Understanding the Middle East

written by Gilbert Achcar | January 31, 2025

Gilbert Achcar *has been a major left commentator on international affairs for many years. He grew up in Lebanon and has lived and taught in Paris, Berlin, and London. He is just retiring as professor of Development Studies and International Relations at SOAS, University of London. His many books include* The Clash of Barbarisms *(2002, 2006);* Perilous Power: The Middle East and U.S. Foreign Policy*, co-authored with Noam Chomsky (2007);* The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives *(2010);* Marxism, Orientalism, Cosmopolitanism *(2013);* The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising *(2013, 2022);* Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising *(2016); and* The New Cold War: The United States, Russia and China from Kosovo to Ukraine *(2023). His new book on Gaza will be coming out from the University of California Press in the summer. He was interviewed on December 9 by email by Stephen R. Shalom of the* New Politics *editorial board, with revisions being made through December 19.*

Stephen R. Shalom: *As you know, our plan was to talk about some of the broad dynamics at play in the Middle East region, rather than on any of the day-to-day developments. But then we've just experienced quite an extraordinary week in Syria.*

Gilbert Achcar: You could even say quite an extraordinary weekend.

SRS: *Indeed.*

So, we have to talk first about what's happening in Syria, before turning to our discussion of more foundational matters.

GA: That's fine.

Part I

SRS: *Let me begin by asking about the role of Israel and the United States in Syria.*

In the days since the collapse of the Assad regime, we've seen Israeli troops cross the border from the occupied Golan and seize further Syrian territory. This has led some analysts to say that this shows that Israel—and its main backer, the United States—were the main driving forces in what's happened in Syria in recent weeks.

GA: That's a very skewed interpretation of things, since if it shows anything, it is that Israel is very cautious about what is happening. If it is forcibly seizing the buffer zone, which was created in 1974 as a result of the 1973 war, that's to prevent those new forces that are now coming to the fore in Syria from getting closer to the border of the annexed Syrian territory, the part of the Golan Heights that was occupied by Israel in 1967. This territory was formally annexed by Israel in 1981, an annexation that Donald Trump, during his first term in office, recognized officially for the first time of any U.S. president. So that's what the Israelis are doing.

They're also bombing the military capabilities of the old regime, some apparently related to the production of chemical weapons, to prevent the rebels from seizing them. By behaving in this way, Israel is actually creating conditions that are not conducive to good relations with any future government in Syria, if ever that possibility existed.

And as for the United States, Washington has been observing and monitoring developments with caution. They, like Israel, are happy that Iran has been dealt a severe blow, with the downfall of the Assad regime. But, like everyone, they have a big, big question mark about what will come next. They have worries about how the main rebel force, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) will behave if it manages to control this big swath of territory that fell into its hands. And they are even worried that ISIS could seize the opportunity to launch a new offensive in the northeast of Syria.

There are those who believe that any local actor is but the puppet of some external actor. Such people can't acknowledge any agency for local actors. That's, of course, a very poor way of perceiving the situation.

SRS: *But surely the condition of Iran and Hezbollah and Russia—forces outside of Syria, external actors—did play a big role in the collapse of Assad.*

GA: Of course. That's beyond any doubt. And it is a powerful rebuttal to all those who claimed for so many years that Assad was a real popular leader, that the Syrian population was very supportive of the Assad family's regime, and that that's why this regime managed to survive. Well, now we have proof that the Assad regime fully owed its survival first to Iran's intervention, which prevented its collapse in 2013—that was when Hezbollah entered Syria at the behest of Iran, sending thousands of fighters to prop up the regime. And even with Iran's support, the regime was again on the brink of collapse two years later, which led Moscow to intervene in September 2015. Russia dramatically added to a key superiority that the regime already had, namely, the monopoly of the skies. It benefited from this monopoly courtesy of the U.S. government, which under Barack Obama vetoed any delivery of antiaircraft weapons to the Syrian opposition. This is why you never heard even of helicopters being shot down, let alone fighter jets. The opposition was unable even to counter helicopters. The regime extensively used its fleet of helicopters to drop barrel bombs—these were very barbaric, indiscriminate attacks on urban zones killing a huge number of people. And the Syrian opposition fighters could do nothing. They didn't have any antiaircraft weapons; they didn't have MANPADs, i.e. portable antiaircraft weapons. The United States didn't provide any and none of the countries neighboring Syria that were allied to the United States were allowed to send that kind of weapon. That includes Turkey, which actually produces these weapons. Recall the famous Stinger missiles that the United States provided to the Afghanistan Mujahideen when they were fighting the Soviet occupation? These are produced in Turkey under U.S. license, but Turkey didn't have the right to deliver a single one of them to the Syrian opposition.

So, Russia's intervention in 2015 was the second time the regime was rescued by a foreign actor—first Iran, then Russia. And it survived with the combined support of Russia and Iran. Russia's contribution was mainly its air force, with also a few troops there. And Iran's was mainly troops from Lebanon, from Iraq, from Iran itself even including Afghan troops based in Iran. And that's how the regime survived. For a long time, one could joke about Bashar Assad that the only territory upon which he had some sovereignty was his presidential palace. Beyond his palace, the Syrian regime's territory was either under Russian or Iranian dominance. What happened in the recent period is that Russia had to remove most of its air force from Syria. According to Israeli sources, there were only some fifteen Russian planes left there.

So very little was available to support Assad, since Iran's main force in support of the Syrian regime, which was Hezbollah, was dealt a very heavy blow in Lebanon. It was no longer really in a position

to rescue the regime. And that's when HTS decided to seize the opportunity. They were preparing for it. They saw a window of opportunity in light of the Russian withdrawal and the severe setback that Hezbollah was experiencing starting in September. They therefore began preparing themselves. And once the ceasefire was concluded in Lebanon, they attacked. Of course, they did not want to attack while the war was going on in Lebanon, because that would have appeared as if they were joining Israel in combat. So, they waited until it was over and then attacked. Having been deprived of foreign support, the regime collapsed just like the U.S. puppet regime in Afghanistan in 2021. It was exactly the same kind of collapse.

We are against both American imperialism and Russian imperialism as well as Iran's reactionary intervention abroad. And the result of foreign domination is always similar. Whether the puppet master is Russia or the United States, puppet regimes are puppet regimes. And the Assad regime had become one for a very long time, except that it was a puppet with two competing masters, giving it a little bit of space. All this has collapsed and is over now.

SRS: *Previously, it seemed like Israel and Russia had an understanding that despite Russia's backing of Syria, it would allow Israel to attack certain targets in Syria, without deploying its antiaircraft systems against the attacking Israeli planes.*

GA: Yes, that has been going on for several years. Israel has been quite frequently bombing Syrian territory—more specifically, Iranian concentrations or pro-Iran concentrations, like Hezbollah forces, within Syrian territory—without Russia, of course, intercepting any of these planes or firing any of the antiaircraft missiles that it has deployed over Syrian territory. There was obviously an agreement between the two countries, Israel and Russia. This also explains why Israel did not take a position on the Ukraine war. It did not come out in support of the Ukrainians, like the Western bloc. Israel adopted a sort of neutral attitude towards the war because of this deal that existed between Israel and Russia. Now, of course, this is over because Russia's presence in Syria has been very much reduced. Moscow is no longer in a position to greenlight or block any action by Israel on Syrian territory. And I wouldn't bet on Russia being able to keep its two bases—air and naval—in Syria for long. Or else that would be almost like Guantanamo, where you maintain a base in a country with which you don't have any friendly relations. The Syrian opposition can't have friendly relations with Moscow, who's got a lot of Syrian blood on its hands. That would be quite awkward.

SRS: *Does Russia still physically have antiaircraft missiles in Syria?*

GA: Yes, it has, of course, if only to protect its bases. Any of their forces that were deployed in other parts of the territory I presume have been redeployed or brought back to the bases that they have in the coastal area. I can't see them keeping isolated forces anywhere else. And likewise, the Iranians completely withdrew their troops into Iraq and from Iraq back into Iran. Hezbollah fighters that were still in Syria went back to Lebanon. And that's it. Lots of articles in the media have been explaining that this is a huge defeat for Iran and its so-called axis of resistance. Well, that's an accurate description of what happened. No possible question about that.

SRS: *In terms of the victorious forces in Syria, aside from HTS, can you describe some of the significant players?*

GA: Syria today is a patchwork, a full political-military patchwork. First, you have several foreign forces. Iran withdrew its forces, but you still have Russian forces there. Then you have Turkish forces on the northern border occupying bits of Syrian territory. You have U.S. forces, deployed in the northeast to back the Kurdish forces, which are dominant in a big part of the country. It's a quite sizable part—one-quarter of the Syrian territory. You have an area in the south on the Jordanian border dominated by opposition forces that are linked to the United States. And you have a genuine

popular uprising in the Druze area of the south, Suwayda—the province of Suwayda, around the city of Suwayda—that linked up with local forces in Daraa province.

And, of course, there was the region in the northwest that was under HTS control. HTS forces have now spread to other parts of the country where the regime collapsed. However, HTS's army is not large enough to control all the territory that fell into its hands. What happened is that the regime collapsed, exactly like you had in Afghanistan, except that HTS does not have the same force that the Taliban had. It's smaller, weaker than what the Taliban were. And it would be hard for them to impose themselves on the Kurds, just as it would be hard for them to really get rid of those Syrian opposition forces that are completely dominated by Turkey, which are in the north. Likewise, I can't see them managing to really exert full control over Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Hama, and all these cities. Nor over the coastal area where you still have Russian forces. HTS has not really spread everywhere, although the state has collapsed everywhere.

There are areas where the state has collapsed and a vacuum was created. And this is related to the nature of the state. It's a kind of state akin to that of Libya or that of Iraq under Saddam Hussein, which are states that are really family ruled, family owned—I call them, along with the monarchies in the region, patrimonial states. They function like monarchies, actually. The state apparatus is so much linked organically to the ruling family that when the regime collapses, it's not only the regime, it's the whole state. What we have witnessed in recent days in Syria is not a regime collapse. It's a state collapse. The whole state collapsed, and any idea that there might be some smooth transition process is just an illusion.

It is just impossible, given the situation of the country and the number of occupation forces on its soil. The worst, of course, is the Israeli occupation. Israel is now in a very hegemonic position in the region after what they did starting from Gaza, then Lebanon, then Syria, and they are now planning to strike at Iran.

Let me be clear. I fully share the joy of the tens of thousands of people who got freed from jail, from the chains of the Assad regime. It is a huge relief that this carceral regime has ended, that so many people are able to go back to their cities, to their homes, that refugees can go back to their homeland. But this is not a revolution. This is the collapse of a regime that hasn't been replaced by any form of popular democratic organization. And therefore, from a left-wing perspective, we should also be worried about the future.

At the very least, we must be very cautious and not fall into the kind of euphoria that led some people to characterize the events as the resumption of the Syrian revolution. The Syrian revolution, the one that started in 2011, has been dead for a long time unfortunately. The only possibility for a resumption of that uprising, was seen in 2020 in Suwayda, in this regime-controlled Druze area that I mentioned, where you now have some kind of popular power. There you had repeated popular uprisings against the regime since 2020, renewing the slogans of the 2011 popular uprising. They briefly spread to other parts of Syria, but there was no form of organization able to generalize this popular uprising to the whole country—or at least the whole Arab-majority territory of Syria because the Kurdish-majority part belongs to a different political category. So, unfortunately the Suwayda uprising did not spread, and the regime repressed it, quite harshly as usual. But now, with the collapse of the regime, they have revived their movement. But it is limited to only one part, one province of Syria.

There are progressives in other parts of the country who are trying to organize something at the level of civil society, from below, to fight for rights, democracy, and social demands. How far they will manage to do something is hampered by the fact that the regime has been such a terrible tyranny that little potential is left. Most of the opposition-minded people have left the country. There

has been a huge exodus from Syria over the years. One-quarter of the population has left the country, if not more. Not to mention those that were internally displaced who represent close to one-third. The situation is very difficult.

Part II

SRS:*Thanks for that survey of recent developments in Syria. I'd like now to turn to the rest of the Middle East region, focusing not so much on recent events, but trying to understand the background to what is going on.*

Let's look first at Palestine. U.S. support for Israel during the current genocide has been criminal and shameful. To what extent do you explain Washington's policy by strategic interests, by domestic factors, or by the perspectives of policymakers?

GA: Actually, it's more than just U.S. support. It is the first major joint U.S.–Israeli war, in all the history of Israeli wars from 1948 to 1956 to 1967. Even 1973, where you had real U.S. support, but Washington pulled the brake at some point. Likewise, in the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, or in 2006, in Israel's second war on Lebanon, or the wars on Gaza in 2009 and 2014—none of them was or could be described as a joint U.S.–Israeli war like this one.

The United States—and here I mean the Biden administration, and indeed, Joe Biden himself—bears a huge amount of responsibility for arming Israel, for providing most of the bombs that did most of the damage in Gaza, the destruction and the killing of so much of Gaza's population. And Washington contributed to funding this war and fully endorsed its goals to the point of blocking any Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire. This is the first time we've seen this degree of U.S. shared responsibility—and I've been observing Israeli wars for a very long time. I can see the huge difference.

And now the question becomes, why did the United States—or why, to be more accurate, did Joe Biden—do it that way? Here I believe that no "vulgar materialist" interpretation makes sense. Because it is obvious that from the point of view of U.S. imperialist interests in the region and beyond, this kind of blind, unconditional support to Netanyahu is counterproductive and not good policy. And you've had some people in the foreign policy establishment—you can read them in *Foreign Affairs* and other leading journals—criticizing the approach Biden has taken. So, to explain that the current U.S. partnership with Israel stems from the interests of U.S. imperialism doesn't make much sense. Of course, it is in the interest of U.S. imperialism to support the Israeli state as a proxy force, as a watchdog for U.S. interests in the Mideast, and especially toward the Gulf area, which remains a strategically key area for both oil and oil money. But this kind of blind support jeopardizes U.S. interests. And I can't see any explanation that makes sense of it except the dimension represented by Joe Biden's own pro-Israel stance.

This is the first U.S. president in history who has publicly repeated several times that he is a Zionist. Not just that he supports Israel, but that he's a Zionist. He's proud of being a Zionist. And that explains a lot. The record of Joe Biden as a Congressperson is well-known: a very pro-Israeli record. It's one of the most pro-Israel records. Keep in mind, that when Joe Biden was campaigning in 2020, people believed—in part based on his own promises—that he would revert to an Obama-like policy on the Middle East. That he would therefore reverse some of the measures taken by Trump, like moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, closing the U.S. consulate in Arab Jerusalem, closing the Palestinian Authority's office in Washington, or condoning the annexation of the Golan. Yet once Biden settled into the White House, he did none of that. On the issue of the Middle East—just like on the issue of China, by the way—Joe Biden has not been a continuation of Barack Obama. He has been the continuation of Donald Trump. And on the issue of Israel, he even went beyond Donald

Trump. One can wonder whether Trump would have gone to the extent that Biden did in offering unconditional support to the Israeli state. I mean, that's a question mark. But anyhow, Biden did it. And Trump, anyway, could not have done more than what the Biden administration did in supporting Israel. It was basically a political choice. U.S. imperialism remains the same, but there can be big shifts in policy from one president to the other nowadays. Gone is the time of the so-called bipartisan consensus in foreign policy. This has basically ended in recent years. Donald Trump has completely ended that. And Biden has continued in that sense, in representing this right-wing shift in U.S. politics regarding Israel. On the issue of Israel, Biden satisfied even the U.S. far right. The U.S. Republicans and the MAGA people were only very mildly critical of what he did on this issue, much less than about Ukraine or anything else. And so even though Biden portrayed himself as someone who was almost a progressive, on this particular issue he concurred with the U.S. far right, with the U.S. pro-Israeli far right. I can't think of any other explanation for what the Biden administration has been doing that makes sense and is convincing.

SRS: *What about the issue of annexation of the West Bank? Trump backed off from this during his first presidency, but now he has several strong annexationists in his new administration. That wasn't a part of Biden's policy. Biden has imposed sanctions against some settlers, and so on. These may be trivial in the larger picture of the genocide, but nevertheless, it does seem like a distinction, no?*

GA: No, there's not much difference. The annexation of the Golan is what Trump officially acknowledged. And Biden did not reverse this. Right? On the issue of the West Bank and Gaza, remember the "Deal of the Century"? This peace plan so-called that Jared Kushner drew up for his father-in-law. And which Trump proclaimed with great pomp and circumstance. Well, this deal is not very different from whatever Biden's views were about the West Bank and Gaza: some kind of rump so-called state, which looks like Swiss cheese, and in exchange for part of the territories that would be annexed by Israel, Palestinians would be given some bits of territory in the Negev desert, close to the Egyptian border. So basically, there's not a qualitative difference between this kind of vision and that of Biden. Biden did not proclaim any vision that could represent a breakthrough. He did not even come out clearly with a position against the settlements. From that point of view, the Obama administration in which he was vice president had a much clearer attitude in condemning the settlements. So no, there's not much difference, really. Biden was the continuation of Donald Trump and Donald Trump II will be the continuation of Joe Biden. There is no major discontinuity on the issue of Israel and the Middle East between Trump I, Biden, and Trump II.

SRS: *You refer to Biden's personal views. But many analysts—for example Mearsheimer and Walt, authors of The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy—argue that divergences between Washington's Middle East policy and its strategic interests are best explained by the influence of the pro-Israel lobby. What do you think of their view?*

GA: This explanation falls short of telling us why this lobby is more effective with some than with others when it comes to actual policies. It boils down to a sort of conspiracy theory instead of understanding other factors that can be much more important, such as the basic interests that guide U.S. foreign policy or the idiosyncratic inclinations of the people in charge. George W. Bush's crowd really did not need the Israel Lobby to convince them of invading Iraq, a goal that many of them had been lobbying for during the Clinton administration. They saw Iraq as a big prize for the United States, a key factor in making what they called the "New American Century," both due to its own oil resources and to the fact that controlling Iraq would tremendously enhance U.S. hegemony over the whole Gulf. If anything, Israel was far more interested in getting Washington to strike at Iran than at Iraq, which had been turned militarily into a basket case by the U.S.–led onslaught in 1991. And when Israel requested a green light from the Bush administration in 2008 to strike at Iran's nuclear installations, they did not get it, as a *New York Times* investigation revealed at the time. So much for the Israel Lobby thesis.

SRS: *Okay, let me move on to ask about some of the Arab regimes. Let's start with Saudi Arabia. For many years, Saudi Arabia was known as the most religiously fundamentalist, reactionary country in the world. And now they have a sort of reformer image in their leader.*

So, my question is: Is there actually a change? If so, what is the significance of that?

GA: What they have today is an avatar of "enlightened despotism." The regime's despotism has not changed a bit. On the contrary, if anything, it's even more despotic. But the crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman—sensing that the young people in the kingdom were becoming very frustrated with the very austere way of life that was imposed on them, especially after their social condition improved considerably with the wealth created by the oil money—decided to liberalize the "moral" system in the country. And in that sense, there is definitely a real change. Amazingly, women today in the Saudi kingdom are freer in their clothing and external appearance than they are in Iran. It used to be the reverse. So, the change is at that level, not at the level of politics, because there are still no elections or no voting rights, not for women and not even for men. Now you have concerts, music, cinemas, everything that was prohibited. There used to be a very obscurantist kind of system, resembling what you had with some of the fundamentalist sects in the United States where they were dominant in U.S. history. So, you had the same in the Saudi kingdom. And that has changed, but that doesn't mean that politically it has become liberal.

SRS: *One often hears reference to "the Gulf states," putting them all into one category. And indeed, they have certain common characteristics: their oil money, their monarchies, and so on. Yet it seems there are some substantial differences in the interests between them. Can you help us understand what those differences are?*

GA: Yes, of course, there are substantial differences between them, to the point that during Donald Trump's first term there was a boycott of one of them by the rest. Qatar was boycotted by the United Arab Emirates, the Saudi Kingdom, Bahrain, and others. They have made different political choices in terms of regional policy. Qatar took over from the Saudi kingdom in the 1990s the tutelage over the regional organization of the Muslim Brotherhood. Until 1990, the Brotherhood was closely linked to the Saudi kingdom but got repudiated because it could not condone the U.S. deployment against Iraq that led to the first Iraq war in 1991. So, a very few years later, Qatar became the Brotherhood's sponsor in place of the Saudi kingdom, which of course irritated the Saudis.

Then you have the United Arab Emirates, which is harshly hostile to the Muslim Brotherhood. And the two of them—the UAE and the Saudis—combined to ostracize Qatar in 2017.

SRS: *Why was the UAE harshly critical of the Muslim Brotherhood?*

GA: It's difficult to find one single explanation. They pretended at some point that there was a Muslim Brotherhood plot against their state, but they also recruited security people from Egypt who had long experience in repressing the Muslim Brotherhood. So, a combination of factors. But again, you know, in such very centralized kinds of regimes you can't always find a rational explanation. It can often be just personal idiosyncrasy.

Another difference became more and more significant with the Arab Spring, the Arab uprisings beginning in 2011. The Muslim Brotherhood played a key role in trying to steer and even hijack these uprisings. And behind them was Qatar. And that was resented completely by the Saudis and the United Arab Emirates, which are classical, conservative, reactionary regimes opposed to any subversion. They resented Qatar's role in backing the Muslim Brothers, whom they saw as troublemakers. They tried to punish Qatar, seizing the opportunity of Trump's presidency, who let them do it. The UAE had built a close relation with the Trump crowd. It is even believed to have

contributed to funding the Trump campaign in 2016. And then in 2020, with the Democrats coming back to the White House, the boycott of Qatar was ended just before Trump left office.

So yes, you have differences among the Gulf states. These are the most polarized. Then you have others like Kuwait or Oman that keep a rather low profile in regional politics, out of conservatism, but also to avoid trouble. In sum, the Gulf states have many similarities, especially economically and to some extent socially, but politically they have rulers upholding different political perspectives.

SRS: *A little over a year ago, Iran and Saudi Arabia restored diplomatic relations after a break of seven years. Was this a real rapprochement? And what is the status of their relationship now?*

GA: I think that the Saudi kingdom, having suffered a setback in Yemen. and afraid therefore of Iran's increasing clout in the region, was happy to seize the opportunity of China's offer of mediation, to mend fences with the Iranians. They did this in order to preserve themselves from Iranian action against them. Don't forget that you also have an important Shia population in the Saudi kingdom. It's a minority, but it's an important minority. And Iran has various means through which it can exert pressure on the kingdom.

And then you had the Gaza war. This was rightly seen by most of the populations in the region as the horror that it is. It made the Saudis happy that they had not joined the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain in the so-called Abraham Accords of establishing formal relations with Israel during the Trump administration. They had been cautious, because of the Iran factor. The United Arab Emirates doesn't have the problem of antagonizing its public opinion because it is a very artificial state, with a population, close to 90 percent of whom are migrants without any rights. That's not the case in the Saudi kingdom, which has a sizable native population. And they're afraid of Iran's pressure in outbidding them in condemning Israel. Therefore, they are now playing at denouncing the genocide and criticizing Israel. But these are very hypocritical stances, because if they really wanted to do something against the genocide, it would have been enough for them to call for an embargo on oil exports to all the countries that support Israel, as they did in 1973. Back then the Arab oil embargo triggered a major global economic crisis. This time, however, the Saudi rulers did absolutely nothing of that sort. They did not call for any Arab boycott or Muslim boycott or whatever. So, when they denounce the genocide in Gaza, they are shedding crocodile tears. They're being totally hypocritical.

SRS: *You referred to the Saudi defeat in Yemen. Can you tell us a little bit about what the situation there is. There was one point when there was a tremendous Saudi bombing campaign and mass starvation going on, and U.S. weapons support for the Saudis. What happened next?*

GA: U.S. support at the time of Obama was quite restricted because this administration was not happy with the Saudis intervening in Yemen in 2015, an intervention that was led by the young crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, who was minister of defense at the time. The Saudi intervention consisted mostly in the use of its air force—very brutally and murderously. But on the ground the Houthis had much more motivated fighters than those on the other side. And then there started to be dissensions on the other side, between Southern separatists, and others, and between the UAE and the Saudis. All this enabled the Houthis to seize a large part of the territory and entrench themselves there. They also began to develop—with the help of Iran, obviously—a missile capability that could threaten the Saudi kingdom. They actually sent a few missiles and rockets towards Saudi targets, and that of course was very worrying for the Saudi rulers, which basically led them to stop their direct involvement in the fighting.

SRS: *What is the situation now in Yemen?*

GA: Now you have one part of the country that is under the Houthis, who are the Shia equivalent of

the Taliban—more accurately, they are Zaydis, which is a specific sect of Shiism. They are the closest to the Taliban anywhere. They are called the Houthis, but their official name is "partisans of God," Ansarullah. And they have a very reactionary moral code. You won't see women in the pictures of demonstrations that you get today from Yemen. The rest of the country is very unstable, there is no unified homogeneous force controlling it. It is rather a coexistence between various territories dominated by this or that group.

The Houthis have used the opportunity of Gaza to outbid both the Saudis and their Yemeni Sunni opponents on the issue of Israel. They've fired missiles at international shipping and at Israel. I don't think that they are crazy enough to believe that they are really inflicting great harm on Israel—it has been quite limited—but politically, they have used their action very intensively against the Saudis and against their Yemeni opponents.

SRS: *Does the United Nations still recognize as the legal government that motley crew of forces outside of Houthi control?*

GA: There is a Yemeni government that is supposedly the continuation of the coalition government that was formed after the dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh relinquished power in the autumn of 2011. But UN agencies work with both sides when it comes to humanitarian issues. Yemen is what the mainstream calls a "failed state." It's not the only one; there are many now in the region. The category started to be used in the Horn of Africa with Somalia. But now you have Yemen. You have Sudan. You could describe Syria, of course, as a "failed state." Libya is one, too, and even Iraq and Lebanon to a certain degree. These are all states that collapsed and got divided among different forces.

SRS: *One of the failed states you mentioned is Libya. It seems like in Libya there are several foreign players involved with the different factions. Can you help us understand what's going on there?*

GA: Libya is both a failed state and the kind of state that we mentioned previously—a patrimonial state, like in Assad's Syria, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, or in the monarchies, where the regime is not separable from the state. In a patrimonial state you can hardly overthrow the regime and keep the state. The collapse of the regime leads to the collapse of the state. And when the state collapses and there is no unified force capable of replacing it, that's when you get the dominance of different factions and very quickly foreign involvement. The rival factions themselves will look for foreign sponsors to support them. That's what has happened in Libya, for instance.

Libya got essentially divided into two parts, west and east. In the western part, the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic forces were dominant and supported by Qatar and Turkey. In the eastern part you have a mixture of remnants of the Gaddafi regime and locals led by a man who had split from Gaddafi and became a CIA asset for a while, namely, Khalifa Haftar. These forces in the east got backed by Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Russia. So, Libya became a theater of conflict between various forces, like Syria has been for many years, as have other countries in the region and into the Horn of Africa.

SRS: *But in Syria until a few weeks ago, we thought that Assad was in charge to some degree, but in Libya it seems much less clear that there's anyone who can claim to speak for the country.*

GA: That's because geographically there's a major difference between Syria and Libya. Libya is geographically composed of two parts. which are quite distinct, and between them you have a substantial stretch of quasi-desertic land. That's not the case in Syria, where the heartland of the country was under regime control. The regime controlled something like two-thirds of the territory of Syria (putting aside the Israeli-occupied Golan), with one-third controlled by others: a big chunk,

close to one-quarter of the territory by the Kurdish movement in the northeast, a much smaller territory controlled by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in the northwest, Druze forces in the Suwayda province, and on top of all that Russian and Iranian forces in the regime-controlled areas and Turkish and U.S. forces in the north and northeast. Now, of course, the state that existed in the Syrian heartland, shored up by Iran and Russia, has collapsed, and the big question is, will it be possible to rebuild a unified Syrian state? That's the big challenge.

Whereas in Libya, the situation sort of stabilized into two states. It's a kind of partition of the country between the eastern province and the western province, Tripoli and Benghazi. And although Haftar tried for a while to conquer the rest of Libya from Benghazi, he was defeated in this endeavor, with Turkey helping the other side. So, you've now got some stabilization of the situation between two rival-controlled parts of the country. Partition is often the dynamic in "failed states." In Sudan, where there is a war between two fractions of the country's armed forces, the disintegration of the state is leading to some kind of de facto partition on the ground.

SRS: *This is quite a depressing picture that you have presented. Are there any reasons for hope going forward?*

GA: Yes, absolutely. I always draw a distinction between optimism and hope. Optimism is the belief that the best will happen. Unfortunately, there is little ground for optimism today in the region, I'm afraid. But there is still some ground for hope. Because you have every now and then popular movements like that which involved the people in Suwayda, in Syria, since 2020 despite all the horrors of the civil war and the regional war fought on Syrian territory. There have been some important social movements in a country like Morocco, for instance, which not long ago witnessed major strikes, including a long and massive teachers' strike. So here and there, there is some potential.

In 2019, there was a second wave of the Arab Spring, as it was called, which involved Algeria, Sudan, Iraq, and Lebanon. That wave was defeated, of course, and in the case of Sudan, the situation turned into a tragedy because of a very specific reason, which is that the armed forces split and clashed. Instead of a fight between revolution and counter-revolution, you got the counter-revolution splitting and engaging in a civil war. Nevertheless, before this happened in 2023, you had a tremendous mobilization of young people spearheading the popular movement in Sudan, who managed to resist a coup by the military. There was a coup, but they thwarted it in the sense that it failed in imposing itself. The popular movement was able to prevent the military from prevailing and ruling until the military entered into this fratricidal clash that engulfed the whole country in a bloody war between two warrior camps.

In the Algerian Hirak of 2019–2021, peaceful protests led to the ousting of the president. In Iraq you had a promising uprising in 2019, that was quelled. But the potential is still there, and that's the reason for hope. The big question, however, is whether or not the young people will manage to build networks that could be the organizational leadership of change. And whether they can build a political leadership smart enough to know how to navigate in these very, very complex circumstances that exist in the region. And especially how to win the rank and file of the armed forces to the side of change, to the side of revolution. That's a very big challenge. But there is room for hope.

Even in Syria today, we can hope that a progressive movement will manage to appear and raise its head. Given that HTS is not, or not yet at any rate, in a position to really control the whole of the country, there's reason for hope. Not optimism, but hope.