

07 September 2016

- Israel and several Muslim African states have established diplomatic relations recently.
- There is co-operation between Israel and Sunni Middle Eastern countries - Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Gulf States - as all share the same fears of Iran and ISIS.
- In Turkey, a failed coup has led to a curtailing of secularism, press and educational freedom.
- Turkey and Israel have re-established diplomatic relations.
- Syria, Iran and Russia are helping the Syrian regime to stay in power and to fight ISIS.
- A Saudi delegation, headed by a former government official recently visited Israel.
- Sameh Shouky, the Egyptian Foreign Minister, told Egyptian high school students that Israel could not be accused of state terrorism, and that it has legitimate concerns about self-defence.
- The US passed a law requiring banks to take steps to target the finances of the armed Shi'ite political group Hezbollah. This is curtailing their ability to operate.
- Mahmoud Abbas, Prime Minister on the 'West Bank' has called elections which he may lose, as Hamas is popular on the West Bank, many rejecting Abbas for the corruption of Fatah, of which he is the Chairman.
- The inhabitants of Gaza have been told to vote for Hamas by a local Imam who announced: "Any person, male or female, who votes for a party other than Hamas will be considered an infidel and apostate and his or her repentance will not be accepted, even if they fasted or prayed or performed the Hajj to Mecca".

Yunis Al-Astal, one of top Hamas Muftis (Khaled Abu Toameh, Palestinian journalist, Gatestone Institute, 12/8/2016)

15 June 2013

The Syrian civil war has now become a sectarian contest. On one hand is the Allawite (offshoot of Shia Islam) President Assad, supported by Shia Iran and Shia Hezbollah, as well as Russia.

On the other side are varying opposition fighters, described by the West as 'rebels'. Many of these are Sunni Muslims, while others are secular people who simply want democracy.

The West is considering arming the latter group, in spite of fact that the weapons could fall into the wrong hands, and the fighting is already spreading to neighbouring countries.

Thousands of refugees have fled to neighbouring countries, and hundreds of thousands of civilians have been killed.

Palestinians go to the UN

On 29 November 2012, Palestine was upgraded by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) to 'Non-Member State' *1

"The case of the Palestinians Authority and the Oslo Accords will be closed. ... Once we become a recognised state, we will go to all UN agencies to force the international community to take legal action against Israel" *2

Abbas Zaki, member of Fatah Central Committee, Al-Quds Al-Arabiya

"If Palestine receives status of a non-member state in the General Assembly, there will be positive effects on all levels in the future ... Israel will no longer be able to define the occupied territories as disputed lands. They will become lands of a separate, occupied state *3.

Riad Al-Malik, PA Foreign Minister [Al-Hayat Al-Jadida, July 24, 2012]

"We are here for a final serious attempt to achieve peace, not to end the negotiation process, rather to breathe new life into the negotiation process."

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, to General Assembly delegates before the vote. 29/11/2012

"Israel's hand is always extended in peace, but a Palestinian state will not be established without recognition of the state of Israel as the state of the Jewish people, without an end-of-conflict declaration, and without true security arrangements that will protect Israel and its citizens".

Benjamin Netanyahu, 29/11/2012

"The fact that the Palestinians tore to shreds their commitments under the Oslo Accords and went to the UN unilaterally is somehow dismissed ... The Palestinians want a Palestinian state without peace. Many of these European governments voted for this thinking it may advance peace but in fact this pushes peace backwards because it tells the Palestinians you can get international recognition and international legitimacy without making the necessary compromises for peace."

Benyamin Netanyahu, Israel's PM (Die Welt-Germany, 10/12/2012)

Israel responded the Palestinians' rejection of former agreements under the Oslo Peace Accords by announcing that it would also not abide by them, would build homes in existing settlements and in other parts of what were previously 'disputed territories', and would reclaim money owed for electricity supplied to the Palestinians but so far not paid for. It was sharply criticised by many in the international community for this announcement.

NOTES

**1 Symbolism of the date: on 29 November 1947, the UNGA voted for the creation of 'Independent Arab and Jewish States'. The Jews accepted this, and Israel was established. The Arab world did not.*

**2 Oslo Accords, 28 September 1995: Both sides committed 'to refrain from steps that will change the status of the West Bank ... pending the outcome of the permanent status negotiations'.*

**3 Thereby bypassing the Oslo accords, and rewarding terrorism. In response, Israel stated that as the P.A. would no longer abide by agreements made under the Oslo Peace Accords, and claimed ownership of land still to be negotiated i.e. 'disputed land', Israel too would claim ownership of some of that land and would build homes on it. Israel has been severely*

criticised by the international community for this. Supporters of Israel regard this criticism as double standards.

**4 "Our land is not just the West Bank and Gaza, and that is important. It is all of Palestine". Mahmoud Zahar, Hamas founder and Foreign Minister (Washington Post, 30/11/2012)*

Friday 21 October 2011

The Arab Spring/Winter

It is now 7 years since the 'Arab Spring' began. It started in **Tunisia** in December 2010, where an unemployed university graduate trying to earn a living by selling vegetables, was prevented from doing so and had his face slapped by an official.

The next day, he set fire to himself outside a government building, which led to riots from young people who demanded jobs and freedom. It then spread to neighbouring countries.

1. We call it 'Arab Spring', but in fact the countries are not Arab. The only original Arabs are the Saudis, who conquered countries and forced people to speak Arabic when they adopted Islam. The peoples belong to different races in each country.
2. Radicals from the Sunni-Shia divide are killing each other, and are coming out as leaders of the Arab Spring.
3. The West, and the Europeans in particular, regard the Muslim Brotherhood as moderate, and want them to retain power in Egypt and to gain power in other countries.
4. As regimes change in Arab countries which used to oppress their own people, divisions are appearing which take us back to the Sykes-Picot agreement to divide up the land. Countries will be divided, and new countries will be created as a result.
5. The strong move for peace talks by the USA only came about when it felt that it was important to keep control of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The USA does not want Hamas to go back to Iran (which it is now doing). There can be no chance of peace with dictators.
6. Although the whole world considers Israel to be the cause of all problems in the Middle East, those Arabs who went into the streets never spoke about Israel. They were revolting against their leaders.
7. When the Islamists wanted to take over the Arab Spring, they brought Israel in for political reasons, while using the name of religion.
8. Christian and other minorities, though Arab, are suffering a lot from their Arab neighbours, who loot their properties and rape their women, because law and order which had previously protected the minorities, no longer do so.
9. **Russia** backs the Syrian/Shia axis. The **USA** backs the Sunni and Islamist rebels. This is resulting in a cold war, as both want to have influence and power in the Middle East.
10. In the long term, democracy will prevail.

Egypt

As a result of the 'Arab Spring' in February 2011 led by young people who want democracy, jobs and freedom, Egypt's President Mubarak resigned. Elections were held, and the Muslim Brotherhood was elected. Its President, Morsi, imposed increasingly extreme Islamist laws.

There is a difference between **Egypt** and the other countries. When the Egyptian people revolted for the second time to get rid of the elected Muslim Brotherhood leader, they proved that they were intelligent enough to revolt again for what they wanted, as soon as they had tested the Muslim Brotherhood's intentions. Christians in Egypt were becoming increasingly worried as they feared that their freedom of religion would be curtailed.

Now most intellectuals in Egypt say 'We are Muslim, but we don't accept American Islam any more'. The army is now in charge, and so far it is upholding the 1978 peace treaty with Israel.

Iran

Iran has made no secret of the fact that it would like to control the whole M.E., and that it will use a nuclear bomb to destroy Israel. It supports the Syrian President, Hezbollah in Southern Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, and has been accused of supporting terrorism in a variety of places.

Iran's President, Hassan Rouhani, offered to talk to Western leaders about reducing his stock of nuclear material which he claims is for domestic use only, in the hope of getting them to reduce sanctions against his country which are harming its economy. At home he has boasted that on the last occasion when Iran was engaged in talks with the West, he managed to pull the wool over its eyes and to continue developing the weapons.

Syria

Young people who want democracy, jobs and freedom started the uprising in Syria in March 2011. They were joined by extremists who have now taken control of the opposition to the ruling Assad regime which is supported by the Iranian regime, and a civil war is now occurring. Young people from around the world, including the UK, have gone there to fight on one side or the other. Iran and the Islamist rebels want to create a Sharia state in Syria.

In October 2013 President Assad agreed to allow the destruction of his chemical weapons, but so far less than half have been removed and destroyed. Some fear that much of it may have already been transferred to Hezbollah.

Thousands of civilians have been killed and many thousands have fled, becoming refugees in neighbouring countries.

Christians in particular have suffered attacks from extremists.

Hundreds of wounded civilians have been treated in Israeli hospitals.

It is turning into a proxy war, with Saudi Arabia and Turkey backing the opposition, and Iran backing the regime. It is beginning to expand beyond Syria's borders.

Gaza

Hamas, an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood and the current rulers of Gaza were, until recently, supported by Iran, and had their offices in Syria. Since the conflict in Syria and during the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, they moved their offices to Cairo. Egypt opened its border with Gaza, while destroying many smuggling tunnels.

After the Muslim Brotherhood lost power in Egypt, Hamas again aligned themselves with Iran. Rocket attacks on Israel from Gaza increased, as have attacks on Egyptian forces and villages in Sinai.

Hezbollah in Lebanon

This organisation, regarded by most western countries as a terrorist organisation, supports President Assad of Syria, and hundreds of them are fighting on his side in Syria. They fear that if Assad were to fall, weapons and support from Iran would be hard to obtain.

Lebanon

The majority of the people of Lebanon support the opposition forces in Syria and as a result Hezbollah, which are based in southern Lebanon, are becoming increasingly unpopular.

Turkey

The Turkish regime supports the Syrian opposition forces and there has been cross-fire across their common border. Many Syrians are seeking refuge in Turkey, which is now building a barrier to keep them out, as it cannot support any more refugees. Turkey once gave the impression of being Western because it wanted to join Europe. Now that it is obvious that this will not happen, its leaders no longer hide their real intention.

Iraq

The democratically elected government which gained power with the help of the West is now helping Iran to withstand international sanctions, and is also helping to support president Assad of Syria.

Bahrain

Bahrain's citizens demonstrated in the streets in 2011 demanding democracy and the removal of the Prime Minister who has been in post for 42 years. So far the rulers have not agreed sufficiently to these demands, and the demonstrations continue. **Saudi Arabia** and **Qatar** support the changes in **Syria** very strongly on sectarian lines, although they are the most oppressive dictators in their own countries. Yet, when **Bahrainis** revolted against their leaders, Saudi Arabia sent in forces to suppress them.

Israel

Israel is concerned about recent events among its neighbours, as it fears that the hopes for democracy which started the uprisings will result in these countries becoming extremist regimes intent on destroying Israel, rather than the hoped-for democracies. It is also wary of making security concessions in peace talks with the Palestinians, until it can be sure that the West Bank and Gaza will not be overrun by regimes intent on its destruction. Israel's concern about Iran is shared by Saudi Arabia and some Gulf states. This may lead to closer ties between them and Israel.

Jordan

Extremists are now demonstrating in Jordan against the slow progress of the granting of democracy and freedom by the Jordanian monarchy.

In Jordan the Muslim Brotherhood is the most organised political group. The king (the representative of the minority Bedouin who rule the country), survives only because of Western support.

The majority of Jordanians are Palestinians. Many of them do not want Jordan to become an extremist state as they fear that their lives will become less secure. Jordan has had a peace treaty with Israel since 1994, which is opposed by most of the trade unions and the people of Jordan.

Gaza-Israel 8-Day War November 2012

Some people believe that the Israeli government started the war in order to enhance its election chances in the January 2013 election. Others blame Iran as many, if not most, of the rockets launched at Israel from Gaza were from Iran, suggesting that it had an interest in causing conflict in the area, as it is doing in Lebanon, Syria, and other countries. Still others say that Israel responded to an increasing number of rocket and missile attacks on its citizens which were bringing whole towns almost to a standstill, as offices and schools closed, and people spent days and weeks in their shelters instead of going to work and to school *1.

Israel's new defence system, the Iron Dome, which intercepted 421 incoming rockets and missiles, as well as its sirens and shelters, undoubtedly saved hundreds of Israeli civilian lives – there were 5 fatalities and 126 injured. In contrast, Hamas announced that it used its own citizens as human shields (a procedure defined by the Geneva Convention as a War Crime), and that 150 civilians in Gaza were killed by Israel *2.

This figure has not yet been confirmed, as it is known that about 100 Hamas rockets landed in populated areas in Gaza, and that these tragically resulted in the death of at least one child, probably more. In addition, photos of dead children allegedly killed by Israel were in fact the heart-breaking victims of the fighting in Syria. Some people accuse Israel of a disproportional response to the rockets. While there is no doubt that Hamas was aiming its missiles at Israeli civilians (also defined by the Geneva Convention as a war crime), there is evidence that Israel dropped leaflets, made phone calls, and sent texts to Gazan civilians, urging them to leave an area they were about to target.

What were the two sides fighting for?

Hamas has stated repeatedly that it wants to destroy Israel. More immediately, it wanted to end the blockade of Gaza by Israel, which was making it very difficult to obtain weapons, as well as hampering trade.

Israel's position is that when it withdrew totally from Gaza ending its occupation in 2005, all it wanted and still wants is to live in peace alongside Gaza, and that that it only imposed the blockade when Hamas increased its attacks on Israel, in an effort to prevent weapons with which to do so reaching Gaza.

A ceasefire was arranged on 21 November 21, the details of which have not yet been agreed. It is known that Hamas wants Israel to end the blockade of Gaza, and Israel wants Hamas to cease all attacks on Israel, and to stop smuggling weapons into Gaza. It remains to be seen whether the USA and Egypt can guarantee an agreement and can ensure that both sides will abide by, and whether they can control the various terrorist cells currently in Gaza, or whether Hamas will use the ceasefire to try to build up its store of weapons again, and whether Israel will then re-impose the blockade.

NOTES

**1 In 2010, 221 rockets were launched on Israel from Gaza; in 2011, there were 630; and until the war this year, 1900. During the war a further 1506 were launched. Since 2001, there have been 13,000.*

2 Over the course of the 8-day operation, which Israel called 'Operation Pillar of Defense**', the IDF killed Ahmed Jabari, head of Hamas' military wing and 6 other senior operatives. Some people say that this is illegal. Others say that during a war, it is legal to target someone who has killed civilians in the past and is known to be involved in or is planning further killing.*

Israel has targeted over 1,500 terror sites including:

- *19 senior command centers, operational control centers and Hamas' senior-rank headquarters,*
- *30 senior operatives, damaging Hamas' command and control,*
- *hundreds of underground rocket launchers,*
- *140 smuggling tunnels,*
- *66 terror tunnels,*
- *dozens of Hamas operation rooms and bases,*
- *26 weapon manufacturing and storage facilities*
- *dozens of long-range rocket launchers and launch sites.*

On 18 October 2011, the Israel soldier Gilad Shalit was exchanged for 1028 Palestinians. He had been kidnapped from Israel and held by Hamas for over five years. Contrary to international law, he was allowed no contact with the Red Cross or similar organisation, or contact with his family. Although full details of his imprisonment are not yet known, on his release it could be seen that he was very weak and extremely thin. Medical reports so far have stated that he was under-nourished.

The Palestinian prisoners released from Israeli jails had all been found guilty of attacks on Israeli civilians, and had been responsible for murderers and suicide bombings, each of which killed tens of civilians and injured hundreds.

In Gaza, the deal was regarded as a victory against Israel, proving that violence and kidnapping is more effective than negotiations. It is believed that this will weaken Fatah in the West Bank, who have negotiated with Israel for many years.

It has always been Israel's policy, wherever possible, never to abandon a kidnapped, captured or injured soldier, and Israelis were delighted at the release of Gilad Shalit. However, there was some opposition to the deal as released Palestinian prisoners have in the past returned to violence against Israel, and many of them this time have also done so.

ISIS

A group calling itself the Islamic State of Syria and Iran was founded in 2003.

- It grew out of Al Qaeda, established by Bin Laden in 1988.
- It is one of the main jihadi groups fighting government forces in Syria.
- It has attracted many foreign jihadist.
- It took control of parts of Syria, and large parts of Iraq.
- It changed its name to Islamic State (IS) in 2014.

By July 2014 ISIS controlled one third of Syrian territory and most of its oil, and much of Iraq and its most important cities and major resources.

It declared a Caliphate, and its intention to spread this caliphate over the whole Middle East, and eventually of the whole world.

It violently persecuted and murdered non-Muslims and Muslims who did not share its aims and beliefs.

In August 2014 The Kurds, Christians and other minorities begged the West for help.

The USA conducted airstrikes on ISIS forces. This helped the Kurdish army to push back the IS forces from the dam near the city of Mosul. It also helped to rescue thousands of Yazidis hiding on a mountain top with no food or water.

Western governments and many Arab rulers joined in the airstrikes, to remove the threat of ISIS.

By June 2017, ISIS was almost driven out of Iraq.

Many in the West fear that, as ISIS territory shrinks, many of its fighters will return to their countries of origin and commit terrorist activities there.