, Allen Lane an imprint of Penguin Books, 2012, pp. 8, 22.

and North Africa Bloggers Network, with organizational impetus from an institute connected with the US Democratic Party... It is hard to ignore the fact that Google's position throughout the uprisings has been virtually identical to that of the US government or of NATO... The United States above all, as well as several European countries, was either aware of or directly involved in the training of bloggers and activists in the Middle East and North Africa as early as 2003-4. Government-financed institutions and NGOs in the United States and Europe welcomed cyber-dissidents from Tunisia, Egypt and virtually all the other Arab countries. They cooperated directly with major American corporations, including Google, and Yahoo, as well Twitter and Facebook. The evidence, which has been verified and confirmed, reveals that the Western countries were not only aware of the activities and mobilizing efforts of the cyber-dissidents, but had identified the leaders and studied their profiles and objectives. The movement can thus not be described as spontaneous. It did not spring suddenly from nothing, taking everyone by surprise".

– If the observer mentioned above brought into discussion the kind of foreign involvement in the preliminary, if preparatory, stages of the Arab revolts, Paul Danahar, with his book *The New Middle East. The World After the Arab Spring*, further developed the respective topic in the ensuing stage, that of unfolding the uprisings: "The people of the Arab world struggled with these new challenges alone. The West had neither the cash nor the inclination to get involved. The world stood back and watched as parts of the Middle East stumbled and fell. The Obama administration's policy in the region was entirely reactive. The only thing the whole Middle East could agree on was that America, the most powerful nations on earth, looked weak and confused there. That was a perception even the US State Department officials conceded privately that they recognized. But there no confusion in President Obama's mind. He cared about preventing Iran from having a bomb and keeping the US out of wars in the Middle East. The United States studied disinterest in the region frustrated diplomats and those engaged in building foreign policy there, but it was entirely in step with the mood of mainstream America. Other nations not directly consumed by the Arab revolts did get involved but it wasn't to lead the staggering Middle East to firmer ground. Gulf money poured in in the immediate aftermath of the revolts as nations and wealthy individuals competed with each other to buy up the loyalty from every shade of Islamist politician or jihadist fighter they could find, regardless of the consequences for the countries they were interfering in... China has been looking to fill any space the US leaves behind if it does begin a slow withdrawal. Europe is becoming more engaged in the Middle East but it is too divided to speak with one firm voice. The temptation to leave the Arab people to sort things out for themselves may be strong for the US, which has reaped very little reward for its efforts in the region. But to bow to it would be a mistake. America's decades-long support for the dictatorships helped fracture the Middle East. The US should help fix it." ²⁵

²⁵ London, Bloomsbury, 2014 (paperback edition), p. 16, 428.

– Having strongly in mind “the historical context” for the relationships between the nations from the Middle East region and the United States and the former European colonial powers, Lucia Volk (Editor) appeared rather preoccupied in her book *The Middle East in the World. An Introduction* to discern a sense of perspective for the foreign interests and effective involvement into MENA’s ongoing developments. In spite of her insistence that “the political and social order of most countries in the Middle East has been profoundly challenged, and in some cases overthrown, whether by forces from without or within, since the mid-1990s”, Lucia Volk let the pessimism overwhelm her when looking for a new exit from the labyrinthine relations of the Middle East with the West: “At the end of the day, the political and economic realities of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries allow the West to do the Middle East what the Middle East cannot do to the West. This fundamental inequality has profound implications for the relationship between individuals, communities, and states in both world regions... Despite the sense of new beginning in academic ventures, it is important to state that one factor will remain constant: the Middle East and the West continue to be linked in unequal ways. The United States dominates the region militarily, even if reluctantly. While plan exist to pull U.S. troops out of Afghanistan, perhaps entirely, the (U.S.) strategic importance of the region is unlikely to diminish. The U.S. Fifth Fleet will likely remain in Bahrain, and will continue to patrol the waters of the Indian Ocean and the Gulf, the hub of most of the world’s oil trade and so on.”²⁶

Cluster 2 (C2): covering evolutions over the period from 2016 to 2020, i.e. the second half of the decade, with *the inception of the “uprisings second wave” – Algeria, Sudan Lebanon, Iraq – whose ripples are yet to be reckoned on.*²⁷ Supposedly, that was also a “maturing” time for the two markers, but the perspective of a radical *tipping point* had been remaining rather elusive.

C2: On the Arab Spring

– The passage to the second half of the 2010s accentuated the skepticism on the region’s perspective against “the revolutionary background”, at best a feeling of cautious optimism. Such a reasoning could be perceived as a major thread in the weaving of an entire book – *Inside the Middle East. Making Sense of the Most Dangerous and Complicated Region on Earth*, authored by Avi Melamed

²⁶ New York and London, Routledge, 2015, pp. 6, 9, 33.

²⁷ Sustained public protests across Iraq since 2011 – including widespread demonstrations in the south in 2012-2013, and 2015 – again erupted in October 2018 and 2019 and spread to most of Iraq’s central and southern population centers. These protests slowed significantly after March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but also in response to assassinations, abductions, and threats by security services and major political parties against activists. Many activists do not venture into the public eye for fear of getting killed – another method the established ruling elites employ to stay in power indefinitely, leaving Arab citizens no option other than nonviolent protests, despite the risk. Street protests against corruption, unemployment, poor services, and an autocratic political system in need of urgent reforms resumed at the end of July 2020 in Baghdad and southern cities. Rami G. Khouri, p. 28.

who eventually managed to reach a kind of mixed feelings: “The world must assist Arab states... but the assistance must be conducted from a position that makes it clear that the central responsibility for the challenges and hardships of the Arab world – as well as the central responsibility to deal with them – fall first and foremost on the Arab world and its leaders. This is a necessary condition for the Arab world to recover and take the road to progress and enlightenment. At present (2016), skepticism that the Arab world will be able to heal is common in the political and cultural discourse of Arab societies and a number of Arab writers have described this (as the Arab journalist Randa Taqi a-Din who entitled an article wrote in September 2015 ‘Dark Future Awaits Middle East Youth’). Yet at the height of the seismic shake-up that is engulfing the Arab world, the overwhelming challenges of Arab societies, and the intensifying inner struggle for over identity, path, and direction, there is the possibility to develop a process that will lead to growth and recovery. But it will be long, complicated, and difficult, accompanied by intense upheavals and more bloodshed... There is room for cautious optimism.”²⁸

Philip Robins, reviewing in his book *The Middle East. A Beginner's Guide* the forces of “the counter-revolutions and counter-change” reached a conclusion far from a cautious optimism: “Ultimately, the Arab Spring, as a largely spontaneous political movement, proved unable to transform itself into a consolidated and irreversible social process... For this we might look to a cluster of different reasons by way of explanation: the fractious nature of the organized political opposition, the nihilism of some of the protests, the still limited impact of new social media as a medium of mobilization and transformation, and the residual dexterity of some of the regimes and their leaders in the face of the threats by these disparate social forces. It was the country case of Egypt rather than Tunisia that displayed the full cycle of revolution and counter-revolution in its precarious and transparent action... Up to 2016, Egypt's President Sisi was the beneficiary of more than US\$20 billion in foreign investment, in an effort to ensure that traditional Egyptian maladies, such as unemployment and poverty, did not make the country unduly vulnerable, while stymieing the growth of the Muslim Brotherhood more generally.”²⁹

Given the MENA's evolutions by the beginning of the second half of the 2010s, Robert F. Worth came with his book *A Rage for Order. The Middle East in Turmoil*, from Tahrir Square to ISIS to draw everybody's attention on the risk of missing the very essence of the pathway a good part of the region's people embarked upon just a few years before: “The protesters of 2011 had dreamed of building new countries that would confer genuine citizenship and something more: karama, dignity, the rallying cry of all the uprisings. When that dream failed them, many gave way to apathy or despair, or even nostalgia for the old regimes they had assailed. But some ran headlong into the seventh century to search for the same prize. They wanted something they had heard about and imagined all

²⁸ New York, Skyhorse Publishing 2016, pp. 272-275.

²⁹ London, Oneworld Publications 2016, pp. 224- 227.

their lives but never really known: a dawla that would not melt into air beneath their feet, a place they could call their own, a state that shielded its subjects from humiliation and despair.”³⁰

To signal that such a juncture would remain possibly for good far beyond the horizon it didn’t take too much time. The strong voice of Steven A. Cook did just that in a compellingly worded entitled book – *False Dawn. Protest, Democracy, And Violence in the New Middle East*: “For all the genuine enthusiasm that greeted the Arab uprisings and Turkey’s role as a model for its neighbors, the much-anticipated transitions to democratic political systems in the Middle East never occurred. A rather different and significantly darker reality – bleaker than most observers have been willing to admit – has emerged in the region. *The Revolts of 2010 to 2013 Were a False Dawn*. The early predictions of a democratic future were understandable given the romance of the Middle East barricades... The Arab Spring was supposed to give way to transitions to democracy that many hoped would approximate Turkey’s AKP’s Third Way. Not only do the problems of the region persist, but they have grown more acute against the backdrop of the ruins of the Arab republics, the revolutions that never were, the Muslim Brotherhood’s disastrous rule in Egypt, resurgent authoritarianism, limited economic opportunities, and the fragmentation of major countries in the region. Under these circumstances, the Fertile Crescent has become fertile ground for the Islamic State. In the tragedy that has become the Middle East, people are becoming disoriented and unmoored... The Arab Spring never really was. The conjuncture of uprisings, but not revolutions, and the institutional environments begat instability and violence, accentuating identity politics in the region, producing more bloodshed and thwarting the dream of democratic transitions. Authoritarianism in Egypt is resurgent, and Libya is a paradigmatic example of fragmentation, leaving Tunisia only, where promise and despair oscillate. In the overall context of the contested, unstable, uncertain, violent politics of the region, a question remains for outsiders: what to do about it? ... The situation in the Middle East is bleak. It is hard to know precisely how the events in the region will unfold in the coming years... For the moment (2017) it seems clear that instability, violence, and authoritarianism will be critical features of the political landscape.”³¹

N.B. By the month of August 2021, Tunisia offered to its Arab brothers and to the worldwide public opinion generally, a “strong” case for the above-mentioned “oscillation”.

Another MENA region’s picture bleak was done by David D. Kirkpatrick in his book *Into the Hands of the Soldiers*: “By 2016, the hope for democratic change in the Arab world felt like a cruel hoax. It was easy to forget that the revolts of 2011 had created a real opening, that for a time Egypt’s generals had feared public disapproval, or that Tunisia had completed a peaceful rotation of power. The uprisings had spread more chaos and violence across the region than

³⁰ London, Picador, 2016, pp. 233-234.

³¹ New York, A Council of Foreign Relations Book, Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 6-7, 11, 198-200.

at any time since the end of World War I. Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq were riven by civil war; Bahrain was held together only by Saudi military force. Struggles for democracy had degenerated into sectarian feuds. Local antagonists were enlisted as pawns in cynical proxy wars between Saudi Arabia and Iran, or between the UAE and Qatar – two rich little American allies in a bizarre family feud... the jihadists came roaring back after the turn again to authoritarianism... Refugees from Arab conflicts flooded westward and triggered a nationalist backlash. It was scarcely an exaggeration to say that the tumult across the Arab world had helped to elect Trump as president and to scare Britain out of the European Union... (But) uprisings were hardly the source of the chaos It felt obvious in 2011 – and even clearer in 2018 – that the failure of that Arab state system was the cause of the uprising, not its consequence... The old autocracies were as fragile as their rulers had feared, but that was because their dependence on corruption and coercion had hallowed them out.”³²

Then came out two extensive studies exposing two distinct taxonomies of the region’s countries on the Arab Spring backdrop.

First, James L. Gelvin with *The New Middle East What Everyone Needs to Know*: “Once uprisings and protests began to break out in the region, they took a number of forms. In the main, the ones that have broken out thus far (2018) might be placed into five clusters: Tunisia and Egypt, Yemen and Libya, Bahrain and Syria; the monarchies; and Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine... To date, the scorecard for the uprisings that began in 2010 is disheartening... Since 2011, the region has experienced one humanitarian crisis after another.”³³

Second, Marina and David Ottaway, authors of *A Tale of Four Worlds. The Arab Region After the Uprisings*, considering, rather optimistically, that “the Arab region is in the midst of the third epochal transformation in the past 100 years, triggered by the wave of uprisings that swept through it in 2011... The present period is equally momentous; the region is being transformed profoundly and will never go back to what it was. New elements have been injected into the politics and economics of various countries that have already made them different from what they were” concluded that, “The post-uprising story in the Arab region has concerned the consolidation of four separate worlds with different characteristics, concerns and distinct dynamics. In the Levant, the Sisyphean task of state-building that started after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire has returned as the dominant problem. In the Gulf countries, where no uprisings took place except for a quickly repressed one in Bahrain, the example of what was happening elsewhere accelerated efforts to modernize, consolidate their identities and define their position in the world of the twenty-first century. In Egypt – a world unto itself because it is so different from other Arab countries – President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has restored the raw authoritarianism of the military state build by President Gamal Abdel Nasser half a century ago, and is dreaming that

³² London, Bloomsbury Circus, 2018, pp. 332-334.

³³ James L. Gelvin, *The New Middle East What Everyone Needs to Know* New York, Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 33, 48-49.

he can ignore current realities and develop Egypt into a new country of grandiose projects and shiny new cities in the desert. Only in Maghreb has the aftermath of the uprisings aligned to some extent with the demands of citizens: political systems have become somewhat more inclusive, though certainly not fully democratic, and the specter of rising Islamic radicalism has been tamed in part by the integration of the Muslim Brotherhood into the political process. The real import of what is happening has been obfuscated by a widely accepted narrative which holds that the uprisings of 2011 were aspiring democratic revolutions that failed... But focusing on changes that did not take place risks missing the importance of the changes that are taking place.”³⁴

Along such taxonomies, which, as much as they closely mirror the realities on the ground, could prove an epistemologically productive tool for a “deeper” and more nuanced understanding of the complex evolutions in a complicated region, there comes another analyst who reminds us that the word “deep” does could have also a... deeper connotation, that of a political and geopolitical concept, a guise which would be validated in the case of some of MENA’s evolutions during the 2010s. Sean McFate, in his book *The New Rules of War: Victory in the Age of Durable Disorder* writes: “Political scientists and foreign policy experts use the deep state to describe institutions that exercise power independent of, and sometimes over, legitimate political leaders. Sometimes the concept of the deep state is the only way to rationalize the behavior exhibited by authoritarian countries like Turkey, Algeria, Pakistan, Egypt, and Russia... The Arab Spring was a popular revolt against deep states across North Africa and the Middle East. The deep states either crushed or bought off protestors demanding democracy. None fell. In 2016, the government of Egypt moved to more overt security-state dictatorship, in which the deep state is the only state. Iran is a classic deep state, a theocracy with a fig leaf of representative government... Deep states exist, and their naked power will become more apparent as states fade. Their unmasking will prove dangerous, as the protesters of the Arab Spring discovered. When a deep state is threatened, it does not go gentle into that good night. It attacks. It is one of the forces accelerating durable disorder, and through it other powerful countries will go the way the way of Iran, Egypt and so on, in the future.”³⁵

Besides the national context, not always favorable to developments as those included into the Arab Spring, this process should also be placed in a global context. A call made by Kenneth M. Pollack in extremely original book *Armies of Sand. The Past, Present, and Future of Arab Military Effectiveness*: “The Arab Spring is testimony to the political change building in the Arab world, a product of globalization, and that is affecting its culture. Indeed, globalization has had a profound impact on the Arab world. It made the Arab Spring possible, and it is now reshaping Arab culture... (meaning that) There is a growing willingness of people to speak their minds. The younger generation is less willing to blindly follow authority figures. More are willing to take action to change their circumstances.”³⁶

³⁴ London, Hurst & Company, 2019, pp. 1-2.

³⁵ New York William Morrow, an Imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 2019, pp. 162-163.

³⁶ New York, Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 519-520.

By 2020, with the closing of an arc of history maybe not too long, just ten years, but full of both promise and frustration for the nations and their people in the MENA region, Daniel Yergin, in the book *The New Map. Energy, Climate, and the Clash Of Nations* advances a memorable conclusion: “These movements and the change in governments that resulted became known as the Arab Spring, a time of optimism and expectations for a dawn of a new era, evoking William Wordsworth’s words at the start of the French Revolution – “Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive.” But it was not all that long before the bliss turned bleak, and the Arab Spring would instead become something that some would describe as an Arab Winter.”³⁷

C2: On international and regional powers’ interests and actions

At the passage between the first and the second half of the 2010s, Avi Melamed, an admirable analyst, who was trying to *making sense of the most dangerous and complicated region on earth*, as he entitled a dedicated book to the respective topic³⁸, inevitably directed its analytical lens on the U.S. policy in the Middle East.

Inside the Middle East. Making Sense of the Most Dangerous and Complicated Region on Earth: “In a way that is practically unavoidable, United States policy in the Middle East has always been subject to sharp criticism from factors in the Arab world and always will be, no matter the actions it takes or doesn’t take. The Middle East is an extremely complex system, abounding with challenges, interests, changing-interests, inconsistent adversaries and alliances, and power struggles. It has a language and code of its own. There is no uniform policy that would be appropriate for every situation nor is there one that will be satisfactory to all parties involved. The fact that Middle East policy is criticized does not necessarily make the policy totally inaccurate or wrong. For example, the criticism in the Arab world of the United States’ unwillingness to have boots on the ground in Syria does not necessarily attest to the fact that the United States policy on the issue was wrong or misguided... Obama’s unwillingness to fulfill the ultimatum he himself issued to Assad after it was proven that the Syrian regime had used chemical weapons against Syrian civilians, contributed to the growing criticism of his policy in the Arab world... because the United States failed to follow through on its decisively stated threat, the American government was interpreted by Arabs to be weak and unreliable... Dr. Walid Phares, an American of Lebanese descent, wrote in his 2014 book *The Lost Spring: U.S. Policy in the Middle East and Catastrophes to Avoid* that ‘Washington is too hesitant to take action when necessary... US foreign policy failed to see the explosions coming, didn’t meet the challenges of political transformations where and with whom it should (have), and failed in isolating the Jihadi terrorists

³⁷ Great Britain Allan Lane, 2020, p. 236.

³⁸ Avi Melamed, *Inside the Middle East. Making Sense of the Most Dangerous and Complicated Region on Earth*, New York, Skyhorse Publishing, 2016.

worldwide. Too many strategic errors were committed...'. And here comes Avi Melamed with his own assessments: "There are a plethora of examples to support the criticism of misguided American policies (in the Middle East) and beliefs – and a wealth of questions are the result. For example: Why did the United States fail to foresee the Arab Awakening? Why did American intelligence fail to see the looming crisis within the Muslim Brotherhood? Why was the American administration surprised by the collapse of the US-backed government in Yemen? The answer could be that the United States consistently misreads the Middle East; it could be that the American policy makers have been unable to identify the undercurrents in the Middle East and their impact. Since the mistakes can't possibly result from a lack of resources, capacity, or intelligent people, they must result from a built-in, systemic flaw."³⁹

Similarly, Steven A. Cook, in his *False Dawn*, considered that, "The violence and resurgent authoritarianism of the Middle East raises important questions about the responsibility and role of the United States in the region... The Bush and Obama administrations do not bear all the blame for the instability and repression gripping the Middle East, yet the combination of malice and incompetence has contributed to the violence of a blood-soaked region. It is odd, then that under these circumstances, the American foreign policy establishment still believes Washington 'must get the Middle East right'. Perhaps this is a sense of obligation, but more likely it is the erroneous belief that the United States has the resources, diplomatic means, and wisdom to decisively influence the trajectory of politics in Middle Eastern countries. The bookends of the first fifteen years of the twenty-first century are the big – albeit flawed ideas that led the United States into Iraq and the reality that developments in the Middle East are less a function of American policy than many officials and observers have come to believe."⁴⁰

In their cited-above book, Marina and David Ottaway used a more comprehensive "radar" so that they would be able to observe and conclude on "The geopolitics of the region (which) has also changed substantially since 2011. The resultant picture is worth analyzing: "Regional powers, as well as Russia and the United States, have weighed in to try to shape post-uprising outcomes in their favor. Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have become particularly aggressive in their attempts not only to determine the fate of Yemen but also that of the Levant states and Egypt, they have indulged in direct military intervention or in political pressure and financial incentives to sway the outcome of local political struggles. Iran has also taken advantage of the chaos by accelerating a long-standing policy of standing up proxies to infiltrate itself directly into the body politic of Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Lebanon. And Russia has managed to become once again an important player in the Arab region by intervening militarily in Syria. Meanwhile, the United States has seen its influence diminishing because of the failure of both the Obama and the Trump administrations to develop coherent policies that address the new geopolitics of the Middle East."⁴¹

³⁹ Avi Melamed, *op. cit.*, pp. 176-182.

⁴⁰ Steven A. Cook, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-11.

⁴¹ Marina and David Ottaway, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-6.

Undoubtedly, to comment on the intricacies of the U.S. foreign policy and diplomacy regarding the unfolding of the Arab Uprisings/ Spring, no other actual American personality will be more competent to do that than the former diplomat William J. Burns. The proof, his recently published book *The Back Channel. A Memoir of American Diplomacy and the Case for its Renewal*: “The Middle East is particularly challenging terrain for American strategy. By the time the Arab revolts of the Arab Spring began to erupt, the region had twice as many people as in the early 1980s. Sixty percent of the population was under the age of twenty-five, and it was urbanizing nearly as fast as Asia. Job markets couldn’t cope, and youth unemployment ran higher than in any other part of the world. Corruption was endemic. The emerging middle class was frustrated, with economic growth siphoned to elites. Arab political systems were almost uniformly authoritarian, generally repressive and unresponsive to demands for political dignity and better government. The Arab order in early 2011 was still one that had the United States as its principal frame of reference... (against this backdrop), in the case of former president Obama, who when entered office (in 2008) looked determined to change the terms of American involvement in the Middle East, the Arab Spring was inexorably tugging him back to the crisis-driven Middle East focus that he had hoped so much to escape... Undoubtedly, we had made our share of tactical mistakes in handling Egypt’s transition... however, I still suspect that American influence was incapable of fundamentally altering the course of events... Egypt’s Arab Spring – like some of other uprisings in the region – was more a decapitation than a revolution. It failed to redefine the military’s grip on the country, and as a result, it was inevitable that the generals would reassert their authority as soon as their interests were threatened... our Gulf Arab partners, as well as the Israelis, all of whom saw our handling of Mubarak’s demise and Egypt’s transition as further evidence of our ‘withdrawal’ from the region and lack of resolve. Those perceptions, however unfair, still linger and corrode... Libya became a violent cautionary tale, whose shadow heavily influenced American policy toward the far more consequential drama unfolding in the Levant – Syria’s horrendous civil war... It is not hard to see Syria’s agony as an American policy failure... We misaligned ends and means, promising to much, on the one hand – declaring that ‘Assad must go’ and setting ‘red lines’ – and applying tactical tools too grudgingly and incrementally, on the other.”⁴²

2020 Richard Haass, *The World. A Brief Introduction*: “The United States did intervene militarily in Syria, not to overthrow the regime, but to attack the Islamic State (or ISIS), a terrorist organization that had moved into Syria in force. American policy is open to criticism however, for what it failed to do. In 2012, President Barack Obama publicly warned Bashar al-Assad that using chemical weapons would cross an American ‘red line’. A year later, it was clear Assad had used chemical weapons on his own people, but President Obama was unwilling to act militarily. This had implications not just for Syria, where Russia soon intervened militarily, all but guaranteeing the Assad regime’s survival, but for

⁴² New York, Random House, 2020, pp. 295-296.

the entire region and the world. Doubts had been raised among America's friends and allies about U.S. reliability and its willingness to act. These doubts would lead allies as well as adversaries to pay less heed to U.S. interests. If there is a date to choose to pinpoint the end of American primacy in the Middle East, 2013 is as good as any. The token military strikes used by Obama's successor, Donald Trump, in the wake of additional chemical weapons attacks by the Syrian government, did nothing to change this impression. The perception of a United States in retreat was reinforced by the decision of the Trump administration not to respond with military force to Iranian attacks on Saudi Arabian oil facilities in September 2019 and to withdraw its support of Kurdish forces who had done so much to weaken ISIS in northern Syria. President Trump's subsequent decision to authorize the targeted killing of Qassim Suleimani, the leader of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps overseas forces, temporarily reversed this impression, but the scope of the U.S. commitment to the region remains in question... What is certain is that the Middle East lacks many of the prerequisites of stability... Increasingly, the region is a venue of often violent competition among the most powerful local countries Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Israel, and Egypt – that is further complicated by the regional interests of several of the major powers – mostly the United States, Russia, and to a lesser extent China – and the actions of a troubling range of non-state actors such as al-Qaeda, ISIS, Hezbollah, and the various Kurdish militias. All of these suggest a future for the Middle East that is like its *past*, defined by violence within and across borders, little freedom or democracy, and standards of living that lag behind much of the rest of the world.”⁴³

Sean McFate, who several paragraphs above surprisingly introduced into the equation of our discussion the “deep state” concept, comes now with a commensurate surprise as regards the foreign and regional powers' involvement: “The Middle East is swimming in mercenaries... Private force has proved a useful option for wealthy Arab nations, particularly Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, all of which want to wage war but do not have an aggressive military. Mercenaries have fought on behalf of those countries in Yemen, Syria, and Libya in recent years. The Emirates secretly dispatched hundreds of special forces mercenaries to fight the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen. Hailing from Latin American countries like Colombia, Panama, El Salvador, and Chile, these men were all tough veterans of the drug wars who brought new tactics and toughness to the Middle East conflict... Syria rewards mercenaries who seize territory from terrorists with oil and mining rights. At least two Russian companies received contracts under such policy: Evro Polis and Stroytransgaz. These oil and mining firms then hired mercenaries to do the dirty work. For example, Evro Polis employed the Wagner Group to capture oil fields from ISIS in central Syria, which it did. Reports showed that there were about 2,500 Russia-bought mercenaries in Syria (eventually, Syria had been a disorderly battleground replete with clashing non-state actors and mercenaries.”⁴⁴

⁴³ New York, Penguin Press, 2020, pp.125-130.

⁴⁴ Sean McFate, *op. cit.*, pp. 133-134, 244.

Cluster 3 (C3) is dedicated to just one year under observation, namely 2021, the time for a sui generis anniversary for the peculiar developments started in the MENA region a decade before. Most of the considerations and evaluations for the respective period as elaborated in books and studies published during 2021, until the end of writing the present article – the month of September, were founded on *solid hindsight*, several of them trying also touching the prediction dimension for the trends worth extrapolating into the third decade of the twenty-first century.

C3: On the Arab Spring – The Care for Balanced Evaluations, in Various Shapes and Patterns

Under the above stated chapter & title, we would like to give the floor first to an outstanding analyst, known for his subtle and comprehensive, balanced not less, assessments, on the subject-matter whatever his regional belonging – the Arab Rami G. Khouri, with his publicly declared preference for the denomination “*revolutionary uprisings*”, instead that of Arab Spring:

“– It is now clearer to the protesters themselves and their governments alike that these are “unfinished revolutions” (a syntagma used first time by the Lebanese sociologist Rima Majed). Any analysis of should see them as a process, rather than an event, which is why many who have lived through the past half century of protests across the Arab region advise that the phrase “Arab Spring” is inappropriate. The current citizen rebellions against their cruel and inefficient governments continue dynamics first forged in the 1970s, and even before that; these continue the spirit of pan-Arab activism for independence, rights, and dignity that was born over a century ago, when the first stirrings for freedom from Ottoman and European rule were felt before and during World War I.

– The historic 2010-2020 decade in the Arab region reflects possibly the most dramatic transformation in the past century of Arab statehood – citizen-driven national self-determination – but it also confirms that progress towards this goal will be slow and erratic. Four core elements of statehood – citizen, society, power, and governance – have been shaken by pauperized Arab citizens who now challenge their militarized states. Many profound changes have occurred in how individual citizens see their place and rights in society, most evident in how they have shed their passive condition and collectively risen up to change their failing economic and governance systems. Many of these changes are probably irreversible, and others may prove to be only temporary, while authoritarian Arab states strike back to maintain the status quo that favors them, often violently and with foreign backing.

– The most important dynamics we can identify today are the lasting changes that have already occurred within the minds of several hundred million men and women who have transformed the narratives of protests from single issues, to achieving rights, freedoms, and equality across social, sectarian, and economic divides. The sentiments these have fostered will transform societies in the future when the moment favors change.

– The most difficult lesson being learned now – and since the 1970s – has been that sometimes many years are required to unseat entrenched and violent autocratic regimes. Some deeply conservative, change-averse rulers in countries like the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt have directly intervened militarily and politically in several countries experiencing prolonged uprisings, in order to slow or reverse citizen-driven political reforms towards democracy.

– A new protest tactic based on past lessons was the decentralized nature of the opposition, often referred to as “leaderless” uprisings that actually rely on a growing network of personal relationships, many community-based civil society groups, and extensive use of social media. The decentralized management of protest allowed the movements to persist despite regime assaults against any one group... Yet, with the exception of Sudan, protesters refused to appoint one or several leaders to represent them in public or in discussions with the government; they felt this protected them from being killed, detained, harassed, or coopted by the regime, which could weaken the uprising. Activists argued that the ruling elite understood the demands of the uprising clearly expressed in public; all they had to do is accept the public’s verdict and quit. However, without leadership or a capacity to concretely and democratically build public consensus, the points of public activism remain quite broad. Protesters across the region say privately that they are reassessing this approach in order to be best prepared for the next third stage of the protests they expect to happen in 2021, as the COVID-19 threat recedes.

– Beneath the surface of the street protests and political developments, not so readily visible to casual or outside observers, the revolutionary uprisings have triggered profound transformations in social values, citizen behavior, and power control systems that will likely impact political life for decades to come. Perhaps the most visible new dimension of the Arab protests is the extensive, often leading, role of women in the protests and other dimensions of public life.

– The rising number of poor and vulnerable citizens, and the 34 million refugees and 16 million internally displaced people, will suffer their fate for years to come. Two main issues propel this: most governments do not have the resources or political will to assist them through social safety nets or insurance, and the economic slowdown has reduced all key sources of revenue for most Arab economies (e.g. taxes, tariffs, exports, foreign direct investment, tourism, worker remittances, and bilateral aid, to mention only the most important ones). This kind of massive new stress on Arab economies translates immediately to life-or-death situations for tens of millions of individual families – many of whom had already reached desperation levels that drove them to protest in the streets to overthrow their derelict governments.”⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Rami G. Khouri, *The Decade of Defiance & Resistance: Reflections on Arab Revolutionary Uprisings and Responses from 2010-2020*, Global Perspectives Series, The Soufan Center, May 2021. https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/TSC-Global-Perspectives-Series_The-Decade-of-Defiance-Resistance-MENA-Protest-Movements_May-2021_FINAL.pdf.

If we were to decant a leitmotif from the array of Arab Uprisings/ Awakening/ Revolutions/ Spring topical narratives, displayed by a lot of publications dated January-September 2021, seemingly that would be the authors' care to balance the irrefutable overall negative evaluation with at least a ray of hope for the future. That was confirmed by the just reviewed Rami G. Khoury's remarks, but is valid for other analysts' writings. With a relevant caveat: "The balance" factor could bear multiple connotations given the multilayered of the Arab Uprisings process.

In spite of a deeply bleak title – *The Arab Winter: A Tragedy* – chosen by Noah Feldman for his book on the subject-matter, the remarkable writer had been striving to reach "the balance" we invoked above: "'A-sha'b Yurid Isqat al-nizam!' 'The people want the overthrow of the regime!' These words, chanted rhythmically all over the Arab-speaking world beginning in January 2011, promise a transformation in the history of the Middle East. For the first time, mass movements of ordinary people sought to take their political fate into their own hands and shape a better future for themselves... The most exciting, revolutionary aspect of the Arab spring was that the people were acting on their own, wresting control away from repressive governments and the international great powers who had long supported them. Yet as we know today, the electrifying course of events that began in Tunisia, swept through Egypt, touched half a dozen more countries, and eventually brought little good except to the place it had begun. Slowly, painfully, by fits and starts, the heroic narrative of the Arab spring was transmuted into something much darker... There is no question that apart from removing a handful of dictators, the Arab spring did not achieve most of its grander aspirations. In many ways, the Arab spring ultimately made many people's lives worse than they were before. Some of the energies released by the Arab spring were particularly horrifying, including those that funded the Syrian civil war and the rise of the Islamic State. Nevertheless, something – many things – took place... The Arab spring marked a crucial break from a long era in which empires – Ottoman, European, and American – definitively shaped the course of the Arab politics. The participants in the events of the Arab spring and its aftermath took charge of their politics through action. In doing so, they remade and transformed the two big forces that have dominated political ideas in the Arabic-speaking world for the past century, namely Arab nationalism and political Islam."⁴⁶

A peculiar sort of balance is perceived by Hillel Frisch, a professor at the Department of Politics, Bar-Ilan University, and a senior research associate at the BESA Center for Strategic Studies: "Assessing outcomes of revolutions is a precarious business, especially with a mere ten years of hindsight. Even more difficult is the assessment of revolutionary waves for the simple reason that there have been so few of them in modern history. Bearing in mind these clear limitations, it can still be assessed that the "Arab Spring" accelerated the plight of regional losers without producing clear winners. The Sunni Arab states weathered the

⁴⁶ Princeton University Press, 2021 (Paperback), pp. IX-XI.

storm but remain geostrategic weak, whereas Iran has been able to destabilize some Arab states yet has clearly failed to export its revolutionary Islamist ideology. Israel has benefitted from reduced Arab interest in the Palestinian cause and from its intensifying relations with the Sunni states but has been adversely affected by the penetration of these states by Tehran's proxies. And while ordinary Arabs have benefitted from the growing focus on domestic affairs at the expense of the traditional "pan" ideologies, they have often paid a price in terms of infringement on civil and human rights by the incumbent regimes."⁴⁷

The risk of an inverted balance, as evidenced during the unfolding of events summoned under the cover Arab Spring, appeared to be subtly considered by Michele Gelfand, *The Threat reflex. Why Some Societies Respond to Danger Better Than Others*: "Policymakers need to be more mindful to the unintended consequences of rapid changes in cultural norms. The sudden displacement of long-standing regimes can unleash extreme disorder that allows populist autocrats to step into the breach and promise to replace chaos with tightness. This happened during the Arab Spring after a popular uprising ousted Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in 2011, it quickly became apparent that Egypt was transitioning not to freedom but to chaos... in the spring of 2012, Egyptians who felt the country had become unsafe and had lost its traditional social norms expressed keen support for autocratic rule. Egypt soon jolted back to an even tighter regime – call it autocratic recidivism. In much the same way, populations in disorganized and chaotic Iraqi districts initially welcomed the so-called Islamic State (ISIS), which promised to restore order and fix essential services that had been neglected by the government. History repeatedly shows that chaos pushes people toward a yearning for tightness. This psychology leaves populations in places where norms have collapsed vulnerable to extremists."⁴⁸

Niall Ferguson, in his most recent book, *DOOM. The Politics of Catastrophe*, tangentially touched on the need of balance with regard the Arab Spring's factorials, more specifically the "... various attempts to explain the Arab revolutions of 2010-12 in terms of a 'youth bulge'": "In one study of countries where youth population growth rates exceeded 45 percent over five years, 'not a single one managed to avoid major political shocks. The risk of a particularly violent civil war was very high for these countries (about one chance out of two).' In and of itself, a youth bulge is not a predictor of upheaval, but in combination with low economic growth, a strongly autocratic state, and an expansion of higher education, it is."⁴⁹

Certainly, in the magma of 2021 publications dealing with Arab uprisings' aspects, one can find authors professing profoundly negative views on the respective process and on the events included in its unfolding. A case in point could be that of Eyal Zisser, who the vice rector of Tel Aviv University and has written

⁴⁷ Hillel Frisch, *Rethinking the "Arab Spring": Winners and Losers*, Middle East Quarterly, Summer 2021, <https://www.meforum.org/62397/rethinking-the-arab-spring-winners-and-losers>.

⁴⁸ *Foreign Affairs*, July/ August 2021, pp. 164-165.

⁴⁹ UK, Allen Lane, 2021, pp. 45-46.

extensively on the history and the modern politics of Syria and Lebanon and the Arab-Israeli conflict. In Eyal Zisser's seemingly unshakable views, "Contrary to much hyped expectations, most Arab regimes have weathered the "Arab Spring" upheavals; the Arab masses have settled for the familiar authoritarian repression and economic distress they have endured for decades, if not centuries, rather than opt for the uncertain promise of the alien democratic ideal... This in turn means that a decade after the eruption of the "Arab Spring," the "New-old Middle East" remains pretty much a region that provides its inhabitants with neither economic prosperity nor human dignity, let alone freedom, social justice, and human rights. It is a region firmly rooted in past religious, tribal, and dynastic-authoritarian traditions; deeply mired in social and economic problems; rife with extremism, violence, and terrorism; and saddled with inherent instability. Yet, it seems that most Middle Easterners have come to terms with this reality, realizing full well that any attempt to change it by force (especially by external powers) will push the region backward. The sooner the West realizes this reality and eschews any attempt to impose its alien democratic vision on a region that is not ripe for it, the better for the Middle East and its various neighbors. The Middle East is where it has been for the last 250 years, and there is no reason to expect a fundamental change in the foreseeable future."⁵⁰

*C3: On international and regional powers' interests and actions;
Duality of Characteristics in 2021
Hindsight – Overall Omnipresence, Patchy Omnipotence*

We would privilege here too the consideration made by a "balanced" insider, the Arab Rami G. Khoury:

– The manner in which regional and big power military and political interventions exacerbated conditions in many Arab states in the past decade should remind the world of the lingering, mostly destructive, aftershocks of the colonial and imperial centuries, which spawned the modern Middle East and Arab state order around World War I.

– Foreign powers have been equally destructive in their military interventions, especially Russia, the United States, Iran, Turkey, France, and the United Kingdom, to mention only the most prominent ones.

– Armed non-state actors have also played their part in supporting or challenging Arab governments, including Hezbollah, Ansarullah (Houthis), and dozens of militias and mercenary forces in Syria, Libya, Yemen, Iraq, Somalia, and other countries.

– The ease with which foreign military and political forces have engaged in conflicts inside nominally sovereign Arab countries suggests that structural changes are required across the entire Arab region to varying degrees. State-building in every Arab country during the past century has followed a common trajectory

⁵⁰ Eyal Zisser, *Rethinking the "Arab Spring": Just a Media Event?*, Middle East Quarterly, Summer 2021. <https://www.meforum.org/62396/rethinking-the-arab-spring-just-a-media-event>.

that largely eliminates the ordinary citizens from participating in national decision-making.

– External actors and foreign interventions have also shaped transitions to democratic governance. The July 2020 no-confidence vote against the Muslim Brotherhood elected speaker of parliament in Tunisia, which failed, was widely seen as an attempt by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to keep beating back the spread of Islamist political groups in the region – even if they were elected democratically. These typically included offers of billions of dollars in cash and direct military and intelligence assistance to strengthen threatened regimes, as well as strategic agreements that included establishing foreign military bases and port management deals. Most such external intervention, however, usually only heightens the repression, renewed protests, economic disruptions, counter-interventions by other countries, and the economic and political poverty that triggered the uprisings in the first place.”⁵¹

Notably, the Israeli analyst Hillel Frisch strived and managed to confirm in practical terms the idea that, “There is some variation in the form and intensity of regional and international intervention (with regard to the international and regional powers involvement with regard to the Arab uprisings):

– Syria is clearly a complex conflict characterized by intensive three-tier involvement of local, regional, and international forces with strong linkages between actors on all three tiers. The incumbent Assad regime is backed militarily and politically by Russia in an uneasy alliance with Iran, the support of both being critical for the regime to face the threat of ISIS and other rebel movements. From the point of view of the Syrian regime, Russian and Iranian support involves a division of labor with Moscow providing air support against the rebels while Tehran and its proxy Shiite militias, most notably the Lebanese-based Hezbollah, deliver financial and ground support. The uneasiness of the alliance is best reflected by Russia’s tacit acquiescence in Israel’s purported air strikes against the Iranian military buildup in Syria. Syria also suffers considerable Turkish intervention in Ankara’s bid to weaken the Kurdish forces, which are in turn backed by U.S. elite forces deployed in the area with the ostensible aim of fighting the remnants of ISIS. For its part, Saudi Arabia reportedly backs many rebel groups in the last enclave in the city of Idlib and the surrounding areas in the central-north part of the country.

– In Libya, international involvement is slightly less complex with Russia being the only great power actively backing Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan National Army linked to the Tobruk government. By contrast, regional intervention is as intensive as in Syria if not more so. Whereas Turkey provides considerable political and military support to the Government of National Accord in Tripoli, an array of Sunni states, principally the UAE and Egypt, back the Tobruk government against what they perceive to be the Muslim Brotherhood-led government in Tripoli. Regional involvement is also fueled by competition over

⁵¹ Rami G. Khoury, *op. cit.*

gas resources in the eastern Mediterranean, pitting a loose alliance of Israel, Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus against energy-hungry but militarily powerful Turkey. Nor should one overlook the ideological enmity between the Egyptian state elite that ousted a civilian Muslim Brotherhood president and the Islamist Turkish regime, which quelled a military coup and which identifies broadly with the goals of the Muslim Brotherhood.

– In Yemen, international involvement is more limited than either of the previous cases, directed principally against a minor actor in the Yemeni conflict. Washington, with decreasing frequency over the years, has been involved in direct air and drone strikes against al-Qaeda and ISIS terrorists in its war against terror. By contrast, Yemen is probably the scene of the most intense forms of regional military intervention with the Saudi and UAE air forces pounding Houthi strongholds on an almost daily basis and the Houthis, massively aided by Iran, launching numerous drone and missile strikes against airports and other infrastructure in Saudi Arabia as well as against their domestic opponents.

– The case of Iran, widely considered the foremost beneficiary of the “Arab Spring”: to be sure, the upheavals enabled Tehran to penetrate and weaken a string of Arab states from Iraq to Yemen; it also transformed its association with Damascus from a bilateral alliance into a straightforward patron-client relationship due to the Assad regime’s dependence on Iran for its survival. In the bargain, Iran has increased the threat to Israel by establishing a significant military presence in Syria and substantially enhancing Hezbollah’s armament and military capabilities, not only turning it into Lebanon’s effective ruler, but also making the organization’s 100,000-strong rocket and missile arsenal a Damocles Sword hanging over Israel. Yet, these strategic gains have not been cost-free. For one thing, Saudi Arabia and the UAE reacted to the Iranian penetration of Yemen with a sustained air campaign against the Houthis while Tehran’s growing regional aggressiveness drove the UAE and Bahrain (with Riyadh’s blessing) to sign peace accords with Israel as did Sudan and Morocco soon afterward. For another thing, the Syrian civil war drove the Gulf states and Turkey to support various rebel groups and, far more significantly, triggered *the first Russian* military intervention on behalf of a local client since the December 1979 invasion of Afghanistan. And despite the common Russian-Iranian goal of securing Assad’s survival, the two states have diametrically opposed visions regarding the kind of regime they would like to see: Moscow is interested in restoring the regime’s power to prewar levels while Tehran strives to “Lebanonize” Syria by keeping a severely weakened regime in place to ensure the presence of proxy Shiite militias and to direct an Iranian military buildup on Syrian soil. This is why Russia has implicitly sanctioned the years-long Israeli air campaign to prevent both the Iranian military entrenchment in Syria and the use of Syrian territory to transfer advanced Iranian weaponry to Hezbollah. Then there are the economic costs of Tehran’s regional aggressiveness. These ranged from the severe international sanctions (especially during the Trump presidency) that brought the Iranian economy to the verge of collapse to the economic costs of its interventions in Syria, Lebanon,

and Yemen, among other places, which drained Iranian resources and triggered mass protests over the diversion of scarce resources to foreign adventures at a time of deep economic plight. Even Iraq, which was made to pay for its effective subordination by becoming a captive economic market in which much of the electricity, refined oil and gas, agricultural produce and many produced goods were provided by Iran, witnessed mass protest in the overwhelmingly Shiite southern part of the country in which Iranian consulates were frequently attacked. As within Iran, public anger was largely triggered by the diversion of economic resources from the needy, local population to imperialist goals, this time from Iraqi job creation and provision of public services to Tehran's proxy militias, which were in turn busy suppressing the demonstrations and murdering their leaders.

Israel's trajectory might be wholly different in the wake of the Abraham Accords. Though it is certainly premature to talk of Israeli soft power in the region, the normalization of relations between Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco has elicited only faint protests and almost no demonstrations within either these states or the Arab world more generally.⁵²

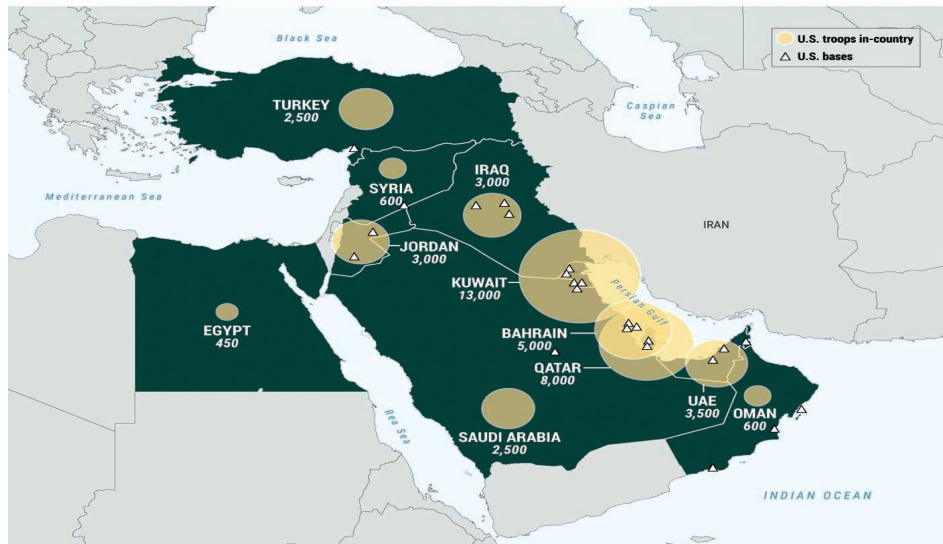
The referential analyst George Friedman presented a notable extension for the understanding of the U.S. image related to what we called the two MENA's markers, in particular on the U.S.' interests and involvement. By the second part of June 2021, G. Friedman came out with a public commentary rather straight forwardly entitled: "*US Withdrawal from the Middle East*"⁵³. Introducing a map (see here) more than eloquent with regard to the expansive and equally solid, practically unmatched by other international power of the moment, American military presence in the Middle East, George Friedman is bringing into the game two concepts as identical as much they differ in terms of political substance and operational coverage.

On the one hand, we learn that the United States is *withdrawing* air defense capabilities from several Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait and Jordan, with most of the *withdrawals* being from Saudi Arabia. According to a report, the withdrawal will include Patriot missiles, some fighter aircraft and other unspecified weapons. This is in keeping with the strategies of presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump of *reducing U.S. forces in the Middle East in order to minimize risk*. Trump, however, increased the United States' air defense capabilities in the region after Iranian drones struck a Saudi oil facility in 2019. The Biden administration's withdrawal appears to be driven by the need to deploy these weapons in other regions hence the question on where are these weapons going (is it the Chinese theater or the Russian theater? the U.S. having interests in both areas).

⁵² Hillel Frisch, *Rethinking the "Arab Spring": Winners and Losers*, Middle East Quarterly, Summer 2021, <https://www.meforum.org/62397/rethinking-the-arab-spring-winners-and-losers>

⁵³ George Friedman, *US Withdrawal from the Middle East*, Gpf Geopolitical Futures, June 22, 2021, https://geopoliticalfutures.com/withdrawal-from-the-middle-east/?utm_source=GPF+Free+Newsletter&utm_campaign=c7dba1e24a-.20210910_FL_EditorsPick&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_f716b3bf65-c7dba1e24a-265110701&mc_cid=c7dba1e24a&mc_eid=9bf5373f65.

U.S. Military Presence in the Middle East



Sources: Defense Priorities, Congressional Research Service, Washington Post, Reuters

@ 2021 Geopolitical Futures

On the other hand, the concept of redeployment as the withdrawal may have little to do with a redeployment. After all, the U.S. must have a significant reserve of weapons to deploy without withdrawing them from Arab countries. But if we turn it around and consider why the U.S. might be reducing the ability of these countries to defend themselves, it is necessary to consider Iran. “We need to see if these weapons go someplace other than a military base in the United States. If not, the only thing I can think of is Iran.”

*The One Conclusion for PART I:
Arab Spring should be Seen and Dealt with as an Open-Ended Process,
A Feature Shared also by “the Conjoined” Marker Known by MENA
during the 21st’s Second Decade*

Taking some more time for reflection one can reach an ampler and valued-added perspective, namely one based on the concept, theoretic but also operational, that both markers had been unfolding as *open-ended processes*. A feature which will continue to be manifesting through the passage to the third decade of the twenty-first Century.

Meanwhile, both markers’ open-endedness feature would be further validated by the surging events and developments, at least two of them being of direct interest in the respective cases, both sharing the inner characteristics of “*Black Swans*”. First, the COVID-19 pandemic, second, the dramatic, in geopolitical and humanitarian terms, fallout of President Biden’s decision to withdraw the American troops from Afghanistan, seen by many, including among U.S. allies and partners, as an intempestive determination in the present regional and global context.

1. Since early 2020 in particular, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated and accelerated the underlying problems that drove millions of citizens into the street, crippled national economies, and sharply curtailed intra-regional trade and funds transfers. Moreover, the pandemic has bolstered the grip of autocratic ruling powers, and as such, its impacts will likely hasten the ultimate outcome of the standoff between citizens and ruling authorities... Many vulnerable, low-income families officially dropped into poverty in 11 2020-2021, due to COVID-19 economic slowdowns. The middle class that defined Arab societies for half a century declined from 44 to around 33 percent of the population by 2017, and has become even smaller now due, among other factors, to COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened grievances and risks. The combined impact of ongoing wars, lagging energy prices, and COVID-19's economic slowdown regionally and globally devastated Arab economies, causing the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2020 to issue its lowest forecast of regional economic trends in half a century, with a loss of some \$323 billion. Governments took advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic in different ways in their attempts to slow down or stop the uprisings. They prohibited street protests and arrested, tried, jailed, or intimidated protest organizers. The National Committee for Liberation of Detainees in Algeria, for example, said in April 2020 that at least 50 activists had been arrested for their Facebook posts in the COVID-19 period, while 237 had been detained since the start of the protests in 2019. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch both issued statements accusing the Algerian government of using the pandemic to harass activists, by detaining them or blocking their websites.⁵⁴

2. The decision announced in April 2021 by the U.S. President Joseph Biden with regard to the American troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan, as implemented by 31 August 2021, would have a dual impact on the evolutions in the MENA region, on short and medium term.

On the one hand, it is expected that the equation incorporating U.S.-Middle East countries' relationship would be faced with new dynamics, hence the possible trend to reconsider the attitude on the Arab Uprisings from both sides involved – protesters, respectively governments.

On the other hand, it is to be closer observed the Islamist, eventually Jihadists, ripples on the entire MENA area following the uncontested Islamic victory in Kabul, directly leading to an eventual changed of "color", anyway a more nuanced picture, for the "unfinished revolution" in MENA. While Afghanistan, which, in the view of the retired American general H.R. McMaster will become *the "new epicenter of jihadist terrorism"* as it is now controlled by the Taliban, Al Qaeda, which may no longer be as prominent as it was on 9/11, it still exists and has a branch in North Africa (critical part of the MENA region); ISIS has affiliates there, too.⁵⁵

Seemingly, seriously touching on such a perspective is unescapable: "Good news for global jihad. America's flight from Afghanistan will embolden jihadists around the world. Even if the Taliban do little to help other fighters, their success

⁵⁴ Rami G. Khoury, *op. cit.*, pp. 6, 11, 14, 17, 42.

⁵⁵ https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/is-the-us-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-the-end-of-the-american-empire?utm_source=nl&utm_brand=tny&utm_mailing=TNY_Daily_090121&utm_campaign=aud-dev&utm_medium=email&bxid=5bd676e524c17c1048015332&cnid=39149971&hasha=.

is an inspiration” is the title of an ample commentary by the referential *The Economist*, with an inciting beginning: “When a new American president takes office, the leaders of other countries compete to be the first to speak to him. When the Taliban took over Kabul, there was a similar rush to speak to Abdul Ghani Baradar, the public face of the Afghan militant group’s leadership. The winner was Ismail Haniyeh, the leader of Hamas, the Islamist group which controls the Gaza Strip. The read-out of the call posted on Hamas’s website has Mr Haniyeh congratulating Mr Baradar on his victory against the “American occupation” of Afghanistan. It would, he said, be “a prelude to the demise of all occupation forces, foremost of which is the Israeli occupation of Palestine”. Mr Baradar responded in kind, wishing Hamas “victory and empowerment as a result of their resistance”. Such diplomatic niceties were matched with an outpouring of celebration from other jihadists. In the Idlib province of Syria, occupied by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, a group thought to have ties to al-Qaeda, the organization which launched the attacks of September 11th 2001, fighters held a parade and handed out baklava on street corners. Three days of celebration were announced in the districts of southern Somalia controlled by al-Shabab, another al-Qaeda affiliate (pictured, training, above). On social media jihadists from all over the world shared memes celebrating the Taliban’s victory, notably a pastiche of Joe Rosenthal’s famous picture of American marines raising the flag on Iwo Jima... (Eventually) America’s departure from Afghanistan will be a huge morale boost to jihadis. This may be especially true in conflicts where outsiders are involved *on the government’s* side. Keep on fighting, the lesson runs, and eventually the foreigners will give up and leave – even if they have been there for decades. And then you will win.”⁵⁶

If that is “the pulse” taken at the level of the Islamists, at a more general level, MENA’s analysts project a larger perspective: “The Arab and Muslim world looks with horror at the Taliban seizure of power in Afghanistan. A jihadist group has just marched on the corpse of a state to conquer a vast territory by force and faith. Here is a first consequence of what augurs the American withdrawal from the Middle East region. The rest is to come, because if America gives in again to the vision that Afghanistan is only a peripheral stake and a lost territory, this is obviously not the case of the countries of the Middle East. A wind of panic is blowing over the whole region.”⁵⁷

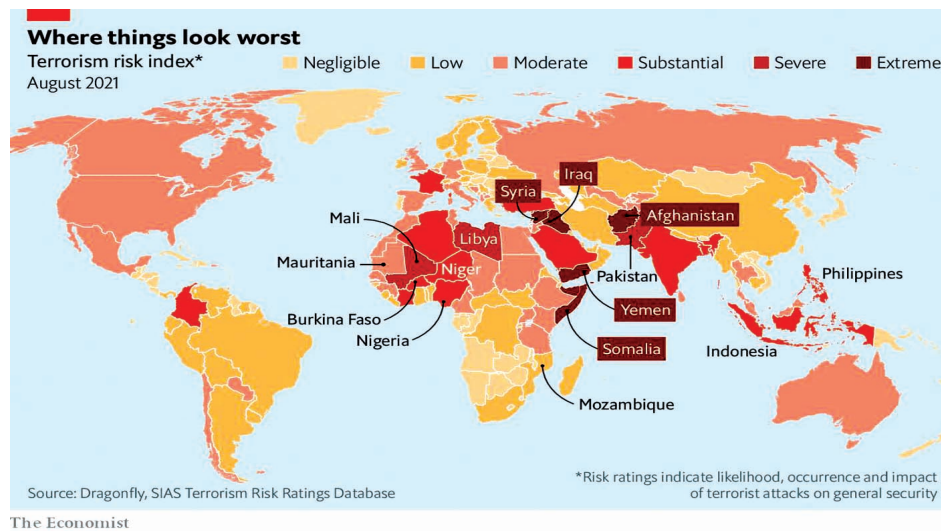
Eventually, the central piece of the puzzle will be coalesced around the American further trajectory – as far as interests and effective implication are concerned – in the MENA regions. Conspicuously enough, or not, going deeper into such a topical issue has a result a dichotomist/ binary perspective:

First, looking from afar, the so-called American debacle in Afghanistan cannot but generate anxiety among both MENA states and their partners or simply well-intentioned observers: “American’s withdrawal (from Afghanistan) confirms a long-term trend of US disengagement. Europeans must draw conclusions about

⁵⁶ https://www.economist.com/briefing/2021/08/28/americas-flight-from-afghanistan-will-embolden-jihadists-around-the-world?mkt_tok=NjU5LVdaWC0wNzUAAAF_MS7dNb6Jn9tyoNzEc6EzHjcJTqaPRkcQbx7c4kLID7acKXF5aNoyjmJM—WJsyEPTcII-CaUFNLYHrMdR1UE4f4f3uLqAG6piwlcL5.

⁵⁷ Bassma Kodmani, *In the Middle East, the Taliban exacerbate religious impulses*, The Montaigne Institute, August 20, 2021. <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/blog/au-moyen-orient-les-talibans-exacerbent-les-pulsions-confessionnelles>

America's reliability when it comes to crises in places like the Middle East and the Sahel... Yet complaints about American reliability are an old pastime. European grumbled about Barack Obama's reluctance to intervene in Libya in 2011 and his cancellation of air strikes on Syria in 2013. Gulf states fretted over Mr Trump's failure to punish Iran for its attack on Saudi oil facilities in 2019".⁵⁸



Second, taking the pulse from the inside – the White House's assurances to the contrary: "I'm often asked, "Are we de-prioritizing the Middle East and our friends in the Middle East?" And nothing could be further from the truth. If anything, in the Biden administration, we are not pursuing, you know, unachievable goals. We're not trying to transform the Middle East. We're not trying to overthrow regimes. We are pursuing a very steady course, centered on achievable aims; alignment of ends and means; and, first and foremost, support to our partners, and, of course, Israel being second to none."⁵⁹

Notably, in the respective circumstances, if the American official took care to underline "our commitment, not just to Israel, but to our partners in the Middle East", it is irrefutable that it is Israel that will remain the unshakable "anchor" the actual and future trajectory of the U.S. presence and actions in the MENA region. Proof, the present Washington officials' diplomatic language: "the strategic partnership between the United States and Israel – ironclad, axiomatic, unbreakable, any word you want to use; an important visit in terms of the relationship, symbolic of our firm commitment to Israel as an ally; obviously, our defense relationship is

⁵⁸ *The Taliban are back in town*, The Economist, August 21st 2021, p. 16.

⁵⁹ *Background Press Call by Senior Administration Officials on President Biden's Official Working Visit with Prime Minister Bennett of the State of Israel*, The White House, August 25, 2021, Press Briefings, Via Teleconference. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2021/08/25/background-press-call-by-senior-administration-officials-on-president-bidens-official-working-visit-with-prime-minister-bennett-of-the-state-of-israel/>.

so – so deep and multifaceted. And the Pentagon are having meetings even today with Israeli officials about our support for Israeli Defense Forces and our commitment to help replenish the Iron Dome coming out of the Gaza conflict. That’s a commitment that stands, and it’s being worked through the Congress... Iran will be a big topic of discussion because Iran is a threat to Israel, and we are 100 percent committed to the security of Israel – no ifs, ands, or buts... this will be a key topic, which, of course, will be discussed in tremendous depth... If anything, the end of America’s military involvement in Afghanistan frees up resources and attention and ultimately allows us to better support our partners like Israel.”⁶⁰

And if the above considerations were presented by an American official “on background”, President Biden himself, in his talks, in the Oval Office, with the Israeli Prime Minister, Naftali Bennett, on August 27, 2021, took care “to reaffirm the historic partnership between the United States and Israel, (and the) ironclad support for Israel’s security and right to self-defense, as part of this extraordinary bilateral defense and security cooperation.”⁶¹

If it were to identify even one area where the two countries’ foreign policies do not completely overlap, that would bear the name “The Palestinian File”. In his talks with the Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, President Biden underscored “the importance of steps to improve the lives of Palestinians and support greater economic opportunities for them. He also noted the importance of refraining from actions that could exacerbate tensions, contribute to a sense of unfairness, and undermine efforts to build trust. President Biden reaffirmed his view that a negotiated two-state solution is the only viable path to achieving a lasting resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.” The entire that narrative wouldn’t be “music to the ears” of the Israelis’ politicians, including those forming the new government.

In the recent Washington’s Middle East foreign policy public agenda, besides Israel, emphatically placed as its “central piece”, one can notice only a couple of other substantive points, generally the image of the respective agenda being presently rather contracted, as if it were an additional confirmation on a virtual US diminishing interests and actions in MENA. With a rather simple explanation: “The U.S. has (only) three truly vital interests in the region: limiting terrorism, protecting the flow of oil and preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. (Consequently) The U.S. is no longer the top dog in the Middle East neighborhood. And it doesn’t need to be.”⁶²

Against the backdrop of the respective “restraining” American agenda with regard to MENA region, notable is the following:

– The favorable “treatment” enjoyed by Egypt from the side of the Administration, in spite of critics, in Congress and NGOs, on human rights policies followed by the Cairo’s regime: “Egypt, a critical security partner, but

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁶¹ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/08/27/readout-of-president-joseph-r-biden-jr-s-meeting-with-prime-minister-naftali-bennett-of-israel/>.

⁶² Aaron David Miller, Richard Sokolsky, *The Middle East Just Doesn’t Matter as Much Any Longer*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 03, 2020. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/09/03/middle-east-just-doesn-t-matter-as-much-any-longer-pub-82653>.

not just a security partner, a critical, diplomatic partner as well". Particularly valued by the present U.S. Administration are the Egyptian-Israeli relations and some of their targeted cooperation actions: "The relationship between Israel and Egypt is absolutely fundamental. There's a real discernible energy to the (respective) relationship and a very steady back-and-forth of senior officials working on the – on the Gaza piece, which takes an extraordinary amount of effort from Egypt to both manage the post-conflict situation and then to provide know, other thinking on the Palestinian issue set."

– With regard to Lebanon, the American officials have been "concerned about the real potential for state collapse if the Lebanese political elites do not get their act together, essentially, and form a new government."

– The fact that "the most critical challenges facing the Middle East have been including the threat posed by Iran", and generally "the complexity of the Iran problem and the reality of the challenge the Americans face and how best to confront it", continue to represent a focus for the Washington Administration, in terms of policy and politics, being reaffirmed the American "multifaceted, multi-dimensional policy of pressure diplomacy and a number of other tools and deterrence."

– With regard to Iraq, this country enjoys the qualification as a "partner of America", as the two countries "work together toward greater stability across the Middle East", the head of the White House personally being "committed" to strengthening the Iraqi-U.S. bilateral relationship and coordination under the Strategic Framework Agreement. Washington is seeing "a continued security partnership" with Iraq as meant "to ensure that ISIS can never resurge and to allow communities recovering from terror to rebuild with dignity even as the United States shifts to a purely advisory role."⁶³

– Officials of an ever-growing influencing state from the Arab Gulf, namely the United Arab Emirates, have voiced the need to improve regional ties as the United States reduces its involvement in the Middle East.

With such a U.S.' foot-print in today's MENA, in mind, it becomes legitimate the question mark with regard to the present trend in MENA, respectively if one should look to the region through a zero-sum lens, in the Cold War "spirit" of America versus Russia. A complex question for the beginning of the 21st Century's second decade, for which Frederic Wehrey and Andrew S. Weiss Frederic, outstanding fellows with Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, have tried to find an answer both comprehensive and balanced, hence their common study *Reassessing Russian Capabilities in the Levant and North Africa*⁶⁴, recently published (August 31, 2021) under Carnegie's ampler demarche entitled *The Return of Global Russia: A Reassessment of the Kremlin's International Agenda*. The dual axes of the respective answer could be of effective help in understanding the evolution of the dual markers of MENA region as extrapolated from the second to the third decade of the twenty century:

⁶³ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/07/26/readout-of-president-joseph-r-biden-jr-meeting-with-prime-minister-al-kadhimi-of-iraq/>.

⁶⁴ <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/08/31/reassessing-russian-capabilities-in-levant-and-north-africa-pub-85222>.

On the one hand, “Russian influence in the Middle East is formidable in many respects. In war-racked states like Syria and Libya, Moscow has adroitly deployed military forces and engaged with actors that are off-limits to Westerners, thus positioning itself as a significant power broker. In Egypt and Algeria, it has pursued arms deals that are unencumbered by human rights conditions. Russia’s economic footprint is expanding in fields ranging from infrastructure to tourism to energy, contributing, in some instances, to the region’s cronyism and corruption.”

On the other hand, “A closer look at Russian activism reveals that its ability to shape events in the Middle East is far more modest than is commonly assumed. Russia has neither the tools nor the willingness to tackle the region’s deep-seated socioeconomic and governance problems. In Syria, the limits of the Kremlin’s military commitment have been exposed amid clashes with other powerful, outside players and a hardening stalemate on the ground. For now, Moscow is simply not in a position to achieve its desired military or political outcomes absent a significant investment of new resources. Russian economic penetration is driven mainly by short-term objectives and a search for outsized financial rewards that sometimes fail to materialize or to make Moscow an attractive partner. Russian inroads are further limited by regional factors like fractured politics and capricious local actors, who, despite being plied with Russian attention and support, do not behave as docile proxies. In many instances, Middle Eastern rulers exert far more power in shaping the extent of Russian influence than conventional narratives suggest. Successive leaders of Egypt, for instance, have perfected the game of soliciting Russia’s attention to gain leverage over other patrons, namely the United States. For their part, Israeli leaders have worked hard to ensure that Russia does not throw major obstacles in the way of Israel’s ongoing campaign against Iranian military encroachment in Syria-yet they surely take note when Moscow does the bare minimum in raising concerns about the situation in Gaza. The limits of Russian influence are similarly noticeable in the heartbreaking economic crisis in Lebanon, where Moscow is little more than a bystander.”

And some of the concluding elements underlined by our two fellows: “Washington should avoid viewing the region through a zero-sum, Cold War lens that sees every development as a net gain or loss for Moscow or minimizes the agency of local actors... Washington should focus its energies on its biggest comparative advantage vis-à-vis Moscow in the region: namely, its abundant sources of influence and leverage in the economic and security spheres, its still-potent soft power, and its leadership of multilateral diplomacy and the rules-based global order.”⁶⁵

All these could be considered as a good omen for the future American impact on the continuing evolution of the two MENA’s markers under discussion here. That, of course, not underestimating the potential influences, on a varied scale, seemingly to be generated for both the U.S. and MENA by an expected “the post-Afghanistan” juncture, in political, diplomatic and geopolitical terms. Already in discussions with partners from the Middle East the U.S. officials expressed support for demarches aiming to elevate diplomacy and dialogue across the

⁶⁵ <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/09/03/middle-east-just-doesn-t-matter-as-much-any-longer-pub-82653>.

Middle East region⁶⁶. Just one day after a White House official made that statement, President Biden himself stressed that “Diplomacy must be the first tool of our foreign policy, and we are grateful to have partners who share that vision.”⁶⁷

As for the nexus “the post-Afghanistan” juncture – “diplomacy and dialogue across the Middle East region”, nothing could be more relevant than one of the President Biden’s “sayings” those days: “This decision about Afghanistan is not just about Afghanistan. It’s about ending an era of major military operations to remake other countries... there are two (lessons) that are paramount. First, we (the Americans) must set missions with clear, achievable goals – not ones we’ll never reach. And second, we must stay clearly focused on the fundamental national security interest of the United States of America... This is a new world. The terror threat has metastasized across the world, well beyond Afghanistan. We face threats from al-Shabaab in Somalia; al Qaeda affiliates in Syria and the Arabian Peninsula; and ISIS attempting to create a caliphate in Syria and Iraq, and establishing affiliates across Africa and Asia.”⁶⁸

Eventually, Iraq will be the first Arab nation which will be affected by what we could call “the Kabul syndrome”. The United States has about 2,500 troops in Iraq as part of the U.S.-led coalition effort to battle the Islamic State group that began in 2014. The two countries agreed in April 2021 to change the American troops’ mission, focusing on training and advisory roles assisting Iraqi security forces, but there was no timeline for completing the transition. Further on, in a joint statement issued on 26 July 2021, by the United States and Iraq following technical meetings, the two countries said, “The security relationship will fully transition to a training, advising, assisting, and intelligence-sharing role, and that there will be no U.S. forces with a combat role in Iraq by December 31, 2021.”⁶⁹ In the read-out issued by the White House following the meeting, on 26 August 2021, between President Biden and Iraqi Prime Minister, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, it was mentioned that “the United States shifts (in Iraq) to a purely advisory role.”⁷⁰

What will be the Arab state to second Iraq with regard to the withdrawal of the American troops, we can have an implicit indication from the very title of an article published on August 25, 2021, in the Foreign Policy Magazine and entitled “*The Middle East Is Preparing for the United States’ Exit From Syria*”: “*The Arab world has taken note of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and is starting to wonder whether Syria – where the United States still has several hundred troops – will be next. The Biden administration has already given indications it is willing to look away from Gulf Arab states reviving relations*

⁶⁶ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/08/27/statement-by-nsc-spokesperson-emily-horne-on-nsa-sullivans-call-with-foreign-minister-hussein-of-iraq/>.

⁶⁷ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/08/28/statement-by-president-joe-biden-on-the-baghdad-conference-for-cooperation-and-partnership/>.

⁶⁸ *Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan*, The White House, August 31, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/31/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-end-of-the-war-in-afghanistan/>.

⁶⁹ <https://www.voanews.com/usa/biden-announces-end-us-combat-mission-iraq>.

⁷⁰ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/07/26/readout-of-president-joseph-r-biden-jr-meeting-with-prime-minister-al-kadhimi-of-iraq/>.

with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad rather than actively prevent them from doing so. This marks a slight but significant shift in U.S. policy, as represented by the 2019 Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act. With Washington showing a diminished appetite for enforcing Syria's isolation – including through military means – some Arab countries are starting to bring Syria in from its diplomatic isolation.”⁷¹

It remains to be seen if the further diminishing the American military presence in the MENA region will not just strengthen the evaluation made by various international circles on an already trend with regard to the U.S. diplomacy branded as “the United States’ disinterest in the Middle East”.⁷²

PART II

The Nexus Tangibles-Intangibles with the Symbols playing a Key Role for a Deeper Understanding of the Trends and Evolutions in Today's MENA

Motto:

“There is a ‘visually epistemological sense of politics’ in the Middle East that demands attention... symbolism becoming an established means of conveying political messages.”⁷³

“In the Middle East, symbolism and imagery define reality.”⁷⁴

As we have been advancing into the 2020s, it has become more than apparent that “digesting” the unfathomable nature, in political, societal, geopolitical terms, of the Twenty Century’s second decade’s respective dual “legacy” in relation to the MENA region, as well as of reckoning with the continuum of its repercussions, should be based on a “recipe” having among its first “ingredients” not less those of an “ethereal” character – symbols and images, including those incorporated into forms of expressing traditions, opinions, perceptions, all of these with their radiance of peculiar emotions and feelings, as professed both locally and regionally, globally too. It is against such a backdrop that almost three years into the Arab uprisings unfolding Lina Khatib, an outstanding expert into the Middle East affairs, published her book already cited above – *Image Politics in the Middle East. The Role of the Visual in Political Struggle*, a referential work documented on dozens and dozens of images and symbols as nurtured by the events structuring the “national stages” of the Arab Spring. All these leading to the concluding opinion that “The Middle East has become a site of struggle over the construction of social and political reality through competing images... (hence) to understand

⁷¹ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/25/assad-middle-east-preparing-united-states-exit-syria/>.

⁷² https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2021/08/23/l-onde-de-choc-geopolitique-de-la-debacle-afghane_6092081_3232.html.

⁷³ Lina Khatib, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-6.

⁷⁴ <https://jcpa.org/article/the-talibans-palestinian-partners-implications-for-the-middle-east-peace-process/>.

political dynamics in the Middle East, one needs to take into account the role of the image in those dynamics... (as Lisa Wedeen argues) 'politics is not merely about material interests but also about contests over the symbolic world, over the management and appropriation of meaning'."⁷⁵

A Resilient Symbol with genesis in MENA Region

Motto:

"In an address given in Doha in January 2011, the U.S. Secretary of State at the time, Hillary Clinton, just a dozen days before the Egyptian Tahrir Square erupted, had warned that "the region's foundations are sinking into the sands"."⁷⁶

*"... after trillions of dollars spent on wars in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and beyond, the US has nothing to show for its efforts but blood in the sand."*⁷⁷

*"Unless Biden is prepared to keep American boots in the sand, Iran will sweep into the Middle East's power vacuum."*⁷⁸

From the category of *the locally "branded" symbols cum metaphors*, expounding, individually and collectively, some of MENA's inner "defining flavors", spiritual and ideological not less, we would like to referring here to *the shifting sands*, a multiple meaningfully and pointedly used phrase, essentially in relation to MENA's problems.

With direct roots in the physical environment specific to many if not all Middle East countries and with the sands' defining traits mostly known of being not always or not at all friendly to human living, the trope *shifting sands* has continued to represent, beyond the face value of a solidly accumulated popular wisdom, a worthy paragon in the discourses on MENA evolutions and events, mainly by elites, maybe less the political ones but for sure scholars and academia.

For instance, *the shifting sands of MENA politics* come up right now as an irrefutable argument in approaching the Arab Uprisings, respectively in tackling its ups and downs, accomplishments *cum* failures.

Notably, with the beginning of the second part of the 2010s, the scholarly landscape on this very issue was enriched with the publication of the book entitled *Shifting Sands: The Unraveling of the Old Order in the Middle East*. The book consists of 16 excellent essays, each written by an expert in an aspect of the regional kaleidoscope, past and present. It may not have all the answers, but it certainly poses most of the right questions. A distinct accolade the respective collective work deserves is related to the contributors' efforts for looking deep in time and largely in sectorial coverage with the aim of determining as many as possible sources in generating what is now called *shifting sands*. Hence, the

⁷⁵ Lina Khatib, *op. cit.*, pp. 2-4.

⁷⁶ William J. Burns, *op. cit.*, pp. 298, 312-313, 322-323.

⁷⁷ Jeffrey D. Sachs, *Blood in the Sand*, Project Syndicate, Aug 17, 2021. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/afghanistan-latest-debacle-of-us-foreign-policy-by-jeffrey-d-sachs-2021->.

⁷⁸ Max Hastings, *We risk replaying the Kabul calamity in Iraq*, The Times, August 26, 2021. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/we-risk-replaying-the-kabul-calamity-in-iraq-5dvgd2zfz>.

collection has as its framing event the Sykes-Picot agreement, which marked its centenary in 2016 and which, by its secret inception, “invented” the modern Middle East and planted the seeds for many of its current woes. Hence, the book’s concrete, surprising sometimes, spotlight on the present crises, as on how Syrian street art helped ignite a revolution, or how, with regard to Egypt, historian Khaled Fahmy bemoans the post-Arab Spring lack of any “*imagined golden age in which we can claim we shaped our destiny and to which we want to return*”, and so on. As an overall view over the Arab Spring, Jusin Marozzi, a writer and historian, underlines in his essay that, “it is surely one of the greatest tragedy for the Arab world that the hope unleashed by popular movements across the region, from Tunisia, Egypt and Libya to Syria and Bahrain, has been so comprehensively snuffed out – with the single exception of Tunisia (instead, when you look at the Arab Spring in Iraq, it seems it never really happened. In Egypt vested interests in the army hit the default button, protecting their economic interests, imprisoning opponents and dealing a near death blow to democratic forces. In Libya, militias have refused to disarm, tribal and regional differences have been allowed to intensify and foreign powers have boosted Islamist extremists in the east of the country, making peace and stability a more distant prospect than ever... Looking at Syria in early 2015, it is difficult to see that vicious conflict ending any time soon.” *So much for the fallout of the shifting sands’ in action over almost the entire MENA region by the middle of the 21 Century’s second decade*⁷⁹.

A “lesson” well underlined by the respective book, as a good mirror of MENA’s developments in the 21st Century’s second and third decades is that, in the globalization time, *sands’ shifting* would have for now “external” (outside the region) *sources of energy*, in addition to “local” (regional/ traditional) ones.

In fact, one should speak of an *outside multilayered “breeze”* which, all along the 2010s’, intermingled with *the local “currents”* – of political, military, societal and economic nature – leading to the pervasively and consequentially defining *MENA’s “shifting sands”*.

In concrete terms, the respective “external breeze” has been injecting additional energy, but also instilling a sense of a certain direction/ orientation for the final “movement” of “the shifting sands”.

Against this backdrop, what has been nurturing *the factoring power* of that external “breeze” in the overall MENA’s regional political and geopolitical landscape has been the dynamic “tandem” between, on the one hand, the official political and strategic interests and effective acts, as expressed and performed by various governmental institutions and agencies representing mainly the few regional and global powers existing at the time, and, on the other hand, a myriad of foreign non-governmental groups, pioneered in this case especially by Western academic circles and think tanks.

In addition to that “operational tandem”, there have been existing, but rather

⁷⁹ Raja Shehadeh and Penny Johnson (Editor), *Shifting Sands. The Unraveling of the Old Order in the Middle East*, London, Profile Books Ltd, 2015 (Hardcover, February 15, 2017, Publisher: Olive Branch Pr), p. 108.

in the background and frequently playing just the role of “chorus” in the Greek tragedies, an array of multilateral institutions/ organizations.

Also, it shouldn't be a matter of wonder if even outside the MENA region one would find “acts” of real “shifting sands” with regard to MENA evolutions and trends. For instance, the same Western academic circles who initially were so enthusiastic, if not deeply ecstatic with regard to the Arab Spring, up to seeing no impediment in “godfathering” it, didn't need a too long time to turning sharply pessimistic, as in putting the phrase *False Dawn. Protest, Democracy, And Violence in The New Middle East*, as the title for a book of 320 pages.⁸⁰

Interestingly enough, during the period of time under discussion, one can encounter instances, outside the MENA area, of using just the word *sands* – given its meaning of frailty and as source of instability. As for the “location” of the respective evolutions, in the following example it is nothing other than... the Middle East.

Close to the end of the second decade of the 21st Century, Kenneth M. Pollack, an American expert on Middle East military and political affairs for over 30 years, including analysts at CIA and director at the National Security Council, published the book *Armies of Sand The Past, Present, and the Future of Arab Military Effectiveness*⁸¹, the title being motivated by the answers the author was looking for to several “questions at the heart” of his book: “What's wrong with the Arab armies? Why do they lose so many wars that by all rights they should win? And why is it that when they do win, their victories tend to be so modest, if not outright pyrrhic? Why have Arabs lost to Israel time and again? Why did it take Iraq eight long years to defeat an Iran wracked by revolution and cut off from the rest of the world? Why was the same Iraqi army then crushed effortlessly by the US-led Coalition of the Persian Gulf War of 1991? How on earth did the Libyans manage to lose to Chad in 1987? Chad! And the Libyans weren't just beaten, they were routed. Why did the Iraqi army collapse under ISIS attack in 2014? And why was it so hard for Iraq to drive ISIS out of their country despite massive American air power and the assistance of 62 other countries?”⁸²

Seeking, over the book's almost 700 pages, for answers to the respective package of self- “imposed” questions, Kenneth M. Pollack was compelled to take note of the presence of “sand”, as well as agency's role by the “shifting sand” in direct connection with the Arab armies' building up and operations. Notably, the author concluded with an effort to balance his considerations: “Since the Second World War, Arab armed forces have fared exceptionally poorly in combat. That has primarily been because the dominant mode of warfare as it has been practiced during this era required skills that Arab society did not produce in abundance. In fact, the economies, politics, and (especially) culture of the Arab world conspired to produce far too few personnel with the requisite

⁸⁰ Steven A. Cook, *False Dawn Protest, Democracy, And Violence in the New Middle East*, New York, A Council of Foreign Relations Book, Oxford University Press, 2017.

⁸¹ Kenneth M. Pollack, *Armies of Sand. The Past, Present, and Future of Arab Military Effectiveness*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2019.

⁸² *Ibidem*, p. IX.

abilities for success on the modern battlefield. Industrial-age warfare was well beyond the capacity of contemporaneous Arab society to master. But this history may not prove to be destiny. Arab politics, economics, and culture are all changing dramatically. So too is warfare. And all are changing in ways that is impossible to foresee.”⁸³

With this last sentence, seemingly our author self-tempered his previous assessment on “*all (are) changing dramatically*”. As such, Kenneth M. Pollack ultimately acknowledged that *the sand* in case should be seen as integral part of *MENA region’s shifting sands*, closing as such *a symbolic cycle* in dealing with consequential MENA issues.

Witnessing the Tragic Birth of a Brand-New Symbol

By the middle of the 21st Century’s second decade – more precisely starting with September 2nd, 2015 – the world began to be moved by the following photographs:



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Alan_Kurdi Turkish News Agency

Essentially, it was the photograph of Syrian toddler Alan Kurdi who drowned when his family, like hundreds of thousands of other refugees, was desperately trying to reach safety in Europe, after leaving Turkey’s Western coast, with the help of Turkish smugglers of refugees.

An extensive array of analysts, mainly from outside the region, mirroring also the public opinion acute reactions, didn’t miss the opportunity to noticing the heavy emotional charge nurtured by such an event per se, and the photograph “cementing” it, the analysts in case trying meantime to foresee the juncture’s

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 522.

larger impact on the foreign policy mainly of the states in neighboring areas, and generally on the international relations. “The case of this young boy’s doomed journey has landed as a political bombshell across the Middle East and Europe. It is an image of his youngest son, a lifeless child in a red shirt and dark shorts face down on a Turkish beach, that appears to have galvanized public attention to a crisis that has been building for years. Once again, it is not the sheer size of the catastrophe – millions upon millions forced by war and desperation to leave their homes – but a single tragedy that has clarified the moment. It was 3-year-old Aylan, his round cheek pressed to the sand as if he were sleeping, except for the waves lapping his face.”⁸⁴

Indeed, rocketing across the world on social media, *the photograph has forced Western nations to confront the consequence of a collective failure to help migrants fleeing the Middle East and Africa to Europe in search of hope, opportunity and safety*. Aylan, perhaps more even than the anonymous, decomposing corpses found in the back of a truck in Austria that shocked Europe in August 2015, has personalized the tragedy facing the 11 million Syrians displaced by more than four years of war.⁸⁵ That proved an issue with multiple ramifications, with various intensity. For instance, although the death of Alan Kurdi resulted in unprecedented expressions of sympathy and solidarity for refugees all over Europe, with many people volunteering to help and spontaneously giving food, water and clothes to refugees and even offering to take them into their homes, the arrival of over a million refugees and migrants to Europe just in 2015 gave rise to hostility and tensions within the societies hosting them.

Refugees and migrants have suffered racist and xenophobic attacks, prejudice and discrimination. Hence, in the view of UN officials in charge of the refugee’s issues, greater became “the challenge for Europe to make available the support and services that refugees needed to successfully integrate so that they can contribute fully to society – bringing new skills, determination and a cultural richness, as they sought to re-establish their lives in their new homes.”⁸⁶

Seemingly, the aggregate of the above comments could had led to “closing the case”. Only that, there remains some work to be done and that exploring, for instance, the connection between the assessment “*a collective failure to help migrants fleeing the Middle East*”, as included in the just reviewed narrative, and two excerpts from the descriptive text associated to Alan Kurdi’s photograph: “*face down on a Turkish beach*” and “*his round cheek pressed to the sand*”.

Apparently, an impossible connection. But as conventional wisdom says, in all situations, for a thing to become clearer one needs a larger perspective, in this case going over the water in which the boy drowned, more exactly from the Turkish shore to the Greek territory, in particular the area of the Ancient Sparta, as the birth-place of the great saying “*Come back with your shield, or on it*”, as Leonidas’ wife, Gorgo, used to tell the great King.

⁸⁴ *Image of Drowned Syrian, Aylan Kurdi, 3, Brings Migrant Crisis into Focus*, The New York Times, Sept. 3, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/04/world/europe/syria-boy-drowning.html>.

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁶ *A year on from Alan Kurdi’s death, Mediterranean drowning rates soaring*. Press briefing by the UNHCR spokesperson. 02 September 2016. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2016/9/57c938b97/year-alan-kurdis-death-mediterranean-drowning-rates-soaring.html>.

In a more popular formulation, the saying was going “*With this/ your shield, or upon this*” (*Ἡ τὰν ἧ ἐνὶ τᾷς, Ἐὶ τὰν ἐὶ ἐπὶ τὰς*) (as the phrase was recorded by the ancient Greek historian, Plutarch), meaning that true Spartans could only return to Sparta from battles (and great warriors the Spartans were!) either victorious (*with their shield in hand*) or dead (*carried upon it*). Some practical reasons to all these: in Ancient Greece, soldiers who had died in battle were often carried home upon their shield as shields were often family heirlooms which were handed down from generation to generation. In this sense, the saying means that a soldier should not lose his shield for any reason, and should die to keep it if needs be. It also alludes to the fact that a Greek soldier should never run away, as a soldier may throw away their shield in order to flee more quickly.

Going back to Alan Kurdi’s photograph, from his position of the Turkish shore one can observe that he was laying “*face down*”, with “*his round cheek pressed to the sand*”, as, after his death, had to be carried back by the only “*shield*” he could had been supplied with from the start of his battle, a battle for his mere life/survival.

And that “*shield*” was nothing else but... *the land and the world generally*. A “*shield*” which would fulfill maybe its subsequent function, as envisaged by the Spartans, namely that of carrying “*home*” the killed warriors. Only that, the same “*shield*”, *i.e. land and world* totally failed in its main function, that to ensuring Alan Kurdi’s survival.

That was true first with regard to *Syria – land and nation*, not able to function as a nurturing “*native land*” for all its “*sons*”, and that even well into the beginning of the 21st Century. Second, *the Turkish land and authorities*, which, in the first instance, seemed not being able to guarantee the minimum conditions for a refugee’s survival, plus the fact that the Turkish smugglers involved in the sea transportation for Kurdi and his family provided a defective boat, in spite of initial verbal assurances. Strangely enough, in that tragic equation which had from the very beginning a negative result, was involved also *the Canadian land & Government*, given the paralyzing bureaucratic approach of the Ottawa’s authorities in processing the Kurdi’s ant, a Canadian resident, the request to have her nephew accepted as a refugee on the territory of that self-assumed great democratic nation.

Eventually, adding to all these the already perennial impotence by the international major actors – greater powers, the UN system – in providing a light for the dark tunnel the MENA evolutions had been crossing through over decades and decades, one can say that hardly one can foresee coming into the fore of a *true reliable shield* meant to protect most of MENA’s citizens. One cannot find a more relevant proof in this respect than the region’s travails at the passage between the 21st Century’s second and the third decades, whatever the metaphorical cocooning of its narrative, Arab Spring included. A time of globalization, with the corresponding definition for the “*shield*”/ *land* for humanity which would be called to act in such cases.

At the time, the French President acknowledged that “*Alan Kurdi’s picture must be a reminder of the world’s responsibility against refugees*”⁸⁷. In our view,

⁸⁷ <https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2015/09/03/french-president-calls-erdogan-over-images-of-drowned-syrian-boy-calls-for-common-eu-refugee-policy>.

a lesson to be learned, as well as the symbol to be drawn from what happened by the middle of the 21st Century's second decade, on the background of the Middle East region's peak of confusion and disappointment with regard to the evolution of "the Arab Spring", should be one in which it would be "*the world's responsibility against the entire humanity*." Meantime we do have case-studies on both *the interplay between images, emotions, and international politics*⁸⁸, as well as on *the power of photograph for social change*⁸⁹. In particular concerning the first case, the MENA region could reclaim the role of a "*true pioneer*"⁹⁰, reminding us a verse from a great poem by Walt Whitman: "*We take up the task eternal, and the burden and the lesson, Pioneers! O Pioneers!*"⁹¹.

A "Black Swan" Redux, and possibly its Last Encounter with MENA Region

In February 2013, three American policy organizations, the Center for American Progress, the Center for Climate Security, and the Stimson Center hosted an event for the release on a new volume on "*The Arab Spring and Climate Change*".⁹²



⁸⁸ *Images, emotions, and international politics: the death of Alan Kurdi*. Published online by Cambridge University Press: 18 October 2019. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/review-of-international-studies/article/images-emotions-and-international-politics-the-death-of-alan-kurdi/0E58366AEDE24E063EA4AC34D398C692>.

⁸⁹ *The transformative image. The power of a photograph for social change: The death of Aylan*. Comunicar, Vol. XXIV, Nr. 47, 2^o trimestre, abril 2016. <https://www.revistacomunicar.com/index.php?contenido=detalles&numero=47&articulo=47-2016-03>.

⁹⁰ Pictures of children affected by Syria's war continued to go viral. The latest was two-year-old Omran Daqneesh – who survived a Russian bomb in Aleppo. And in the meme below his debris-covered image was combined with the iconic image of Alan Kurdi to highlight the plight of a whole generation of Syrian children who have known nothing but war. Image Sourcetwitter <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-37257869>.

⁹¹ *The Complete Poems of Walt Whitman*, Ware, Wordsworth Poetry Library, 2006, p. 173.

⁹² *The Arab Spring and Climate Change. A Climate and Security Correlations*, Series Edited by Caitlin E. Werrell and Francesco Femia, Center for American Progress | Stimson | The Center for Climate and Security, February 2013. <https://climateandsecurity.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/climatechange-arab-spring-ccs-cap-stimson.pdf>.

One of the panelists at the event was the journalist Thomas Friedman who, just ten months before, wrote that, "*The Arab Awakening was driven not only by political and economic stresses, but, less visibly, by environmental, population, and climate stresses... if we focus only on the former and not the latter, we will never be able to help stabilize these societies.*"⁹³

In the Preface to the Volume, the outstanding American expert in international relations, Anne-Marie Slaughter, underlined that, "*'The Arab Spring and Climate Change' does not argue that climate change caused the revolutions that have shaken the Arab world over the past two years. But the essays collected in this slim volume make a compelling case that the consequences of climate change are stressors that can ignite a volatile mix of underlying causes that erupt into revolution.*"

Equally interesting is the concept introduced by one of the volume's co-authors, namely *using the Arab Awakening as a backdrop to explore how a 21st century security strategy, which must account for "transcendent challenges," including the nexus between climate change, human rights, and migration.* Against this backdrop, another concept comes into play, namely that of "*threat multiplier*", "*a helpful way to think about climate change and security more broadly... as a complex web of conditions and interactions that help us understand the larger context of the Arab Awakening*". Also, a platform for deeper understanding the situations at dual level.

First, at the country level too, as in the particular case of "*Syria, where a combination of social, economic, environmental and climatic changes ... eroded the social contract between citizen and government in the country, strengthened the case for the opposition movement, and irreparably damaged the legitimacy of the Assad regime.*"⁹⁴ Also at the country level, in Yemen, a protracted war seems to have worsened the water crisis. Yemen's freshwater underground sources are fast drying, leaving the country parched. Its annual per capita share of water is just 120 cubic meters, compared with the global per capital share of 7,500 cubic meters. Before the war, Yemen's water ministry had imposed conditions on the drilling of wells, but during the conflict, it was impossible to monitor. Over the last decade, Yemen has fast depleted its already meager freshwater resources.

Second, as regards evolutions at the regional level and on the longer term, but not less on the medium and even short terms. During the 2021 summer, several picturesque countries in the Middle East became tinderboxes. As extreme temperatures and severe droughts ravaged the region, forests burned, and cities became islands of unbearable heat. In June, Kuwait recorded a temperature of 53.2 degrees Celsius (127.76 degrees Fahrenheit), while Oman, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia all recorded over 50 degrees (122 degrees). A month later, temperatures in Iraq spiked to 51.5 degrees (124.7 degrees), and Iran recorded a close 51 degrees (123.8 degrees). Worst of all, this is just the start of a trend. The Middle East is warming at twice the global average and by 2050 will be 4

⁹³ Thomas L. Friedman, "*The Other Arab Spring*", The New York Times, April 7, 2012. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/08/opinion/sunday/friedman-the-other-arab-spring.html>.

⁹⁴ *The Arab Spring and Climate Change*, p. 3.

degrees Celsius warmer as compared with the 1.5 degree mark that scientists have prescribed to save humanity. The World Bank says extreme climatic conditions will become routine and the region could face four months of scorching sun every year. “According to Germany’s Max Planck Institute, many cities in the Middle East may literally become uninhabitable before the end of the century. And the region, ravaged by war and mired in sectarianism, may be singularly ill-prepared to face the challenges that threaten its collective existence... The scenes of social unrest – as those in Iraq, Lebanon, and Iran over the summer of 2021 – have offered a glimpse into the future of the region that most acutely feels the impact of a changing climate.”⁹⁵ The connection between climate change and the revolutions and wars of the Arab Spring is hotly debated. But there are clear and unarguable linkages between poor governance, environmental mismanagement, urbanization, and urban unrest in communities poorly served with water, air conditioning, and other amenities.⁹⁶ The thought of what will happen in these cities as climate change worsens living conditions, if the standards of governance remain the same, is a frightening one. Climate change and the consequent increase in weather extremes add to the challenges imposed by regional conflicts, the trend for people to emigrate too.

As such, the land supposed to shield “future Alans Kurdis” from the given life’s vicissitudes in the Middle East would restrain itself more and more, if not completely disappear, and with that the symbol itself.

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⁹⁵ Anchal Vohra, *The Middle East Is Becoming Literally Uninhabitable. One of the regions hardest hit by climate change is also one least equipped to deal with it*, Foreign Policy, August 24, 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/24/the-middle-east-is-becoming-literally-uninhabitable/>.

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*.

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