

## Saudi Craftsmen Stitch Gold-Laced Cover for Islam's Holiest Site

### Factory in Mecca Produces New Cover for Cube-shaped Kaaba Before Hajj Each Year Using Silver, Gold-Plated Thread Costing Saudi \$6 Million. The Kiswa was Manufactured in Egypt until 1962

MECCA - Dozens of Saudi craftsmen, mostly in their 40s and 50s, are hard at work in a factory in Mecca preparing an embroidered black and gold cloth to cover the Kaaba, the holiest site in Islam. Known as the kiswa, the cloth is woven from silk and cotton and adorned with verses from the Koran. A new one is made each year to be placed on the Kaaba in Mecca's Grand Mosque during the annual Muslim hajj pilgrimage.



Many of the craftsmen have worked in the factory in the Oum al-Jood district of Mecca all their lives but they will retire soon, so a new generation is being trained to carry on the trade.

General manager Mohammed bin Abdullah Bajuda said King Salman had ordered all the machines, which were introduced some 30 years ago to help automate the process, to be replaced with newer ones by next year.

A cube-shaped stone structure, the Kaaba is a focal point of the hajj, during which some two million pilgrims walk around it in a mass ritual.

When Muslims anywhere in the world say their prayers five times a day, it is towards Mecca and the Kaaba that they face.

The Kaaba's black stone was revered even before the birth of Islam. Muslims believe it was originally built by the prophet Ibrahim, the Biblical Abraham, on the site of the

first house of worship built by Adam. It has since been rebuilt more than once.

#### 'THE BEST FEELING' -

The kiswa was manufactured in Egypt until 1962. There have been red, green or white coverings in centuries past, but now it is always black with embroidered gold calligraphy.

Nearly 670 kg (1,477 pounds) of silk, enough to cover a structure estimated to measure about 50 feet (15 metres) high and 35 to 40 feet long, is imported from Italy. Silver and gold-plated thread comes from Germany.

But the kiswa is embroidered and stitched together in Saudi Arabia and paid for by the kingdom each year at a cost of \$6 million.

Asked about that expenditure at a time of austerity in the kingdom, Bajuda said: "This glorifies the house of God. The Kaaba more than deserves this honour." Waleed al-Juhani has worked at the factory, which opened in 1977, for 17 years.

## Israel Jails 19-Year Old Woman for Refusing Military Service

A 19-year old woman has been jailed by the Israeli authorities for refusing to be conscripted into the Israel Defence Force.

Noa Gur Golan is currently being held in a military prison near Haifa, having been detained for more than 30 days.

She is being held in a room with nine other women and is only allowed to see her family once every two weeks.

Israel expects all Jewish, Druze and Circassian Israeli over the age of 18 to do their military service, with women being conscripted for two years and men two years and eight months.

Ms Golan's brothers, aged 29 and 24, have completed their service with the Israeli Defence Force.

She had sought to avoid military service on the grounds of her being a pacifist, but her plea has been rejected in the two hearings she has had so far, the Independent reported.



## The Man Without a State

### How did Mikheil Saakashvili go from Leader of the Rose Revolution to Stateless Wanderer?

Mikheil Saakashvili, the former president of Georgia, likes to reminisce about his walks in the center of Kiev, Ukraine, where people would approach him on the street to have their picture taken with him.

Actors may get lots of similar requests, but among politicians, "I'm the one who gets most of the selfies," he said via phone from the Hungarian capital of Budapest. "I have this because somehow I'm part of their whole popular culture."



Saakashvili has been shuttling between Hungary and Poland because authorities in Kiev stripped him of his Ukrainian citizenship on July 26. Saakashvili, who lost his Georgian citizenship when he became a citizen of Ukraine, is now stateless.

The former president of Georgia is now camped out in Poland. There, he and some of his supporters and allies are working to figure out when the man known to many as Misha could make his way back to Kiev.

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## Does Trump Intend to Thwart Iran's Ambitions in Syria?

In response to several questions about the U.S. view of an ongoing offensive by pro-Assad forces to reconquer eastern Syria, specifically Deir Ezzour and the vital border town of Abu Kamal,

We as a coalition are not in the land-grab business. We're in the killing ISIS business, and that is what we want to do. And if the Syrian regime wants to do that, and they are going to again, put forth a concerted effort and show that they are doing just that in Abu Kamal or Deir Ezzour or elsewhere, that means that we don't have to do that in those locations.... But if our access to Abu Kamal is shut off because the regime is there, that's okay.

Shortly thereafter, the administration confirmed that it had ended a controversial Obama-era CIA program to support anti-Assad rebels. And just days later, in late July, the U.S. military announced that it had cut ties with one of its main Sunni Arab partners in southern Syria after the group, Shuhada al-Qaryatayn, sometimes known as the Shuq, had launched operations to impede the eastward progress of pro-Assad forces. Explaining the move, Dillon acknowledged that "The Shuq have been important partners in the fight against ISIS in southern Syria." But he noted that "We have made it very clear time and again that our goal in Syria and Iraq is to fight ISIS and fight ISIS only.... So we have since talked with [the Shuq] and made them know that we cannot support them if they want to pursue objectives other than defeating ISIS."

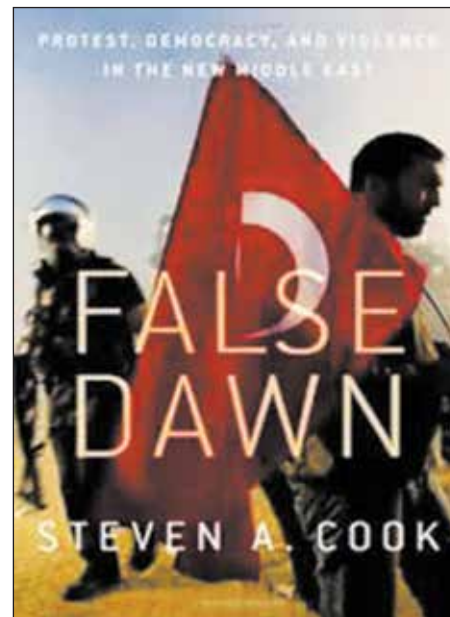
Needless to say, America's seeming strategic incoherence when it comes to Iranian designs in Syria has many of its most important regional friends alarmed — and none more so than Israel. A high-level Israeli security delegation that just returned from Washington expressed "grave concern" that the U.S. balked when pressed to condition any Syrian settlement on the evacuation of Iranian-allied forces. The Israelis reportedly told their American counterparts, "We rushed here to warn of the deployment of Hezbollah, Iranian and Syrian forces; to explain exactly what's going on there. Without a significant change [the U.S.] position, if you don't become more involved, tougher and more aggressive, you

will leave the Middle East to the Iranians, under Russian auspices." In response to their warnings, however, the Israelis perceived only "a kind of embarrassment" on the part of the Trump administration resulting from their "lack of a clear position ... with regards to the nature of the future agreement and disagreements on what should and what should not be done in Syria to bring quiet to the region. As far as they're concerned, the matter is still wide open."

Anyone who has spent time with senior Israeli officials in the past year knows how deadly serious they have been about the emerging Iranian threat in Syria. They have left little doubt that an outright victory for Iran defined in terms of any enduring Iranian ability to use Syria as a launching pad for military aggression against Israel would be unacceptable. The consolidation of an IRGC-controlled land corridor stretching from Tehran to the Golan Heights, replete with Iranian-backed forces and permanent military outposts, would see that nightmare realized on steroids. While Israel has strongly preferred that the United States take the lead in blocking such a dangerous deterioration in its geostrategic situation, there is every reason to believe that it will take matters into its own hands should America falter. It's now beyond question that the endgame in Syria is rapidly approaching. Regrettably, after nearly six long years of the Obama administration's abdication of U.S. leadership, there are no successes to be won there anymore — only worse disasters to be mitigated. At the top of the list should be preventing a fundamental shift in the balance of power in favor of America's most determined enemies in a region of the world long deemed vital to U.S. interests. A close second might be avoiding a major Israeli-Iranian conflagration that could make the Middle East's current unraveling seem like mere child's play. Heading off those dueling catastrophes will no doubt prove difficult. It will be impossible, however, unless the United States first decides to do so. For the Trump administration, the time for choosing what to do when it comes to the gathering Iranian menace in Syria has now come.

## False Dawn

### Protest, Democracy, and Violence in the New Middle East



A sweeping narrative account of the last five years in the Middle East and a timely argument of how and why the Arab uprisings failed.

Book by Steven A. Cook

Publisher —Oxford University Press

More than half a decade after people across the Middle East poured into the streets to demand change, hopes for democracy in the region have all but disappeared in a maelstrom of violence and renewed state repression. In False Dawn: Protest, Democracy, and Violence in the New Middle East, Steven A. Cook, Eni Enrico Mattei senior fellow for Middle East and Africa studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, explains why the Middle East uprisings did not succeed.

Despite appearances, notes Cook, there were no true revolutions in the region six years ago: none of the affected societies underwent social revolutions, and the old structures of power were never eliminated. Egypt remains an authoritarian state, Syria and Yemen are in the midst of civil wars, Libya has descended into anarchy, and the self-declared Islamic State remains a threat. Even Turkey, which was once thought to be a democratizing model for the Arab world, now more closely resembles an autocracy. Cook explains that "leaders around the Middle East harbored worldviews that were antithetical to what the uprisings and the Gezi Park protests [in Turkey] stood for."

However, these leaders "cannot be held solely responsible for the nature of politics in their respective countries. They have certainly had help from feckless oppositions, bloodthirsty extremists, and indifferent world powers."

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With regard to the role of the United States, Cook argues, "What ails the Middle East has less to do with the United States than Washington's political class and the foreign policy establishment are inclined to believe. Policymakers should get used to it because it will likely be the story of the Middle East for at least a generation to come."

"Looking back, it all seems dream-like. . . . Egypt's Facebookers and bloggers, Mohammed al-Bouazizi, Khaled Said, Tahrir Square, brave Libyan fighters advancing on Tripoli, the Girl in the Blue Bra, and Gezi Park's girl in the red dress are of a recent but seemingly distant past—a gauzy sequence of determination, defiance, hope, and activism that has not been extinguished as much as eclipsed by political uncertainty, instability, and at times unspeakable violence," he concludes.

**CERTIFIED TRANSLATION**  
ENGLISH <> ARABIC  
Call: 770-608-3343  
Fax: 770-442-2486  
Translations@An-NourNews.com

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