

Royals and Revolutionaries: The Saudi-Iranian Battle for the Future of Islam and the Middle East

Fanack.com by Roger Cohen

Earlier this year, I went to Doha and met with the Qatari foreign minister, Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani. Among the erratic things that the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman, has done is to impose a virtual blockade on Qatar, accusing it of underwriting terrorism. That, from the Saudis, is a bit rich. So, I asked Al-Thani, what do you make of this 33-year-old upstart, M.B.S.?

“He cannot strip away the dress of terrorism,” that Saudi Arabia “was wearing for more than 40 years and now just put it on Qatar like this,” he said. For the Saudis, Al-Thani went on, “terrorism is not the act of terror. Terrorism is you are disagreeing with me.”

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That line has haunted me since the disappearance inside the Saudi Istanbul consulate two weeks ago of Jamal Khashoggi, the free thinker and Washington Post columnist who had the temerity to criticize the Crown Prince. “We Saudis deserve better,” Khashoggi wrote in the Washington Post.

Better, he meant, than Saudi-led slaughter in Yemen, better than M.B.S.’s mass round-up of critics, better than the arrest of the very women activists who pushed for this year’s Saudi decision to allow women to drive. Now, it seems, Khashoggi has been murdered, on the orders of Mohammed bin Salman, for the crime of disagreeing with him.

The Saudis say Khashoggi left the Consulate soon after entering it, but they have produced no proof. That may be because corpses don’t walk, any more than “rogue killers” materialize en masse in consulates. Saudi Arabia is insulting the world’s intelligence.

Terrorism is you are disagreeing with me.

The capacity for political disagreement and free speech are of course limited all across the autocratic societies of the Middle East (they are not faring so well in Donald Trump's United States either). Murder or imprisonment is simpler and swifter than open debate. Fanack, our host today, is founded on the principle that the free expression of different ideas is not a weakness but a sign of a healthy society. Therein lies its importance.

As the Khashoggi scandal unfolded, Siamak Namazi, an Iranian-American businessman and former Wilson Center public scholar, was completing his third year in Tehran's Evin prison. He has been convicted of cooperating with the hostile American government. He is in effect a political hostage, held as leverage against the United States, just as journalists like Roxana Saberi and Jason Rezaian were held before him.

The Islamic Republic promised freedom as Ayatollah took power in 1979 after the Shah's brutal rule, but delivered only a different form of repression. Iran remains, tantalizingly, on the brink of the more representative society Iranians have sought for more than a century.

As Akbar Ganji, the Iranian dissident writer once told me, **"We have a lot of the preconditions for democracy – urbanization, high education, a large middle class, a young population, a sophisticated intellectual class, a feminist movement. The power of ideology has diminished considerably. But the power of money has not. The government has it and uses oil money to create a vast loyal class."**

The Iranian yearning for greater freedom is now held in check by the clerical and paramilitary Nomenklatura of a tired, 39-year-old Revolution, just as it was once frustrated by the westernizing despot on the Peacock Throne.

My subject today is the bitter conflict playing out across the Middle East between Shia Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia, between the clerical revolutionaries and the conservative royals. It can take bloody

form, as on the battlefields of Yemen and Syria; or political form, as in Qatar, Iraq and Bahrain.

This confrontation should not, however, mask the fact that Iran and Saudi Arabia bear striking similarities. They are both repressive and expansionist powers with hideous human rights records. They both oppress women. Both opposed the Arab Spring because both are uncomfortable with freedom and the demands of their citizens for agency and representative government. In this sense, they both represent the past.

Outside Tunisia, the Arab Spring was largely quashed, but the pent-up frustrations it reflected among the young population of the Middle East exist still, redoubled now by the theft of a great liberation movement. Two years before the Arab Spring, there had of course been the Iranian Green Movement of 2009, a vast uprising suppressed with force. The anger and hope I witnessed during those heady June days in Tehran has not disappeared.

This is not, then, a fight between good and evil, the Enlightenment and barbarism. It's a fight between two anxious, twitchy regimes with a deep mistrust of each other. The mistrust has a long history.

Arabs and Persians enjoy cordial enmity. Each regards the other as inferior. The cultural rivalry between the Sunni and Shia universes dates back 1.5 millennia or so, to the battle of Karbala in 680, and, for the Shia, the never-forgiven slaughter of the Imam Hussein, the Prophet's grandson, by the forces of the Sunni caliph.

Neither country, fearful of openness and connectedness and the people's will, has made its peace with the modern world. This in a way was Khashoggi's core point about the Muslim Middle East. The region was stuck. The promise of the Arab Spring had been betrayed. A newsroom like the Washington Post's was, to him, a vision of almost unimaginable freedom.

That's why Khashoggi headed into self-imposed exile in Virginia. Yes, he criticized the Crown Prince (while also praising his attempt to quash the Saudi-nurtured Wahhabi extremism behind Al Qaeda and

Isis), but his target was far wider. As he once put it, “The Arab world has been seeking renaissance for the last 100 years.” So, in its way, has Iran. The story I will tell today is one of frustrated promise, and of the elusive quest for a satisfactory reconciliation of Islam and modernity.

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Iranian suspicion of the Arab world runs deep. Like the Jews, Shiites are a minority, albeit a larger one, in the Sunni Middle East. Two centuries of Arab rule left a deep mark. The great 11th century Persian epic poem, the *Shannameh*, is in many ways an assertion of Iranian nationhood against the Arab world, a contradistinction cemented by the adoption of the Shia faith. Anyone who spends any time in Tehran quickly becomes aware that the Arab, not the Jew, is the perennial butt of Persian contempt.

So, the waters are troubled. When the people of Iran rose up in 1979 against an American-backed despot, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, and the American-trained SAVAK secret police proved powerless against the popular will to install Ayatollah Khomeini as leader, the Saudis could only look in the mirror and see the toppled Shah.

What, after all, was the House of Saud but a fragile system of autocracy, cemented in the last instance by American power, in the name of oil and stability?

When the Grand Mosque in Mecca was seized later in 1979 by Islamic militants seeking the overthrow of the House of Saud, these existential fears turned to outright panic. The response of the Saudi King Khaled was, as he put it, more religion, not less. Photographs of women in newspapers were banned. Women on television disappeared. Cinemas were shut down. Hours of religious study were added to school curricula. Gender segregation in every public place became rigid.

The Saudi export of its militant Wahhabi ideology to Madrassahs across the world went into overdrive. Egyptians, Jordanians and others flocked to the oil-rich Saudi economy to work. They came back with refrigerators – and a more fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. The hijab spread. So did hatred of the apostate West.

The Mujahideen, or jihadi warriors, were initially supported by the United States for anti-Soviet strategic purposes in Afghanistan. Then American attention wandered, as it tends to do. In the vacuum, America's useful Saudi-backed jihadi baby turned into a metastasizing vengeful monster with names like Al Qaeda and ISIS. The West has paid a heavy price in New York, London, Amsterdam, and elsewhere for the triumphalist American negligence of the 1980's,

Here, I would quote Khashoggi on his country again, writing this year in the Washington Post:

“I agree with MBS that the nation should return to its pre-1979 climate, when the government restricted hardline Wahhabi traditions. Women today should have the same rights as men. And all citizens should have the right to speak their minds without fear of imprisonment. But replacing old tactics of intolerance with new ways of repression is not the answer.”

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That year, 1979, was a watershed. There had been two pillars to American policy in the Muslim Middle East: support of the Shah and the House of Saud. Now, one pillar was gone. The seizure of American hostages in the Embassy in Tehran, a lasting wound in the American psyche, brought home for 444 days the new Iranian hatred of The Great Satan. The United States held the Saudis in an ever-tighter embrace that not even the 15 Saudis on the 9/11 planes could break.

The House of Saud felt comfortable with that: American arms deals and aid suited it fine. The royal family has been the status quo Middle East power par excellence.

Then, however, the United States began to tilt.

As the Saudis saw it, the Iraq War was a gift to Iran. They were not wrong. Saddam Hussein's Sunni dominance was ended; the oppressed and often persecuted Shia majority came to power. Iran extended its influence into Iraq through this shift. The American war changed the

Sunni-Shia balance in the Middle East, one of the many ways in which it was destabilizing.

Worse, from the Saudi point of view, was to follow. President Barack Obama, seeking to recalibrate the U.S. strategy in the Middle East and engage with the Islamic Republic, reached a nuclear deal with Iran. This rebalancing made sense. Iran is a major Middle Eastern power. It's a big economy and, beneath a repressive regime, a promising, highly educated and largely pro-western society exists. American dependence on Saudi oil is a thing of the past; American strategic options have broadened. The nuclear accord was far from perfect but better than any alternative.

To the Saudis, and their allies in the United Arab Emirates, it was merely proof of the perfidy of Barack *Hussein* Obama.

This perfidy, for the Saudi royals, was taken still further in Syria, where Obama backed the Sunni opposition to Bashar al-Assad, promised the world that Assad would go, and set a red line against Assad's use of chemical weapons – only to ignore it. So much for America's word! So much for America's alignment with Saudi Arabia, a chief sponsor of those anti-Assad Sunni insurgents!

There was now no question in Riyadh: Washington had abandoned it for an unspoken rapprochement with Iran. The two-pillar policy was back. This was nothing less than terrifying.

The evidence of Obama's perfidy was, for the Saudis, ubiquitous. An important element of Middle Eastern reality is the existence of a political Islam that is not synonymous with terrorism. When the Muslim Brotherhood won Egypt's only free election in 2012, the Obama administration tried to work with the elected president, Mohamed Morsi, who now languishes in jail, ailing, in solitary confinement.

Obama's acceptance of Morsi appalled the Saudis and Emiratis, who view the Brotherhood as terrorists. With Obama, how could anyone "not come to the conclusion that you want the Muslim Brotherhood to take over the region?" Adel al-Jubeir, the Saudi foreign minister, told me in an interview earlier this year.

I said the Saudis are the region's foremost status quo power. In fact they are rivaled by Israel, which seeks all means to preserve its military and nuclear dominance. That is why they both choose to see the Islamic Republic in the same way: an expression of pure evil, comparable to Hitler's Nazi regime.

This is Iran derangement syndrome. I have seen brutal Iranian repression first-hand, in 2009, when the Green Movement rose up against Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's stolen election, and I have no illusions about the ugliness of the regime. Iranian support for Bashar al-Assad and his chemical weapons attacks on civilians is as appalling as anything the Saudis have done in Yemen.

But Iran is a multi-faceted society with several power centers. The Islamic Republic has survived for many reasons; one of the foremost is prudence. This is no collection of fanatics on a march of "conquest, subjugation and terror," as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has put it.

That, however, is now the view in Saudi Arabia. Empowered by Donald Trump's election and his reversal of Obama's attempted Middle Eastern rebalancing, reassured by Trump's infatuation with MBS, galvanized by the arrival in power of this headstrong Crown Prince, convinced that growing Iranian influence in Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut and Sana constitutes a Shia plot to take over the Middle East, the Saudis have embarked on a reckless series of surrogate wars, military and diplomatic, to extirpate Iranian influence.

This is what we see across the region, from Yemen to Syria to Qatar. Some of the Kingdom's strategic concerns are understandable, but folly is not the answer to the march of history. One thing about folly is it's hard to contain: Khashoggi's apparent murder is the proof of that.

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Let's take a quick look inside these two societies. As I said, both regimes are twitchy. External gambits and scapegoating are the well-known recourse of vulnerable governments seeking to shore up with

nationalism what they have lost through incompetence. Witness Iran in Syria, Saudi Arabia in Yemen.

Both Saudi and Iranian societies are young, with a huge under-30 generation that is connected and thirsty for knowledge, demanding more of their rulers.

During a week this year in Saudi Arabia, I found a dizzying nation where ultrachic malls are full of stores that close five times a day for prayer and modern restaurants are still enmeshed in the regulatory minutiae of segregating men from women. There's a heavy dose of glitzy Houston and a repressive hint of Pyongyang.

A Candide-like faith that the barnstorming prince will deliver the best of all possible worlds seemed pervasive. Yet, it was clear to me that Prince Mohammed also propagates the kind of fear that makes a woman prepared to defy the religious police afraid to give her name. Embrace the Internet, but not to the point of allowing it to be used to criticize the royal family. Open for business, but centralize the power of the House of Saud.

Saudi Arabia is in a halfway house. It would be churlish, and false, to say M.B.S. has changed nothing. Many women feel there is hope for them for the first time. Tamader al-Rammah, the vice minister of labor and the most senior woman in the government, shared her irritation at stereotyping during a recent World Bank meeting in Washington. "People were asking me, 'Does your husband mind?' Or, 'Did you get permission?'" Back home, she'd just been in a small town in the north, where she found young women, some with their faces covered, some not, doing all the sales jobs in a mall. "Not long ago it would have been men," she said. "We're breaking the stereotypes."

No wonder, then, that the West stood up and took note and allowed itself to be seduced. If the Prince is serious about undoing the Kingdom's harsh form of Islam – its repression of women and its ideological backing for extremism – that could be very significant.

It could, in theory, change more than Saudi Arabia. Five times a day many of the world's 1.8 billion Muslims turn toward the country in

prayer. “When people look at Saudi Arabia, see Mecca and Medina, they want to emulate it,” the Saudi foreign minister, Adel al-Jubeir, told me in that interview. “When they see openness and moderation and tolerance and innovation, that’s what they want to be.” No other country, he argued, has “that soft power.”

In other words, change Islam in its Saudi nucleus and you change the world.

There are two schools of thought on the reform prospects. I’ll call the first the perfect-timing faction. It argues that M.B.S. caught a wave that had been building for some time. A largely uncensored internet, Saudis’ intense involvement in social media, a youth bulge, women’s education, frequent travel and post-9/11 self-scrutiny had all paved the way for a revolutionary upstart to fast-forward a chafing society.

The second school sees a rash leader, as corrupt as those he’s accused of corruption, embarked on the helter-skelter pursuit of modernization as he reinforces rule by royal decree, cutting subsidies even as he acquired a French chateau for several hundred million dollars. “M.B.S. is erratic, irrational and immature,” Samer Shehata, a professor of Middle East studies at the University of Oklahoma, told me. “Is he really the man who can reconcile Saudi Arabia with the modern world?”

After Khashoggi, this second skeptical school is, of course, much reinforced. Indeed, such was the madness of this killing, such the hubris required to have ordered it, that Mohammed bin Salman’s medium-term survival must be in doubt, despite all the coercive power he controls. M.B.S. is not without enemies, from the court itself to conservative clerics. They are waiting.

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Iran also finds itself in a delicate political moment. Anger at the regime is running high. The currency has crashed. The hopes vested in the Iran nuclear accord have evaporated. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is ageing and, by some reports, unwell.

President Hassan Rouhani has been weakened by his failure to deliver economic revival or usher the country from its pariah status – something hated by most Iranians who thirst for more contact with the West. Further American sanctions will only sharpen a sense of isolation.

That said, the Islamic Republic is resilient and resourceful. The institutions that sustain it, particularly the Revolutionary Guard Corps, are powerful. Iran has lived under American pressure for decades now. It knows how to trade across its many borders whatever the attempts to curtail that trade. It is proud.

If there is someone in Washington who thinks Iran can be brought to its knees, I can only say to that person, you know nothing of Iranian pride. A lot of that pride is vested in the nuclear program, as it was once vested in ousting the colonial exploiters of the country's oil reserves. The Trump Administration does not have a plan. It has urges. The withdrawal from the nuclear has been a big setback and it has divided Europe from the United States.

The stereotypes that do the rounds in the West fail to capture the Iran I know. Here's a scene from one of my trips that I recount as an indicator that Trump's apparent push for regime change is likely to be frustrated. Iranians want stability. They prefer to find their way around the system rather than shed blood. When you have Afghanistan to one side, and Syria to the other that is not surprising:

The Naderi Cafe is an old hangout of intellectuals in downtown Tehran. It has a garden in the back that used to be a romantic spot in the Shah's day. Now the stage where orchestras played Sinatra to champagne-sipping couples is collapsing and the place has a crumbling air offset only by the fierce dignity of the waiters. I was having coffee there one morning when Faride walked in and sat at a table opposite.

In a gesture frequent among young Iranian women, she caused her hijab to slip and took a very long time to readjust it, revealing what the mullahs want hidden along with the female form: hair. There was a lot of it. She multitasked, chatting to a friend, pushing Chanel shades back on her head, texting on a cell phone, throwing glances my way and elsewhere, ordering tea, running her hand through all that hair as she made occasional feeble attempts to get the headscarf knotted back. I asked if she'd be prepared to talk. She was.

Outside in the busy street Faride extended a hand – a defiant gesture in Iran where any male-female physical contact outside wedlock is taboo. A night's detention after falling foul of the morality police is a rite of passage for many couples. Here's what Faride told me after our handshake.

She was from Sabzevar, a “closed and suffocating” town in eastern Iran. Determined to get an education, she swam against the current of her parents' traditionalism, landing at Tehran University when she was 18. “I had to fight to get away. You've no idea how difficult that is for a woman here.”

When she was still a student, on a visit home, she fell in love with a neighbor's son and, at age 20, married him. “Then,” she said, “I learned how fanatical an Iranian man can be.”

The marriage, a disaster, ended in divorce, as an increasing number of marriages do in the Islamic Republic. Now Faride is a highly-educated 30-year-old divorcee, one of a growing class of women with college degrees and no husband. The revolution's rigid social structures afford no place for them.

“At the Revolution, they told us, put on a scarf or we'll hit you on the head. But the reality was we put on a hijab and they hit us anyway,” she said. “This whole virginity thing, having to be a virgin when you get married, it's only to satisfy the hang-ups of men.” She lit a cigarette. “Look, life is difficult, but we find a way around.”

Iran sometimes strikes me as one big game of cat-and-mouse. A society that has in many ways become very secular operates under a superstructure of clerics headed by Khamenei, the “Guide” who is the ultimate interpreter of God's word. This system of the Guardianship of the Jurist, or *velayat-i-faqih*, is resented by many Iranians because, as the British author Christopher de Bellaigue has observed, “The top of the pyramid is barely connected to the mass; the senior jurist – the Guide – might just as well have been transplanted from heaven.”

The democratic ideals of the revolution, succumbed to Ayatollah's Khomeini's interpretations of Islam. Perhaps all revolutions get stolen somehow. But after so much war and suffering young Iranians are far less inclined to rise up and scream “Theft” than to find one of Faride's “ways around.”

Like the Chinese after their 20th-century traumas, Iranians value stability. It's rare in their neighborhood. They have seen their personal freedoms grow at the margins over the course of lives that began with bomb-shelters, sirens and rationing in the 1980s. The Internet and satellite TV are important to them. Tens of millions of Iranians are online. Sites are suppressed, then pop up again: the regime is not very efficient. But it can still

be brutal, as all those prisoners in Evin can attest. On balance, the people of Iran say “yes” to reform but “no” to upheaval – let alone apocalypse.

More than half of the population, which has doubled since the revolution to 72 million, is Faride’s age or younger. Of the 2.7 million university students, about 60 percent are women. Nasser Hadian, a university professor, said, “I tell my students, it’s hard to wait but you should be patient. The laws of a country cannot forever lag the reality, and Iran’s reality today is that women have been empowered and secularism has spread.”

In the end the best antidote to the appeal of Islamism as a political philosophy may be living it in practice, which is what Iran has done for nearly 40 years

Faride’s way around the “nezam,” or order, over the past couple of years involved an affair with a wealthy married man who sent in her direction a tiny fraction of Iran’s great geyser of oil money – a windfall of close to \$200 billion before oil prices plunged to \$50 a barrel from \$150. The affair has ended. But Faride, who works for an advertising agency and says she loves Faulkner and Marquez, has a Hyundai, a Rolex and a small apartment in the one of the mushrooming high-rises of northern Tehran to show for it.

“It’s addictive that world, but you have to get out of it,” she told me. “Once you’re through with your cup of tea” – her cigarette was extinguished with an emphatic gesture – “there’s nothing left in there. Believe me, beans with love taste a lot better than steak without love!”

That, too, ladies and gentlemen, is Iran.

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There will be no victory in the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran. It’s an old fight that’s gotten worse. Neither country has good, strong or pragmatic leadership. Neither has a powerful message, as Khomeini had in 1979. M.B.S. has, it appears, just committed a heinous crime from which he will not recover in a hurry. We will have to be patient.

All wars do end in the end. Look at Beirut, where I first went as a war correspondent for The Wall Street Journal after the U.S. Marines got blown up in 1982. The civil war that seemed unending did stop. Lebanon is a dysfunctional society, with its Hezbollah fiefdom and weak

central government, but it's not for the moment a violent one. The best that can be hoped for in Syria at this point is some similar state of fragmented exhaustion that silences the guns.

In Yemen, the Saudis and Emiratis have committed terrible crimes, bombing hospitals, civilian buses and the like. The Houthis are not mere Iranian agents. They are an intrinsic part of the population. M.B.S. wants to crush every last trace of Iranian influence in Yemen, just as he does in Qatar (which shares the world's largest natural gas field with Iran). This will not happen. The Crown Prince will have to learn compromise or he will fail.

Sixty-five years ago a man of compromise, the Iranian prime minister Muhammad Mossadegh, was ousted in an Anglo-American coup. His crime, in the eyes of the CIA and MI6, was to have nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. A European-educated constitutionalist, Mossadegh agreed with Voltaire's "I may disagree with what you say, but I would defend to the death your right to say it." He was a liberal and a modernizer, but he was against imposing western institutions or laws on Iran because "the direct result of imitating Europe will be the spoliation of a country like Iran, for everything should be in proportion to the need."

With Mossadegh died the best hope of a stable reconciliation of democracy, patriotism and Islamic faith. The coup set Iran on a self-defeating zig-zag between embrace of the West (the Shah) and embrace of the Prophet (the post-revolutionary theocracy). It thrust the United States into the unhappy business of support for Middle Eastern tyrants able, American leaders long claimed, to deliver oil and stability – a strategic position at odds with American values and one of the targets of the hypocrisy-exposing Arab Spring.

And here we are, with Middle Eastern societies still split between strongmen and Islamists, their institutions weak, and their liberal aspirations, so vivid during the Arab Spring, stillborn. These are societies without a political center.

If the Saudis really do curb Wahhabism, that will change our world. If the powerful pro-democracy and liberal forces in Iran ever

gain the ascendancy, that will change our world. The transition after Khamenei will be a particularly delicate moment.

The Arab Spring contained a core truth of the Muslim Middle East: people are tired of nepotistic autocracies, they want control of their fates, and they seek more freedom. I will never forget the brave young Arabs I met at that time in Tahrir Square, Benghazi and Tunis, nor the brave Iranians protesting in 2009. I asked one Iranian woman who had been speaking to me her name. “My name is Iran,” she said.

Yes.

But right now reformers have scant support – none in Trump’s Washington, none in Netanyahu’s Jerusalem, or Sisi’s Cairo, or MBS’s Riyadh. Calling Iran a Nazi regime is too often a mere attempted camouflage for domestic repression. It has replaced the Palestinian conflict as a convenient distraction from harsh rule.

Iran, meanwhile, has reached a sterile impasse.

Sooner or later, the region is going to have to grapple with what the Qatari foreign minister Thani, told me earlier this year: “I’m not here defending the Muslim Brotherhood. But our point of view is that anyone who is willing to participate in a political process, a democratic process, above the surface, in a transparent way — give them a chance there and don’t push him below the surface and let him commit crimes.”

In other words, let democratic processes play out. Don’t suppress the Palestinians. Don’t condemn political opponents to mass executions, as Iran does. Don’t butcher, as Sisi and Assad have. Don’t gas Syrian civilians. Don’t kill civilization by slaying and dismembering a journalist, as Mohammed bin Salman has. And don’t kill the women and children of Yemen.

Don’t accept these words: *Terrorism is you are disagreeing with me.*

Instead, give citizens the protections of the rule of law, which is synonymous with agency and hope.

I have not given you much hope today, I fear, so let me at least conclude with the beautiful words of the Iranian poet Hafez, words of renewal and renaissance:

*Although I am old, you hug me
Tight one night
So I arise young again
At dawn from your side.*

ENDS