

# Turbulence Spreads in the Explosive Middle East

By David Dolan

Week of August 26, 2013

Regional chaos continued to spread during August as Egypt edged closer to all out civil war while fighting raged in Syria and car bombs left many dead in two Lebanese cities. Israeli air force jets struck a target in Lebanon for the first time in seven years after four rockets were fired into northern Israel. This came soon after chemical weapons reportedly killed hundreds of people in a rebel-held suburb of Damascus. The atrocious attack was widely condemned around the world, increasing the prospects that Western powers will soon intervene in an attempt to halt the carnage in war-torn Syria. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu proclaimed that the world, and especially Iran, is watching to see how international leaders will react to the alleged chemical weapons attack that was apparently carried out by the embattled Assad regime.

The new Egyptian army-led government which seized power in Cairo last month struggled to contain growing Muslim Brotherhood protests all over the teeming Arab country, which led to clashes in many places that left many people dead and wounded. Two minivans were ambushed by supporters of ousted Egyptian President Muhammad Morsi in the Sinai Peninsula on August 19, leaving 25 off duty policemen dead in an execution style operation. Earlier Muslim Brotherhood supporters sacked scores of Coptic Christian, Catholic and Evangelical churches all over the country, leaving many in ruins. Islamic leaders are upset over widespread Christian support for the July 3<sup>rd</sup> military action that action that deposed Morsi.

Egypt's main international backer, the United States, wrestled with what to do in the wake of what many American legislators called "the military coup" that toppled the controversial Muslim Brotherhood leader. Among the most vocal advocates for cutting off all annual US economic support was former Republican presidential candidate John McCain, who has also called for American arms to flow more freely to rebel forces in Syria. However while publicly deploring the Egyptian military action that topped Morsi, US President Barack Obama fell short of calling it a coup. Under American law, all foreign aid must be severed following any coup taking place in a US-backed country around the globe.

Face to face peace negotiations between the Palestinian Authority and Israel resumed during August for the first time since Ehud Olmert served as Prime Minister during the past decade. While both sides said the initial round of talks, held in Jerusalem and Ramallah, made very limited progress, analysts said just the fact that they were taking place at all was a significant move forward. However the prospects that the negotiations will be rocky at best was buttressed by the fact that both sides put forth positions that had earlier been rejected by the other side. Among them was the continuing Palestinian Authority insistence that PM Netanyahu halt all Jewish home construction in the disputed territories north and south of Jerusalem and in the eastern half of the capital city itself before serious bargaining can actually take place. Israeli officials made clear this was not on the horizon. Meanwhile the Israeli Premier came under more scathing criticism for agreeing last month to release over 100 Palestinian security prisoners as a sweetener to get the peace talks rolling.

One of Bashar Assad's closest regional allies, the Shiite Lebanese Hezbollah militia, suffered a major blow in mid-August when a car bomb exploded in southern Beirut, killing scores and leaving around 200 wounded. The victims were mainly Shiite Muslims who dominate the area. Hezbollah leaders later blamed Israel for carrying out the powerful terrorist blast, but Israeli officials insisted they were not involved. This came as IDF military forces remained on full war alert along Israel's tense borders with Lebanon and Syria. At the same time, Iran's new President made clear his government has no intention of curbing the rogue state's uranium enrichment nuclear program.

## **EGYPT PLUNGES TOWARD CIVIL WAR**

Three of Israel's four direct Arab neighbors, Egypt to the south and west and Syria and Lebanon in the north, are now experiencing violent internal upheaval that threatens to spill over into the small surrounded Jewish State.

In fact, enemy rockets were fired at Israeli civilian centers in the north and south during August, striking the popular southern resort city of Eilat and near the northern city of Haifa and surrounding areas. This came as the country of Jordan, adjacent to Israel's long eastern border, struggled to cope with a continuing wave of Syrian war refugees flooding into the small, financially strapped Sunni Arab country.

While the situation in Syria and Iran's outlawed nuclear development program remain at the top of the Israeli government's growing Middle East watch list, the escalating crisis in Egypt also received significant attention from government and military leaders during August. Although it was quite evident in Israel that the Netanyahu government and the country's military brass are not unhappy that the American-backed Egyptian army ousted Muhammad Morsi from power in early July, the anticipated violent backlash from his Islamic fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood group and its millions of supporters during the month produced grave concern in Jerusalem. Many analysts said the outcome of the current struggle in Egypt between supporters of the new interim military government and its opponents may determine which direction smaller Arab countries in the region head in during the coming months and years.

Despite the fact that it took them several weeks to get their act together, the large Muslim Brotherhood movement and its Islamic supporters took to the streets en masse during August, employing violence against government security forces on several occasions. Nearly a thousand Egyptians were killed or wounded as the street protests spread.

Meanwhile over 40 churches and other Christian sites were assaulted by violent Muslim mobs during the month, leaving many in ruins. An unknown number of Coptic Christians were killed or wounded as the lawlessness spread. The Coptic Pope, Theodoros II, who was elected to that position only one year ago, was among many public figures that endorsed the Egyptian military action to topple Morsi, who had assumed dictatorial powers last November before backing off a bit under widespread public protests. The Coptic Christian community in Egypt is thought to number at least 10 million souls, with some saying the actual number is closer to 14 million people, most of them under the age of 30. Tens of thousands of Roman Catholics and Protestants can also be found in Egypt.

A well-known Egyptian scholar, Samuel Tadros, said the recent Muslim attacks upon Christian institutions and congregations in Egypt are the worst since the 14<sup>th</sup> century. He noted that media reports during August said over 40 churches had been looted and totally destroyed by angry Muslim mobs, while another 23 had been attacked and heavily damaged in one week alone in mid-August. He noted that Coptic and Catholic officials reported that 160 Christian-owned buildings all over Egypt had been targeted as well. In one small town, three trembling Roman Catholic nuns were reportedly paraded by Muslim militants like prisoners of war after the assailants burned their Franciscan school to the ground. The pro-Morsi mobs had earlier torn a cross off of the school gate and replaced it with an Islamic flag featuring passages from the Koran. An on the scene observer told the *New York Times* that the assaulters, numbering in the hundreds, then entered the school compound's church and "lashed out so ferociously that marble alters were left in broken heaps on the floor."

In another attack, two Egyptian security guards working on a Christian-owned tour boat plying the Nile River were burned alive by marauding Muslim thugs. Analysts said news of the vicious attack, widely reported in Europe, dealt another death blow to the collapsing Egyptian tourism industry, which is one of the large Arab country's most important sources of economically vital foreign revenue. The Roman Catholic Bishop of Luxor was trapped inside his home for nearly three weeks by Islamist mobs chanting "death to the Christians" night and day outside his door. He later told reporters his local congregants were running out of food and other living supplies because they were too afraid to leave their homes. In the town of Minya, an Evangelical church was attacked by pro-Morsi supporters who said they plan to convert it into a mosque. A nearby Bible Society office was ransacked and destroyed, as was another office in the southern city of Assiut. Egyptian Bible Society General Director Ramez Atallah called the destructive assaults "attacks against the state by a violent minority," which he added "are attempting to destabilize the nation."

## **FIERCE CRACKDOWN ON MUSLIM BROTHERS**

In early August, the new interim Egyptian government led by former army general Abdel Fattah Sisi issued a stern warning that it would come down hard on the Muslim Brotherhood movement if the attacks upon Christian and other targets did not immediately cease. Instead, Muslim militants marched down the main streets of many villages and towns, spray painting large black exes on shops and businesses owned by fellow Muslims and bold red marks on Christian-owned buildings. In ugly scenes reminiscent of pre-war Nazi Germany, Islamic fundamentalist gangs then went on the rampage, sacking all of the red-bearing buildings. This in turn helped spark off the major government campaign to end the violence, which media outlets said led to the deaths of nearly 1,000 Morsi supporters by the end of the third week of August.

On August 20<sup>th</sup>, Egyptian authorities arrested the overall leader of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, Muhammad Badie, who is officially known as the “Supreme Guide” of the Sunni Muslim group. Wearing his usual gray tunic, the 70 year old clerical leader was apprehended at his apartment in Cairo. He joined Muhammad Morsi and other senior Muslim Brotherhood leaders, including chief financial strategist Khairat Shater, who are being detained by the new interim military government. Badie’s son, Ammar, was subsequently killed during a violent protest rally in Cairo.

Popular support for the new government’s actions sharply increased after Muslim Brotherhood supporters ambushed two minivans transporting dozens of policemen to their outposts in the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula. Officials said 25 policemen lost their lives in the attacks near the border town of Rafah, while several others were badly injured. Security forces all over Egypt were then ordered to step up their suppression of pro-Morsi protest rallies, which have often sparked off violent mob attacks upon nearby police and army positions in many locations.

The dramatic and highly controversial Egyptian military action came just days after Sunni Muslim terrorists linked to Al Qaida fired several rockets at the southern Israeli coastal city of Eilat, prompting the Netanyahu government to shut down the international airport there for the second time this month. The Iron Dome anti-missile system, which was recently deployed near the resort city, was also ordered into action. The head of the Egyptian army’s Strategic Center, Major General Alaa Ezzidine, later told reporters that military leaders are currently working on a plan to reign in growing lawlessness in the strategic Sinai Peninsula, which links Africa to Asia near to where the Suez Canal connects the Indian Ocean to the landlocked Mediterranean Sea. He said it “includes intensifying the movement of military patrols in sites which jihadists have taken advantage of in the past, along with providing more weapons to curb the existing ambushes.”

## **THE WORLD RESPONDS**

Western leaders were in a quandary as to how to respond to the military takeover of Egypt, which some termed excessive if not brutal. The Egyptian military’s main international backer, the United States, denounced the army crackdown. In Washington, President Barack Obama ordered the cancellation of joint “Bright Star” military exercises that annually bring American and Egyptian forces together each September to test their ability to cooperate in times of war.

After supporting the ouster of deposed Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in February 2011, the American Commander in Chief once again blasted last month’s military coup and subsequent suppression of pro-Morsi demonstrations. While vacationing in Martha’s Vineyard on the Massachusetts Atlantic Ocean coast, President Obama said the United States “strongly condemns the steps that have been taken by Egypt’s interim government and security forces. We deplore violence against civilians. We support universal rights essential to human dignity, including the right to peaceful protest.” While adding that the American administration “wants to sustain our relationship with Egypt, our traditional cooperation cannot continue as usual when civilians are being killed in the streets and rights are being rolled back.” Similar statements came from London, Paris and other Western capital cities. Few noted that Islamic militants had played a large role in provoking the increasingly harsh Egyptian military crackdown, especially by ambushing government security forces in the

Sinai Peninsula. Several Muslim groups blamed Israel for somehow instigating the turbulence in Egypt in an attempt to destabilize the region, and if Israel needed any more trouble along its roiling borders.

Israeli Middle East analysts generally supported the Egyptian military action, noting that the influential Arab country had been plunging back into chaos for nearly a year as a result of the inept Morsi government, which was fanning sectarian flames in Egypt and threatening to sever the 1978 Camp David peace treaty with Israel. Had the army not stepped in, a total collapse of Egyptian society may have been on the horizon, they said. Many also criticized Obama for his lukewarm support at best for the Egyptian military leadership, which has played a vital role in keeping the controversial US-brokered Camp David peace treaty in force for three and a half decades. "Obama has once again revealed his ignorance of Middle East issues and America's essential security interests in the region," said one analyst interviewed on Israel television. Another went even further, saying that as he did in his Cairo speech during his first term in office, the American leader with a Muslim middle name has revealed his underlying sympathy for Islamic jihadist groups that have openly declared holy war against Israel and the West.

American Republican Senator John McCain was among many voices in Washington calling upon the Obama administration to immediately cut off all foreign aid to Egypt forthwith. Currently the United States provides 1.3 billion American dollars each year, almost all of it flowing to the military. Analysts say around 80% of the army's annual weapons procurements are funded by Uncle Sam. However the new Egyptian interim regime expressed indifference to the threatened aid cutoff, with new Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmy announcing he is currently reviewing the American aid provide to Egypt. He said he wants "to determine what is useful and what it not, and what is being used to pressure Egypt, and whether this aid has good intentions and credibility." Analysts said the comments probably reflect the interim government's growing conviction that Saudi Arabia and other wealthy gulf Arab Sunni Muslim states will quickly open their government coffers to support the Egyptian military in its quest to restore order to the highly influential country. They point out that the last thing the sheikdoms need right now is uprisings led by Al Qaida-linked Muslim militants who are encouraged by America's tepid support for the Egyptian army crackdown.

With American taxpayer aid to Egypt now at risk of being imminently severed, the Virginia-based *Defense News* media outlet reported that both US and Israeli government officials have signaled their desire to increase the amount of annual support given by the United States to Israel in order to insure the Jewish state's continuing survival in an extremely hostile Muslim neighborhood. Michael Oren, Israel's ambassador to Washington, told the American media outlet that the Netanyahu government "is looking at a holistic Mideast picture, which includes the growth of missile arsenals in Lebanon and Gaza; the strategic situation in Sinai; the Syrian situation as it impacts us and other countries, including Jordan, and the fact that all this is going on in an age of sequestration." Since 1985, the United States has provided Israel with three billion dollars in annual aid, three-fourths of which must by law be spent in the United States to purchase weapons, army uniforms and other military items, meaning most of the US aid quickly returns to the country where it helps bolster America's wobbly economy.

## **TROUBLE IN THE NORTH**

While naturally focusing on the intense crisis plaguing neighboring Egypt, Israeli government and military officials were forced during the month to refocus on the blood soaked warfare raging in nearby Syria and growing violence in Lebanon. Military analysts say the embattled Assad regime now controls less than half of the mostly Muslim country, mainly around the capital Damascus and the southern border area with Jordan and the Mediterranean coastal zone dominated by the small Alawite sect that is allied with the Shiite wing of Islam. Mostly Sunni Muslim rebel forces now control around 50% of the country of almost 21 million people, which is three times larger than Israel's current population but less than one-third of Egypt's over 80 million residents. A third zone of control lies in the northeast corner of the country, where Kurdish forces have set up a virtual autonomous mini-state in recent months adjacent to Kurdish areas in neighboring Turkey and Iraq.

The Syrian crisis roared back into the Israeli headlines when it was reported on August 20<sup>th</sup> that forces loyal to Syrian dictator Bashar Assad had fired chemical agents into a neighborhood south of Damascus under the

control of opposition fighters. News reports said at least 350 people, most of them civilian noncombatants, had perished in the horrendous assault. Other reports claimed more than 1,000 people had been killed, with thousands more injured. The regime quickly denied that it had deployed the deadly weapons that are known to exist in the government's large military arsenal. Television outlets around the world broadcast gruesome scenes of some of the victims, many of them children, squirming for life in the wake of the apparent chemical assault, said to be the largest since Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein gassed some internal opponents and Iranian troops toward the end of his war with Iran waged in the 1980s.

Almost exactly one year to the day after he declared that significant use of chemical weapons would trigger an American response, President Obama indicated that he would order some form of military response to the attack. However it was not clear what action the American government would take in the face of the deadly assault, given that all opinion surveys show the American public is fed up with seemingly never ending wars in the region stretching back to 2001. Analysts said at the very least, Obama will probably begin to enforce a no fly zone over Syrian skies, which would mean stepped up US involvement in the two and a half year old internal war but not any actual boots on the ground. US warships were ordered to head to the eastern Mediterranean region late in the month as the President met with his national security team to discuss the deteriorating situation. Syrian officials warned the entire Middle East would be set ablaze if Western forces intervene in the conflict.

In London, British Foreign Secretary William Hague said the British government "believes that this was a chemical attack by the Assad regime. The only possible explanation of what we've been able to see is a chemical attack...there is no other plausible explanation for casualties so intense in such a small area on this scale." Hague stressed the insidious attack was "not something that a humane and civilized world can ignore." He urged the Assad regime to grant visiting UN weapons inspectors quick access to the site of the reported chemical attack in order to verify widespread evidence that Syrian government weapons were indeed deployed against hundreds of the country's own citizens. Local anti-government activists were busy gathering up evidence of the apparent massacre to hand over to UN monitors who were in Syria to investigate earlier reported chemical attacks in the north of the country.

Israeli PM Netanyahu spoke about the atrocity at the opening of his weekly cabinet meeting on August 25<sup>th</sup>. He told his government ministers that Israel is ready to respond militarily against the Assad regime if that become necessary. "First, this situation cannot continue. Second, it is forbidden for the world's most dangerous regimes to have the most dangerous weapons in the world. And thirdly, we expect this to end, but we remember the ancient adage of our sages: 'If we are not for ourselves, who will be for us' – that is to say, our finger, our hand, will always be on the pulse. Our finger is responsible, and when needed it is also on the trigger."

## **TURMOIL IN LEBANON**

Four rockets were fired from Lebanon into Israeli territory in mid-August, triggering a quick Israeli military response. The target was said to be a base near the Mediterranean coast south of Beirut that is used by a pro-Syrian Palestinian PLO faction, the Popular Front group. Another group linked to Al Qaida, the "Brigades of Abdullah Azzam," claimed it had carried out the attack. It was the first time that Israeli air force jets bombed positions in the unstable Arab country since the Second Lebanon War ended in August, 2006.

Enemy rockets struck two unnamed Israeli communities near Haifa the third week of August, thankfully without causing any significant damage or human casualties. A crater was created in a road where one of the rockets landed and exploded. Israel's sophisticated Iron Dome anti-missile system was ordered into action after computers projected a rocket would strike a heavily built up area, probably inside of Haifa's city limits. The fourth rocket landed short of its target outside of Israeli territory.

One week before the attack, a massive car bomb exploded in a Hizbullah-controlled Shiite suburb of the Lebanese capital city, killing 20 people and wounding around 200 others. Later in the month, two powerful car bombs exploded next to two Sunni Muslim mosques in the northern city of Tripoli, killing over 40 people and wounding at least 500 others. Local officials blamed Shiite forces loyal to Syrian dictator Bashar Assad for the attacks.

With turmoil and bloodshed flooding the region, few Israelis paid much attention to the renewed peace talks with the Palestinian Authority that began during the month. Opinion surveys showed very few Palestinians or Israelis believe the American-sponsored negotiations will make significant progress in overcoming the many obstacles that still lie in the way of a final peace accord between the longtime foes.

With the Middle East apparently inching ever closer to all out regional war, it is good to recall that the Lord God of Israel is watching over His chosen people whatever comes their way. Therefore they can join King David in gladly proclaiming that *“Some boast in chariots and some in horses, but we will boast in the Name of the Lord, out God” (Psalm 20:7).*

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HOLY WAR FOR THE PROMISED LAND (Broadman & Holman), his latest book, is an overview of the history of the Israel and of the bitter Arab-Israeli conflict that rages there, plus some autobiographical details about the authors experiences living in the land since 1980. It especially examines the important role that militant Islam plays in the conflict.

ISRAEL IN CRISIS: WHAT LIES AHEAD? (Baker/Revell), which examines the political and biblical prospects for a regional attack upon Israel, settlement in the disputed territories, and related topics, is also available for purchase, along with an updated edition of his popular end-time novel, THE END OF DAYS (21st Century Press).

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