



The Middle East Riots – *Cui Bono?*

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Executive Summary

- The spread of the Islamist riots throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds is a well-organized and thoroughly preplanned “spontaneous” outburst – the objectives of which exceed by far any sanctimonious rage over a “movie” purportedly slandering Prophet Muhammad.
- The real objective of the current crisis as perpetrated by the Islamist trend is to preempt and reverse the widely anticipated “October Surprise” planned by the Obama White House. The Ikhwan’s target date is Eid al-Adha which comes at the end of the Hajj season in late October.
- The regime that will benefit most is Morsi’s Cairo. The continuation and further escalation of the crisis will consolidate the Ikhwan-led Egypt as the undisputed leader of the new and evolving Arab World.
- Hence, the anti-US ferment will keep escalating and spreading until the Islamists-Jihadists attain their goals. There are already indications that Arab governments start to tacitly bow to the Ikhwan and their Islamist allies, and turn their backs on the US. It is a question of time before meaningful power-sharing with the Islamists and Ikhwan begins – thus making mockery of Obama’s policies and declared objectives of the “Arab Spring”.

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ANALYSIS

The spread of the riots throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds merits a pause to better comprehend where they come from and what is their ultimate objective. Needless to say that the West is facing a well-organized and thoroughly preplanned “spontaneous” outburst – the objectives of which exceed by far any sanctimonious rage over a “movie” purportedly slandering Prophet Muhammad.

Even the “movie” – “Innocence of Muslims” – that ostensibly incited the rage is not what it is reported to be in the mass media. The short trailer (rather than a full-length movie that nobody seems to have seen) has been floating around the Arab-Evangelical community (many of whom are zealot converts from Islam) for at least a year and nobody outside knew or cared about it. Then, around September 10, Sheikh Khalid Abdullah – a fire-brand “tele-Islamist” (by his own definition) – broadcasted the trailer with dubbing to Arabic that exacerbated the English text and inflammatory running commentary on his popular New Egypt show on a Salafi TV station in Egypt. The trailer, in its Arabic-Salafi version, was also uploaded on YouTube (it’s not clear by whom), as well as a host of Islamist-Jihadist web-sites. Moreover, the Arab Islamist propaganda continues to insist that the “movie” is the work of an Israeli-American even though the US Government formally identified the culprit as an American-Egyptian Copt living in the US. Hence, there should be no doubt that the Egyptian Salafi TV station aired the “movie” in order to incite anti-American violence in pursuit of higher objectives.

The real objective of the current crisis as perpetrated by the Islamist trend is to preempt and reverse the widely anticipated “October Surprise” planned by the Obama White House. The Ikhwan’s target date is Eid al-Adha (presently scheduled for October 26) which comes at the end of the Hajj season (presently expected to fall between October 24 - 29, 2012).

There is a growing trepidation throughout the Arab world – both elites and grassroots – that the US and its Western allies are actively preparing to reverse the historic achievements of the Intifada’s and Awakening – namely, the beginning of the banishment of Westernization from Arab Heartlands. The Arab elites are convinced that the American effort to restore dominance over the Arab world is based on a twin track approach. On the one hand, the US intends to exploit the economic plight of several countries starting with Egypt in order to regain influence and control through the power of foreign aid and food supplies. On the other hand, the US intends to exploit the Arab dread of the regional ramifications of a spillover of the Syrian fratricidal carnage by threatening a US-led non-Arab (read, Turkey) military intervention in Syria that will provoke widespread grassroots eruptions and wars.

It is a common conviction – an article of faith – among Arab, Turkish and Iranian leaders that the Obama White House is planning a major Libya-style military intervention in Syria in order to divert the attention of the American voter and make an Israeli unilateral attack on Iran politically impossible. But such a US-led intervention is bound to provoke an Iranian offensive-by-proxy involving the HizbAllah, Shiite militant groups along the Gulf coast and Yemen, a myriad of Jihadist groups, and perhaps even select Syrian, Iraqi and Yemenite forces. For the region’s leaders, this type of an “October Surprise” looms as a huge viable threat they cannot afford to either ignore or withstand. For the Islamist trend, dominated by the international Muslim Brothers, that has so far won the Intifada’s and Awakening (ironically, with massive US help) – neither the return of American-Western dominance, nor an Iranian by-proxy triumph, is acceptable. Therefore, it is imperative for the Ikhwan-dominated Arab elites to preemptively reverse the emerging dynamics virtually at all cost.



The Ikhwan-dominated Islamist strategy has four major facets:

1. Negating the dominance of a regional war and/or US-led intervention, either in Syria or the Persian Gulf, through the containment of provocative violence. Indeed, in recent days there has been a discernable decline in the Jihadist violence in Syria. The number of attacks on both civilians and Syrian military forces has markedly declined. There are no expressions of rage against the “movie” and the US among the Jihadist forces in and around Syria. Similarly, even though Iranian media is virulent – the Shiites in the Gulf States are virtually quiet. The only major demonstrations take place in Kuwait. These are noisy demonstrations by Sunni Islamists under the banner “Obama, ya Obama – We’re all Osama!”
2. Escalating the economically-driven riots in the West Bank and their transformation into an anti-Israel “Third Intifada”. Palestinian and Arab media is already accusing Obama’s Washington of responsibility for the Intifada because of the US support for Israel. The Ikhwan are convinced that such a campaign will deter the US from intervening in any crisis in the Arab world that will evolve into a clash with Israel. Moreover, any conflict involving Israeli forces always serves as sure catalyst for grassroots riots and street violence throughout the Arab world, while all Arab governments, especially the conservative ones, are reticent to criticize anything Palestinian. Hence, even the Arab governments most likely to benefit from a US intervention will not dare to support the US for fear of domestic turmoil.
3. Radicalization and exacerbation of the forthcoming Hajj season. The Islamists plan to exploit the presence in Saudi Arabia of millions of pilgrims in order to set the stage for challenging the Islamic policies of the House of al-Saud and thus also the ruling families in the rest of the Gulf States. The preference of the Ikhwan is launching an Islamist Intifada in Saudi Arabia with grassroots support that will culminate in a major challenge at the height of the Hajj. The fallback alternative is to put enough pressure on the House of al-Saud to compel Riyadh to accept the regional ascent of the Ikhwan-dominated powers – mainly Egypt – and their allies as a viable price for remaining in power.
4. Building momentum of frustration and radicalization, evolving into street violence, that will only increase and spread toward Eid al-Adha. This year, Eid al-Adha is going to be a sad and bitter holiday because of the prevailing economic crisis that makes it impossible for ever larger segments of the populace to buy sheep for slaughter. The population will be embittered, incited and ready to do whatever necessary against those they consider responsible for their individual and communal plight and destitute. Blaming the rich but anti-Muslim America will fall on fertile ground.

Thus, the rapidly spreading and escalating anti-American riots throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds should be considered the beginning of a major and protracted trend. On September 15, the al-Qaeda supreme leadership issued a communique explaining that although the attack in Benghazi was a “meticulously executed revenge” for the US target-killing of Abu-Yahya al-Libi – the significance of the overall trend unfolding in the Arab world must not be lost on friends and foes alike. The al-Qaeda communique stresses that “the uprising of our people in Libya, Egypt and Yemen against America and its embassies is intended to notify the United States” that it is now confronting in the Arab world “not groups and organizations” but “the Islamic Nation that has rebelled against injustice.”

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In analyzing these profound upheavals, most important is the answer to “*Cui Bono?*” The regime that will benefit most is Morsi’s Cairo. The continuation and further escalation of the crisis will consolidate the Ikhwan-led Egypt as the undisputed leader of the new and evolving Arab World. Indeed, when the riots erupted, Morsi himself was conveniently in Europe, and it took him almost 48 hours to react to the events shaking and unfolding in Cairo.

The Saudis will accept Egyptian dominance as “the Leader of the Arab World” and the world’s gateway to the Gulf oil and gas – as was the case at the height of the Sadat-Mubarak era. Moreover, Saudi and Gulf leaders will then, among other things, subsidize Egypt (so that US aid no longer matters).

The ascent of Egypt – Bilad al-Kanana – without challenge from Islam’s heartland in the Arabian Peninsula – al-Jazeera – will enable Cairo to suppress and prevent the ascent of a new Syria – Bilad al-Sham – as a regional powerhouse empowering a north-south traditional Sunni-Arab bloc with Saudi Arabia – a rejuvenated Mashriq. A Mashriq dominated by a greater Syria will have, in turn, marginalized Egypt – Misr, or the Nile Valley – back to the minor role of a buffer between the Mashriq and the Maghreb.

The ascent of Egypt as “the Leader of the Arab World” will enable Egypt to work together with the two non-Arab powers – neo-Ottoman Turkey and Mahdivist Iran/Persia – to crush the Fertile Crescent of Minorities. This means, among other things, major confrontation with Israel, and the defeat of the Allawites, Druze and Kurds in Syria and Iraq. This trend will help both Iran and Turkey to suppress their own minorities, as well as regulate the cooperation and power sharing of the three over the new Middle East.

The Islamist incitement and hype will ameliorate the inevitable grassroots turmoil. Egypt is in unprecedented economic crisis. After miserable Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr, the destitute populace is now heading toward an even bleaker Eid al-Adha. Ikhwan-led Cairo will have to explain the reason for the lingering plight and destitute – and the immense benefit of blaming the US and Israel for all the misery is obvious.

The Egyptian Ikhwani culpability is very clear in the context of the incitement campaign in the Egyptian Islamist media since mid-August. The Ikhwan capitalized on the immense popularity of religious-political TV talk-shows during the month of Ramadan (July 20 - August 18) and Eid al-Fitr (August 19 - 21) in order to launch a focused incitement campaign in the form of repeated statements and assertions by luminaries of the Ikhwani and Islamist elites.

The overall theme is that in the aftermath of the Arab Awakening throughout the Middle East, the demise of the US standing, and the ascent of the Muslim Brothers in Cairo, time is ripe for the return of Egypt as the Leader of the Mashriq, and the Arab world as a whole. Such an ascent will necessitate a confrontation, perhaps even war, with Israel in order to ensure direct on-land contact between Egypt and the rest of the Mashriq. However, such a crisis, and possible war, will inevitably lead to the emergence of an Islamist global power in which the Ikhwan will have a dominant role.

Thus, Egyptian Muslim Brothers Media Advisor Ahmad Sabi explained (on August 22) that the mere existence of Israel and the Camp David agreement isolate Egypt from the rest of the Arab world to the detriment of its leadership role and posture. He predicted that one of the first priorities of the Morsi government will be “amending the agreement, which is a mark of shame upon the Egyptian people. This agreement has been a heavy burden upon the Egyptian people, undermining Egypt’s sovereignty. It has even undermined projects for the development of the Sinai. Therefore, it is an unjust and unfair agreement, which has isolated Egypt from its Arab and Islamic environs, and from the pan-Arab effort to liberate the land of Palestine and to support Pales-



tinian resistance. ... Indeed, this is an unjust agreement, which requires the reexamination of everything to do with Egypt's sovereignty over its land."

Professor Gamal Zahran, head of the political science department at Port Said University, stressed (on August 17) that the Arab Awakening has created uniquely conducive conditions for the return of Egypt to leadership role. "Jerusalem is at the heart of the Palestinian cause, and the Palestinian cause is the cause of all Arabs and Muslims. Therefore, the elimination of the Zionist entity is beyond debate, and the only question has to do with the circumstances. I believe that the Arab revolutions, which broke out in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen – as well as in Bahrain and elsewhere – generate the peoples' hope that one day, Jerusalem and Palestine will return to them." It is therefore imperative to consolidate the Awakening politically because, "so far, the revolutions have not reached the throne of power. It is difficult to transform this hope into reality until these revolutions come to the forefront." Zahran is convinced that regional dynamics are escalating and that the fateful eruption is imminent. "By next year, Allah willing, Israel will be annihilated," he predicted. (The Islamic New Year is expected to fall on or around November 15, 2012.)

The Deputy Head of the Muslim Brothers Party, Essam al-Aryan, concurred (on August 25) that time was uniquely ripe for a profound regional change. He explained that the United States has begun to irrevocably disengage from the effort to dominate the Muslim World. "The global business called the 'War on Terror' is done with. Almost. Its death notice is imminent. When things settle down in the Arab region, the story of the Global War on Terror, declared by George Bush, will come to an end." Some important vestiges of the US war remain active, including the airing of "some TV shows funded for the sole purpose of distorting the image of Islam and the Muslims." Al-Aryan further explained that with the US banishment from the Arab world, it is possible for Egypt to begin disengaging from the Camp David Accords. "Egypt has pushed the Accords aside and is doing what it deems to be its right, even though it honors the Accords," he said.

One of the most important voices of this campaign is the influential cleric Safwat Higazi – a frequent guest on Islamist TV. Higazi argued forcefully (on August 14) that Egypt has entered the era of the Muslim Brothers – or the era of the Islamic Movements – that will usher in new fronts for the regional and global ascent of Egypt. This dynamics will necessitate confrontation with Israel "in order to make Jerusalem the capital of the 'United States of the Arabs'" led by Egypt's Ikhwan. Higazi is convinced that current regional developments – namely the spread of Arab Intifada's – might bring about the collapse of Israel without the need for Israeli-Egyptian war or an Arab-Israeli war. "Liberating Palestine and restoring the United States of the Arabs does not necessarily have to be done through weapons or war. We Muslims are not warmongers. We seek peace. We want to get what is rightfully ours. ... The first choice of the Muslims is peace. If not through peace, there is nothing preventing war. We welcome war."

Addressing the conduciveness of these times, Hussein Shehata, Muslim Brothers leader and a lecturer at al-Azhar University, stressed (on August 27) the importance of Jihad under present conditions. The first Ramadan of the era of Arab Awakening is a good starting point because "Ramadan is the month of victory for those who wage Jihad for Allah. ... We call upon those who fast ... to remember their brothers, those who wage Jihad for the sake of Allah: in Palestine, against the Jews, the descendants of apes and pigs; in Iraq, against the Americans; in Bosnia-Herzegovina, against the crusader Serbians; in Chechnya, against the Russians; in Kashmir, against the idolatrous Indians; in Eritrea, against the Zoroastrian Habeshas; in Somalia, against the arrogant Americans; and everywhere in [the lands of] the Islamic Ummah, against those who fight the Muslims."



Ultimately, Safwat Higazi was the most explicit of the lot. The consolidation of Egyptian-Ikhwani preeminence over the Mashriq that will come as a result of the destruction of Israel is only the first step, he explained. “One of the tenets of the Muslim Brothers, which they cannot renounce, is the Islamic Caliphate and the ruling of the world. Yes. The day will come when we will be the masters of the world.” One has to start somewhere and sometime – and for the Ikhwan it is in the current crisis.

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On September 15, the anti-US Islamist rampage was sweeping 21 countries. The street protests against anything American kept escalating – growing more violent and better organized. The protesters are no longer just throwing stones and waving Jihadist black banners. They are using firearms and setting embassies ablaze. Obama’s outreach policy toward Arabs and Muslims was their first victim. But the immediate objective is the radicalization Arab political system to the point of accepting the return of the Ikhwan’s Egypt as “the Leader of the Arab World”.

The US and its widely anticipated “October Surprise” have no place in this new Middle East. Tehran is the most explicit advocate of this approach. On September 15, Majlis Speaker Ali Larijani, one of Ayatollah Khamenei’s most trusted national security confidants, urged the US and the West to “open their eyes” and realize that they are no longer welcome in the lands of the Muslim Nation. The US and the West should leave the region and limit relations to “dialogue, mutual respect and understanding” from afar. Failing to do so might have horrendous consequences for the US and the West. “The West and the US should know that they will burn in the fire of the Muslims’ hatred if they do not make a right decision,” Larijani warned.

Hence, the anti-US ferment will keep escalating and spreading until the Islamists-Jihadists attain their goals. There are already indications that Arab governments start to tacitly bow to the Ikhwan and their Islamist allies, and turn their backs on the US. It is a question of time before meaningful power-sharing with the Islamists and Ikhwan begins – thus making mockery of Obama’s policies and declared objectives of the “Arab Spring”.

But the Obama White House remains in self-denial. The first reaction of the US Embassy on September 11, that quickly apologized by a Tweet for the affront of the “movie” to the Muslim world, meant every word. The unfolding events in the coming days did not alter Washington’s reading of the situation. Thus, on September 14, White House spokesman Jay Carney insisted that the violent protests were a “response not to United States policy, and not obviously the [Obama] administration or the American people,” but were “in response to a video, a film we have judged to be reprehensible and disgusting.” He further emphasized the point. “This is not a case of protests directed at the United States at large or at US policy, but in response to a video that is offensive to Muslims,” Carney stressed. Washington’s reaction thus proves anew that the Obama White House does not have a clue about what is really happening in the region. America’s regional allies will be paying the price for years to come.

Remarks: *Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.*



About the Author of this Issue

Yossef Bodansky has been the Director of Research at the International Strategic Studies Association [ISSA], as well as a Senior Editor for the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications, since 1983. He was the Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare at the U.S. House of Representatives between 1988 and 2004, and stayed on as a special adviser to Congress till January 2009. In the mid-1980s, he acted as a senior consultant for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of State. He is the author of eleven books – including *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* (*New York Times* No. 1 Bestseller & *Washington Post* No. 1 Bestseller), *The Secret History of the Iraq War* (*New York Times* Bestseller & *Foreign Affairs Magazine* Bestseller), and *Chechen Jihad: Al Qaeda's Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror* – and hundreds of articles, book chapters and Congressional reports. Mr Bodansky is a Director at the Prague Society for International Cooperation, and serves on the Board of the Global Panel Foundation and several other institutions worldwide.



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