



The Heretic's Lament

Yossef Bodansky

December 2012

Executive Summary

- The negotiated outcome of the Israeli “Operation Pillar of Cloud” – formulated and effectively enforced by the Obama White House – signals the beginning of the end of the modern Middle East and the beginning of dominance by Jihadist radicalization. There can be no more befitting a climax to the “Arab Spring”.
- The crux of the current crisis in the Middle East – that includes Syria, Iraq, Jordan, and the Gaza Strip (and now also the Sinai Peninsula) – is the aggregate impact of the Islamist-Jihadist challenge to the Arab modern state and the ascent of the Islamist encircling outside forces – Egypt, Turkey and Iran – that now constitute a tripartite alliance.
- The Gaza interlude must therefore be put in the wider context – namely, the emerging strategic posture that should be considered the primary outcome of the “Arab Spring”. At hand is not the actual outcome of the latest periodic clash between Israel and the HAMAS-led Jihadist alliance in the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula – but rather the exploiting of the fighting in order to further higher strategic-regional interests by the US and the tripartite alliance.
- President Obama is convinced that these developments further Washington's political interests. The Obama White House favors the consolidation of a web of autocratic Ikhwan-affiliated Islamist regimes in the existing Arab states throughout the Greater Middle East – even if they are not pro-American – under the hegemony of the tripartite alliance. As well, Obama is convinced that the integration into the tripartite alliance will make Khamenei's Iran more amenable to the great rapprochement with the US Obama is committed to.

About ISPSW

The Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy (ISPSW) is a private institute for research and consultancy. The ISPSW is objective and task oriented and is above party politics.

In an ever more complex international environment of globalized economic processes and worldwide political, ecological, social and cultural change, bringing major opportunities but also risks, decision-makers in enterprises and politics depend more than ever before on the advice of highly qualified experts.

ISPSW offers a range of services, including strategic analyses, security consultancy, executive coaching and intercultural competency. ISPSW publications examine a wide range of topics connected with politics, economy, international relations, and security/ defense. ISPSW network experts have worked – in some cases for decades – in executive positions and possess a wide range of experience in their respective specialist areas.



ANALYSIS

The negotiated outcome of the Israeli “Operation Pillar of Cloud” – formulated and effectively enforced by the Obama White House – signals the beginning of the end of the modern Middle East and the beginning of dominance by Jihadist radicalization. There can be no more befitting a climax to the “Arab Spring”.

*

From the Israeli point of view, the crucial turning-point during “Operation Pillar of Cloud” was the decision to give up on the ground operation, and not the acceptance of the conditions for a cease-fire. Ultimately, the dubious cease-fire agreement that Israel accepted did stop the exchange of fire – but also laid down the path for yet another cycle of violence in the not too distant future. Regarding Jerusalem’s decision to forgo the ground offensive – the principal reason was the evolving relations between Jerusalem and the Obama White House. Washington interceded twice when Israel was about to launch the ground offensive and coerced Jerusalem to stop the operation. In the first time, President Obama called Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu and begged for 24 more hours in order to try and get the negotiations going. Netanyahu accepted and stopped the troops.

In the second time, Obama called Netanyahu and Hillary Clinton called Israeli DM Ehud Barak in quick succession. Both Obama and Clinton warned, even threatened, that Israel would not be permitted a decisive victory – namely, the toppling of the HAMAS government in the Gaza Strip or the complete occupation of the Gaza Strip – for fear of the negative repercussions on the standing and posture of Washington’s principal allies Egypt, Turkey and Qatar, as well as the nascent US negotiations with Iran. Barak beseeched Netanyahu that Israel could not afford to antagonize Obama and Clinton. Hence, Jerusalem concluded that under such conditions there was no point in pursuing the military operation and the cease-fire came into being soon afterwards. Simply put, the Obama White House sacrificed the interests of one of America’s closest allies on the altar of empowering Islamist governments inherently hostile to the West.

*

The crux of the current crisis in the Middle East – that includes the fratricidal and sectarian carnage tearing Syria apart, the sectarian terrorism rocking Iraq, the unprecedented challenge to the monarchy in Jordan, and the latest eruption of violence between Israel, the HAMAS and other Jihadists in the Gaza Strip (and now also the Sinai Peninsula) – is the aggregate impact of the Islamist-Jihadist challenge to the Arab modern state and the ascent of the Islamist encircling outside forces - Egypt, Turkey and Iran.

The historic context of this crisis is of immense importance. The quintessence of the profound transformations unfolding in the Greater Middle East is the irreversible demise of the modern Arab state and Arab nationalism. Although the Arab World has never legitimized the Western concept of a Westphalian State – the cataclysmic upheaval since late-2010 proved strong enough to bring the rejection process to completion. Thus, the most tangible and enduring outcome of the Intifada’s or Awakening engulfing the Arab World has been the redefining and redirecting of the regional dynamics in heritage cognition and percept.



Hence, the interrelations between the four Muslim regional powers – Iran, Turkey, Syria and Egypt – now follow the historic patterns of the interactions between the Persian Empire, the Ottoman Caliphate, Bilad al-Sham [historic Greater Syria] and Bilad al-Kanana [historic Greater Egypt] even though these historic blocs are now constrained within the respective boundaries of “states”. While the drastic realignments between the four “states”, and the rest of the Arab World, since mid-summer 2012 do not make sense in terms of conventional international relations – they make perfect sense in the context of these four powers – even when constrained within the modern states’ boundaries – redefining their regional role and posture in their historic-legacy frameworks.

Simply put, between these “states” there being played out anew the historic struggle for the dominance over the Mashriq (roughly the Arab World east of the Sinai Peninsula) and Islam – through the dominance of Islam’s holiest shrines in Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. The Mashriq was historically dominated by the socio-political dynamics in the Arab heartland – al-Jazira (spanning roughly from the shores of the Arabian Sea to northern Syria, and from eastern Iraq to the Gaza Strip). This Arab cauldron – predominantly Sunni but includes Shiite Arabs as well – has a tendency to spread roughly from south to north through radicalization and jihadization to the detriment of Arab urbanization-modernization and nationalism. This ascent is not only contained, but at times also reversed, by three external powers that seek to advance and expand into, as well as extend their influence and hegemony onto, these Arab lands. These are Mahdivist Iran, neo-Ottomanist Turkey, and Ikhwani Egypt (as both the contemporary United Arab Republic and the reincarnation of historic Bilad al-Kanana). All three powers have long had hegemonic aspirations over the Mashriq through various means ranging from cultural-economic influence to outright military occupation.

The fault lines between the Arab heartland of al-Jazira and the encircling great powers are characterized by a thin line of minorities that, together, constitute the core of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities. These minorities are, from east to west, the Ahwazi Arabs of southwestern Iran, the Kurds, the Alavis/Allawites, the Druze, the Maronites and the Jews, as well as smaller minorities such as the Armenians and Cherkess/Circassians. This Fertile Crescent of Minorities has provided the stabilizing buffer regulating the spread of influence of Iran, Turkey and Egypt. Throughout history, these minorities have been discriminated against and oppressed by the various Arab and Ottoman rulers of the Mashriq. In contrast, the Western powers relied on the minorities to bring modernity and Westernization into the Middle East. As a rule, whenever the Fertile Crescent of Minorities was strong and viable – it constituted the key to regional stability and the purveyor of modernity and growth.

After the ascent of Egyptian President Muhammad Morsi in summer 2012, Cairo introduced a grand strategic arrangement based on a wider alliance of outside forces – now Egypt-Turkey-Iran – encircling the Mashriq, jointly destroying the Fertile Crescent of Minorities, and ultimately suppressing and controlling Arab al-Jazira and Bilad al-Sham. At the same time, this tripartite alliance will also be creating a Sunni majority bloc – Turkey and Egypt – strong enough to contain Iran without alienating it. Turkey and Egypt will be able to capitalize on this dynamics to gain the willing subservience of the Sunni Arab World – Syria, western Iraq, Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

Historically, the Ottoman Caliphate ruled the huge Mashriq by manipulating a devastated and oppressed Fertile Crescent of Minorities, while domineering the myriad of Arab tribes, clans and extended families that lived in the Arab al-Jazira surrounded by the Crescent. Fractured and devoid of national identities – these localized Arab entities could not resist the Ottoman overlordship. Indeed, Ankara’s two preconditions for success in Syria and beyond closely resemble the Ottoman legacy:



- (1) the destruction of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities – the historic buffer between Arab al-Jazira and the encircling forces; and
- (2) the destruction of the Mashriq states –especially Syria – in favor of weak fractured Islamist entities.

Attained together, these steps will effectively recreate the traditional socio-political tapestry that served the later-days Ottoman Caliphate (of which British-ruled Egypt was not a part). Thus, the near term objective of the Syrian crisis is bringing about the demise of the modern Syrian state in favor of amalgamation of localized sub-state entities based on tribes and clans that are focused solely on self-preservation and self-survival. And the demise of the Syrian state already reverberates in Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan.

In summer 2012, it became imperative for Iran to react to these changing strategic circumstances. Tehran had to demonstrate the preeminence and indispensability of Iran in any regional new order. As well, it became imperative for Tehran to emphasize the centrality and relevance of “the Palestinian cause” – the key to Iran’s predominance in the radicalizing Arab Street – in a Middle East overwhelmed by the Syrian crisis and its reverberations. Tehran utilized the HAMAS and other Iran-sponsored Palestinian Jihadist organizations toward this end.

First, Iran had the HAMAS flagrantly leave Damascus. Although the evacuation of the HAMAS Politburo was completed in late January 2012, the HAMAS office remained open. In late September, and more so in early October, Syrian media suddenly started calling HAMAS, and especially Khaled Mashaal, traitors on account of their cooperation with the Muslim Brothers against Bashar al-Assad’s Damascus. In early November, Imad al-Alami was banished from Damascus to Doha, and the HAMAS office was closed down. This commotion was orchestrated by Tehran in order to shift the image of HAMAS in the Arab media to the side of the tripartite alliance. The new posture of the HAMAS as a key ally of the tripartite alliance was highlighted on October 23 when the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, made a brief official visit to Gaza and thus legitimized the HAMAS leadership as an Arab Government and the real representatives of “the Palestinian cause”.

Concurrently, the latest round of Gaza-origin of violence started in mid-September with the escalation of both the launching of rockets at the Israeli civilian south and attacks on IDF patrols inside Israel. Strategically, most important were the establishment in early November of a unified command and operations room of the HAMAS and key Islamic Jihad and other Jihadist factions in the Gaza Strip. Starting early November, the website of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades – the military arm of the HAMAS – posted videos and communiques of the entire Jihadist movement claiming collective responsibility for the escalating attacks on Israel. These videos and communiques showed the insignia of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades and half-a-dozen other Jihadist organizations operating in the Gaza Strip.

Whatever the motivation, Israel could not tolerate the marked escalation of violence from the Gaza Strip. Hence, Israel target-killed the brain and driving force behind this endeavor – the commander of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, Ahmad Jaabari – on November 14, 2012. The ensuing escalation became “Operation Pillar of Cloud”. For the HAMAS leadership, the operation constituted a major opportunity to raise Arab awareness of “the Palestinian cause”, and to further consolidate its links to Sunni Arab leaders after the rift with Assad’s Damascus and the banishment of HAMAS leaders. The actual horrendous cost to the HAMAS and Jihadist forces, as well as to the infrastructure of the Gaza Strip, was irrelevant to the HAMAS leadership.



Thus, at hand is not the actual outcome of the latest periodic clash between Israel and the HAMAS-led Jihadist alliance in the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula – but rather the exploiting of the fighting in order to further higher strategic-regional interests. The initial positions of the HAMAS leaders during the Cairo negotiations on cessation of hostilities clearly reflect the real strategic-political objectives of the escalation and its aftermath.

The HAMAS initially demanded an Islamic multi-national force capable of defending the Gaza Strip against future Israeli aggression. The HAMAS insisted that the majority of troops come from Egypt and Turkey, and the rest from Pakistan, Iran and other Arab states. Both Ankara and Cairo said they would consider the idea on condition that Washington formally guarantees that Israel would never and under any circumstance do anything to endanger these forces. Simply put, the HAMAS wanted the international force to serve as a human shield, and Ankara and Cairo wanted Washington to formally guarantee that this human shield would never be put in danger no matter what the HAMAS or anybody else did. Hillary Clinton told Cairo and Ankara that Washington could not provide such guarantees because Israel at times becomes uncontrollable.

Also in the negotiations, Egypt adamantly refused to provide “any guarantee” regarding HAMAS and Jihadist activities on Egyptian soil and especially the Sinai Peninsula. Simply put, Egypt would do nothing to stop the flow of weapons, funds and reinforcements from Iran, Sudan, Libya and Qatar. At the same time, Egypt insisted on iron clad guarantees from Israel that the IDF would never ever operate on or over Egyptian territory. This means that the HAMAS and the Jihadists will enjoy safe-haven in Egypt and will not have to move forces and weapons into the Gaza Strip until the last minute. The HAMAS and the Jihadists will also be able to continue launching rockets from Sinai with impunity as they were doing during “Operation Pillar of Cloud”. These positions were adopted into the final agreement and reiterated explicitly by virtually all HAMAS leaders. Under such circumstances, it is clear that sooner or later rocketing will resume – but this will be a “new” crisis to be politically addressed in isolation from past crises and their contexts.

Meanwhile, there exists a dominant Iran factor. Behind the scenes, Tehran was an active participant in the Cairo talks – albeit by phone. HAMAS and Jihadist leaders constantly consulted with Tehran, and Egyptian and Turkish leaders repeatedly appealed to Iranian leaders to intercede with the HAMAS and Jihadist leaders when there were problems. Ultimately, the HAMAS and the Jihadists kept hardening their positions at the behest of Tehran in order to test the commitment of Obama and Clinton to the ascent of the Islamists in the whole region and particularly Obama’s proposed direct negotiations and rapprochement with Iran.

One of the main issues Tehran had long been pondering about is the viability of the US-endorsed tripartite alliance – Cairo-Ankara-Tehran – BEYOND Syria. The US-sponsored dominant role of the tripartite alliance in the negotiations with the HAMAS and the Jihadists (where Tehran delivered the HAMAS and Jihadist cooperation) served as a proof to Tehran that Obama was indeed sincere with his offer of rapprochement. Indeed, Obama and Clinton were also exploiting the Gaza crisis in order to further consolidate the tripartite alliance and thus prove to Tehran it can get the best deals on any regional posture by cooperating with Obama. Clinton’s primary objective in Cairo was to further Tehran’s position in order to expedite the secret US-Iran negotiations.

Meanwhile, the moment the fire ceased, HAMAS and Islamic Jihad leaders, including the venerable Muhammad Deif, hailed Iran’s role as the provider of the “strategic weapons” – the long-range rockets launched against metropolitan Tel-Aviv and Jerusalem – that decided the confrontation for the HAMAS and the Jihadists. HAMAS leaders are confident that Iran will now increase the military and financial support for the HAMAS and all other Jihadist forces in the Gaza Strip. Capitalizing on these statements of gratitude and their impact on both the Arab street and political elites, Tehran immediately started adjusting its strategic posture in the entire



region, starting with Syria, in the context of the tripartite alliance.

On November 23, Majlis Speaker Ali Larijani, one of the closest confidants of Ayatollah Khamenei, left for Damascus, Ankara, Beirut and other capitals in order to conduct strategic consultations about the future of the Middle East. In Damascus, Larijani opined that the regional strategic posture has changed drastically as a result of the Gaza crisis. "The resistance of the Palestinians in the Zionists' recent adventurism changed the political scene [in the region] and showed that resistance has completed an evolutionary move," Larijani told Assad. Damascus must also adjust its policies in order to cope with the emerging regional correlation of forces – that is, the preeminence of the tripartite alliance. Larijani told Assad that "Iran remains opposed to any adventurism" [i.e. foreign intervention] in Syria. However, Iran also backs "real and democratic reforms" in Syria – the buzzword for the ascent of Sunni Islamists-Jihadists in Damascus. Concurrently, the HAMAS also redefines its role in Syria in support of the Iranian initiative. Khaled Mashaal reiterated the commitment of the HAMAS to help healing the "old and obsolete" rift between Assad's Damascus and the Muslim Brothers in general – not just their Syrian leadership. Such a rapprochement is the key to any future deal between the Assad administration and Cairo, Ankara, Doha and their sponsored Jihadists.

*

The Gaza interlude must therefore be put in the wider context – namely, the emerging strategic posture that should be considered the primary outcome of the "Arab Spring".

The leaders of the Islamist tripartite alliance remain convinced that jointly suppressing the ascent of traditional Arabism is far more crucial than resolving their lingering Sunni-Shiite disputes. Hence, Turkey, Iran and Egypt must first bring down the strongest elements of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities – especially their Levant section that constitutes the buffer between the Arab Middle East and the non-Arab powers, as well as facilitates the West's access to the Middle East. Consequently, both Turkey and Iran will also be able to suppress with impunity their common nemesis – the Kurds. Ankara, Tehran and Cairo are cognizant that such a regional strategy means provoking a crisis, and perhaps war, with both Israel and Saudi Arabia. Thus, a test run has just taken place in the Gaza Strip.

Once the Fertile Crescent of Minorities collapses – the members of the Islamist tripartite alliance can confront the Sunni parts of Bilad al-Sham, and then converge on Arab al-Jazira with Iran exploiting the Shiite population, and Egypt and Turkey inciting an "Arab Spring" among the Sunni population. Qatar is convinced it would be empowered to "handle" the Arabian Peninsula on behalf of the regional dominant powers. Toward this end, Doha is playing a major role in exacerbating the fratricidal war in Syria as well as in the preparations in the Sinai Peninsula for sponsoring Jihadist grassroots insurrection in both Saudi Arabia and Jordan.

The leaders in Ankara, Tehran, Cairo and Doha are convinced that through a combination of political pressure and sponsored wars-by-proxy (including Jihadist terrorism) they would be able to consolidate their hegemony over the entire region – including the three Holy Shrines of Islam (Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem), the vast energy reserves of the Arabian Peninsula and the eastern Mediterranean, and maritime choke-points (the Suez Canal, Bab al-Mandeb and the Strait of Hormuz). The leaders in Ankara, Tehran, Cairo and Doha are cognizant that should Israel and/or Saudi Arabia put up a fight – the entire region will explode and their chances to realize these objectives will go up in flames. However, they are convinced that the Obama White House will contain both Israel and Saudi Arabia – coercing them to accept the ascent of the encircling Islamist powers at the expense of their own vital interests. Thus, the behavior of the Obama White House during the Gaza crisis and



the cease-fire negotiations proves the Islamist tripartite alliance right.

Significantly, President Obama is convinced that these developments further Washington's political interests. The Obama White House favors the consolidation of a web of autocratic Ikhwan-affiliated Islamist regimes in the existing Arab states throughout the Greater Middle East – even if they are not pro-American – as the key to instant stability, populist welfare administration, and ostensibly clean governance practices. Moreover, Obama is convinced that the integration into the tripartite alliance will make Khamenei's Iran more amenable to the great rapprochement with the US Obama is committed to. Furthering the ascent of Islamist-Jihadist forces beholden to the tripartite alliance – starting with Syria and the Gaza Strip – is a major undertaking of the Obama White House in effort to prove that the US is no longer anti-Islamist.

Therefore, the Obama White House keeps encouraging Turkey, Qatar and other states to support with weapons and funds the Islamist-Jihadist forces in Syria, as well as tolerating the Iranian sponsorship of Quds Forces' own Syrian Jihadist forces – all in order to facilitate the establishment of an Islamist-Jihadist regime in Damascus. All the while, a growing number of Syrians on all sides are dying and injured in the escalating multi-faceted fratricidal war. At the same time, Syrians have lost control over the dominant trends of the war in their own country. Simply and starkly put – growing numbers of Syrians lose life and limb in a war that increasingly aims to further the grand-strategic interests of aspirant regional powers – Turkey, Egypt, Iran and Qatar – at the expense of all Syrians. The primary objective of the tripartite alliance is to ensure an Islamist-Jihadist regime in Damascus that, jointly with a comparable regime in Baghdad, will be firmly within their sphere of influence and thus constitute a springboard against oil-rich conservative Arab governments. The intervention by the Obama White House in support of Turkey, Egypt, Iran and Qatar only serves to markedly aggravate an already explosive situation.

The primary loser of this US-sponsored transformation is America's closest ally in the region – Israel. Not without reason, Jerusalem is petrified by the close cooperation between the Obama White House and the vehemently anti-Israel Islamist allies – Egypt, Turkey, Iran and Qatar – and the ignoring of Israel's vital interests. The Gaza crisis was a clear case of terrorists' rockets being fired from an area completely vacated by Israel in 2005 (including the uprooting of all settlements) against civilian targets in pre-1967 Israel. Hence, if that's the way the Obama White House is taking the vital interests of Israel into consideration – what can Jerusalem expect when issues involve the US rapprochement with Iran and/or the US support for the ascent and empowerment of Islamist movements? And what should lesser allies of the US such as Saudi Arabia expect?

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.



Yossef Bodansky