

War Dangers Spread from SW Asia to the Pacific

by Jeffrey Steinberg

Feb. 10—Recent Israeli bombings of at least two sites inside sovereign Syrian territory are a prelude to an ongoing Israeli plan to attack Syrian facilities suspected of providing advanced weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon, according to both U.S. and Israeli intelligence sources.

A former head of Israeli Military Intelligence, Amos Yadlin, who now heads the Institute for National Security Studies, a Defense Ministry-linked think tank, told the *Washington Post* on Feb. 10 that there are four classes of weapons that Israel will target: advance air-defense systems, ballistic missiles, shore-to-sea missiles, and chemical weapons. The threat of continuing Israeli Air Force incursions into Syrian territory is a wild card factor, adding to the danger that the Syrian crisis will spread across the borders into Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, and Jordan.

U.S. intelligence sources have confirmed that Israel is so concerned about slippage of advanced weapons from Syria into Lebanon that a detailed plan has been presented to caretaker Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for the creation of an Israeli no-fly buffer zone covering 5-15 miles of territory inside southern Syria and Lebanon.

The Israeli intervention into the Syrian crisis comes at a particularly critical moment. For the foreseeable future, the military situation on the ground inside Syria is deadlocked. The Syrian Army re-

mains firmly in control of Damascus and other urban centers, while the rebel forces, the Free Syrian Army, and an amalgam of Islamist jihadi groups heavily funded from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and other Gulf states, have taken control of parts of the Syrian countryside. Nothing significant is likely to change in that correlation, barring significant outside intervention to provide advanced weapons to the rebels.

At the just-concluded Munich Security Conference, Saudi Prince Turki bin-Faisal, former head of Saudi intelligence, and later, ambassador to London and Washington, demanded that the West heavily arm the rebels to break the deadlock. While British Prime Minister David Cameron strongly supported the Saudi position, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff are opposed to arming the rebels, given the growing power of groups like the al-Nusra Front, an arm of al-Qaeda, in the rebel power structure.

Following his own appearance at the Munich conference, David Ignatius, *Washington Post* columnist and former CIA officer, proposed that U.S. Special Forces begin training of elite, vetted units of the Free Syrian Army. These units, hypothetically, could be the vanguard of an eventual assault on Damascus, and could subsequently be deployed to crush the Islamist factions in Syria. In short, the scheme would assure warfare in Syria for the foreseeable future.

A Political Solution?

To avert that total collapse of Syria into a failed state, efforts have recently escalated to promote a diplomatic solution, driven in large part by the growing danger of a regional war spreading throughout Southwest Asia and beyond. The fact that neither Russia nor China show any sign of breaking from their refusal to support the rebels against President Bashar al-Assad, has created a political stalemate that can only be broken by a genuine effort at a political solution. At a meeting last week in Cairo, the Organization of Islamic Conference issued a statement calling for a political solution, and, for the first time, did not demand al-Assad's departure as a precondition for negotiations. A similar offer had been made by Syrian opposition leader Moaz al-Khatib on the eve of his own appearance at the Munich Conference at the beginning of February.

On the sidelines of the Cairo meeting, Egypt, Turkey, and Iran conferred on prospects for reviving the June 2012 Kofi Annan Geneva plan for a ceasefire and government transition. Saudi Arabia boycotted those talks, and remains intransigent about Assad's departure as a precondition. There is no evidence of a serious cut-back in the flow of arms and funds to the jihadist rebels in Syria from the Gulf states. Indeed, the northern region of Lebanon, bordering on Syria, is becoming a new hotbed of jihadist attacks, posing a serious danger of a new eruption of sectarian war in Lebanon. Prince Bandar bin-Sultan, the current head of Saudi Arabia's General Intelligence Directorate, has been building this jihadist hub along the Lebanon-Syria border for the past year, with the active sup-



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Saudi Prince Turki bin-Faisal, backed by the U.K.'s David Cameron, has demanded that the West heavily arm the Syrian rebels to break the deadlock. The U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, however, remain opposed to any further arming of the opposition.

port of the Hariri clan in Lebanon.

Egypt on the Edge

As the Syria situation reaches a new crisis phase, other regional flashpoints for conflict are also heating up. In Egypt, weeks of protests and riots against the government of President Mohamed Morsi have continued, with the recent emergence of a Black Bloc of leftist anarchists adding to the crisis. According to senior Egyptian sources, the Muslim Brotherhood-controlled Morsi government has secretly struck a deal with the remnants of the Interior Ministry's powerful police apparatus to assist in the crackdown on protesters, in return for amnesty for 600 ministry officials who are still facing charges for their role in the effort to crush the 2011 revolution. Egypt, the largest Sunni Muslim country in the Arab world, and an anchor in regional politics, is facing a severe economic crisis, upcoming parliamentary elections, and stalled negotiations with the IMF that will only worsen the economic crisis, if concluded on

the terms currently being demanded by the Fund.

Target: Iran

As of Feb. 6, new unilateral American sanctions were activated against Iran. President Obama approved those new sanctions in December as part of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). They effectively block Iran from access to the international banking system, and are aimed at choking off cash to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. Syria is a secondary target of Obama Administration's Iran sanctions, because Iran has been a major financial backer of the Assad government, and it will now be far more difficult

for Tehran to provide assistance to Damascus, at a moment when Syria's foreign currency reserves are almost depleted.

A Danish Peace Research Institute writer recently published a study, warning that such crippling sanctions not only do the greatest damage to innocent civilians: They almost always lead to war. The current situation in the Persian Gulf/Eastern Mediterranean region is no exception. The tightening of the screws on Iran is intended to sow internal chaos going into the Presidential elections in June. Following the Munich meeting, attended by which was attended by Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi, Iran agreed to hold the next negotiations with the P5+1 on Feb. 26 in Kazakstan.

Nuke Test in North Asia

Tensions are also rising in North Asia, where the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (D.P.R.K.) is threatening to test a nuclear weapon, at the same time that China and Japan are engaged in a war of nerves over disputed islands in the East China Sea. Last week, Japan accused China of locking radar on Japanese Navy vessels and helicopters, charges that China has denied.

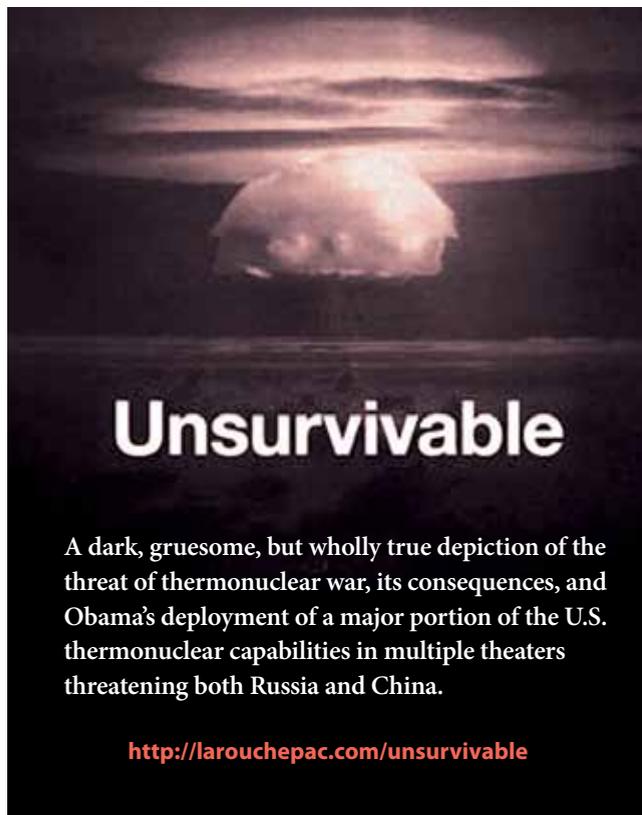
Japan also accused Russia of conducting illegal flights over the disputed Northern Islands. While Asian military officials have said that they believe that these rising tensions are driven primarily by domestic political factors and will be resolved, the danger of an incident at sea spinning out of control cannot be ruled out, regardless of the intentions of top policymakers in Tokyo, Beijing, and Seoul.

In response to the North Korean announcement about a pending nuclear weapons test, South Korean Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Jung Seung-jo warned on Feb. 6 that Seoul would launch a preventive strike against the North, "if signs of an imminent nuclear weapon launch against the South were detected," *The Hankyoreh* reported. Officials say this would be better than to wait for the D.P.R.K. to develop a deployable nuclear weapon and face a much bigger future conflict.

The United States last week announced previously planned joint naval maneuvers with the South Koreans, involving Aegis destroyers equipped with advanced anti-missile systems and submarines. South Korean Defense Ministry officials asserted that the joint maneuvers should be read as a response to the threatened North Korean nuclear test.

Chinese officials are convinced that the United States is fully backing Japan in the territorial disputes over the East China Sea islands, and that the United States is moving towards a policy of containment and encirclement of China, under the new doctrine of Air Sea Battle. Washington, in Beijing's mind, is also moving to establish a quasi-NATO structure in the Asia-Pacific region, involving Japan and Australia as the two anchors of an anti-China military pact. Indeed, the United States, Japan, and Australia held joint maneuvers last week, and announced plans to invite other regional allies to participate in the future. A Washington think tank, Project 2049 Institute, published a detailed proposal in 2012, calling for an Asia-Pacific formal security treaty, directed against China.

Under the circumstances of the unfolding hyperinflationary crisis centered in the trans-Atlantic region, and given the deterioration of U.S. relations with both Russia and China, regional flashpoints have the immediate potential of escalating into superpower confrontation, including thermonuclear war. Last week, *Financial Times* writer Gideon Rachman warned that a Sarajevo moment is looming in the Asia-Pacific, in which a brush-fire incident could spark global war.



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