

Tumult in the Middle East

***“It shall come to pass in that day, that a great tumult from the LORD shall be among them; and they shall lay hold every one on the hand of his neighbour, and his hand shall rise up against the hand of his neighbour.”
—Zechariah 14:13***

IN THIS SCRIPTURE, THE Prophet Zechariah was moved by the Holy Spirit of God to point to the tumultuous events that would mark the great “Day of the LORD,” and the end of this present Gospel Age. The prophet had earlier indicated, “This shall be the plague wherewith the LORD will smite all the people that have fought against Jerusalem; Their flesh shall consume away while they stand upon their feet, and their eyes shall consume away in their holes, and their tongue shall consume away in their mouth.”—vs. 12

THE TIME OF TROUBLE

The word “tumult” means commotion or disturbance, and the same word has been translated “trouble” by Isaiah in his prophecy concerning the ending of this age. He wrote, “It is a day of trouble, and of treading down, and of perplexity by the Lord GOD

of hosts in the valley of vision, breaking down the walls, and of crying to the mountains.”—Isa. 22:5

The Prophet Joel also describes God’s great day of wrath. Using symbolic language, he wrote, “Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in my holy mountain: let all the inhabitants of the land tremble: for the day of the LORD cometh, for it is nigh at hand; A day of darkness and of gloominess, a day of clouds and of thick darkness, as the morning spread upon the mountains: a great people and a strong; there hath not been ever the like, neither shall be any more after it, even to the years of many generations. A fire devoureth before them; and behind them a flame burneth: the land is as the garden of Eden before them, and behind them a desolate wilderness; yea, and nothing shall escape them.”—Joel 2:1-3

DESTRUCTIVE SYMBOLS

Joel’s reference to blowing the trumpet and sounding the alarm was to awaken all who are humbly watching for the great day of God’s vengeance and the events that would mark the closing features of this present Gospel Age. It would be a day of darkness because mankind is not yet aware of the significance and true meaning of our Lord Jesus’ Second Presence at the end of the age. The great and strong people such as was never before seen, and would never be seen again, is the Lord’s Great Army with which he will destroy the present social order and prepare the earth for the future kingdom of Christ. Fire is used to illustrate total destruction, after which Christ’s kingdom will usher in blessings for the people described as a Garden of Eden.

The Time of Trouble that was foretold to come upon the nations and the institutions established by men is termed the great “Day of the Lord” in the Scriptures. Many of God’s prophets of old served to warn the nations concerning the greatest revolution that the world would ever see. It would be a time when every principle of right and wrong would be made manifest to all the people. The wonderful promises of God assure us that under the soon-to-be-established kingdom of Christ, the blessings will flow to the sin-sick world. At that future time, everlasting life will be offered to all who obey God’s law.

AN AWAKENING

At the present time, there is evidence in nearly every segment of our society, which is made up of the social, financial, political, and ecclesiastical segments, that we are now living in this foretold Time of Trouble—the great day of God’s wrath. Thus do we see the awakening of the world’s oppressed people. There is a growing antagonism toward the dictatorial regimes that have flaunted their positions of power and privilege, while denying their citizens the most basic human rights, or disdaining to hear their many unresolved issues.

One of the most volatile regions of the world is the Middle East, and the dangerous situation in Syria threatens the peace of the whole area. The Middle East covers a wide area of North Africa and Western Asia with about two dozen countries, multitudes of races, religions, cultures, and subcultures. For centuries this area has been the center of important historical changes. During the past year we have been witnessing the beginning of a disintegration

in the culture of the Middle East that will have profound influences throughout the world. These powerful events have come about suddenly, and no one knows how it will turn out.

During the past half century, the United States and other western powers have invested huge sums of money and resources in an effort to control the predictability and stability of the area, and to influence the outcome of events. Therefore, puppet regimes were installed in many Middle Eastern countries. However, there was little concern shown about whether these autocratic rulers were accountable to their own people, nor was there concern that these regimes were spending their country's resource money on themselves and for their own lavish lifestyles. There was little attention paid to the needs of the people who were being abused, exploited, or oppressed.

In the meantime, the Western nations have had their own agenda—guaranteeing the flow of uninterrupted oil supplies, maintaining control of the critical Suez Canal waterway, keeping the Soviet Union at bay, and lending support to the newly established state of Israel.

MODERN TECHNOLOGY

Another factor in keeping the peace is the rapid advance in technology, which is based on satellite television, computers, mobile phones, and the Internet. Therefore, the younger generation is now better informed and connected. With the use of the new technology, they are able to communicate with one another and to gather large crowds to air their grievances.

Youth and modern technology have now teamed up and have been successful in removing from power some of the dictatorial regimes that have held repressive control over their people for decades. Many more people are being made aware of the inequities that have existed in the puppet regimes that were set up in the region decades earlier. These factors have served to empower the restless masses of people, while disarming the powers of the state.

TUNISIA

In the early part of 2011, dramatic events began to transpire in Tunisia which quickly led to the ultimate collapse of the Tunisian government, and the resignation of President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali. A young street vendor living in a small remote community in the interior of the country set himself on fire to protest the strong-arm tactics of the police who had arrested him. His fruit and vegetable cart had been confiscated because he had not obtained a proper permit to sell his produce. His treatment, and subsequent death a few days later, served as the small spark that soon ignited the whole Arab world, and brought deadly demonstrations and riots throughout the entire region. After only a short time, Tunisia's powerful ruler was forced to step down after twenty-three years as one of the Arab world's strongest autocrats.

EGYPT

The events in Tunisia soon touched off another powerful and even more widespread uprising in its neighboring country, Egypt. Egypt is the region's largest and most important state, and was also considered to have the most stable and firmly entrenched

government. Under the ruling power of President Hosni Mubarak, it was a major ally of the United States and had kept the peace with its important neighbor Israel for a period of over three decades. However, protesters demanded change and urged the residents of Egypt's capital city Cairo to gather in Tahrir Square. Thousands of people gathered to demand the resignation of President Mubarak, who was forced to resign his office as leader of the country after only eighteen days of the revolt.

LIBYA

Inspired by the revolts in both Tunisia and Egypt, a series of protests and confrontations began in Libya, aimed at Libya's government, and especially its leader, Muammar al-Gaddafi, who had ruled his country since 1969. The unrest soon spread from the nation's capital city Tripoli to many other cities and regions in the nation. Remaining firm in his commitment of selfishness and pride, Gaddafi would not relinquish his dictatorial power. It took several months of intense fighting, in which NATO, the United States, and some of their European allies were involved, to end the chaos and violence. Over a period of several months, there was great loss of life and destruction of property before Gaddafi was finally captured and killed. The nation of Libya is in disarray, and only time will tell what lies ahead for the people and their neighbors.

SYRIA

In May, 2011, political strife also began to erupt in Syria and has continued to the time of this writing. For several months, the world's attention has been focused on the growing crisis in the Syrian

Arab Republic, under control of President Bashar-al-Assad and his government. Violence has erupted in many parts of the country, and the government has responded with overwhelming and brutal force to put down the unrest. Thousands of civilians have been killed, or seriously injured, while countless others have been arbitrarily arrested, tortured, or have simply disappeared.

AN ANCIENT CULTURE

The modern state of Syria is situated in the area where several ancient kingdoms and empires once existed. It shares a border with its neighbor Turkey on the northern frontier, with Lebanon in the west, Iraq on the east, Jordan to the south, and Israel to the southwest. The territory of Syria is slightly larger than that of the state of North Dakota. Its capital city, Damascus, is located on the Barada River, and is the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world.

The people of Syria are separated along profound ethnic and sectarian divisions, including groups divided by politics, language, and religion. Arabs constitute the major ethnic group, while other minority groups such as Kurds, Armenians, Turcomans, and Assyrians make up the remaining portion of the population. Sectarian divisions include the Sunni Muslim majority, and a small number of Shiites. The Christian population in Syria is very small, and Jews number only a few thousand.

THE MODERN STATE

The modern state of Syria was established after the end of World War I as a French mandate. It was the largest of the Arab states that emerged from the collapse of the former Ottoman Empire as a result

of the war. In 1920, the Arab Kingdom of Syria was established under King Faisal. However, his rule ended after only a few months when a clash occurred between Syrian Arab forces and those of France. In 1925, Syrian resistance to French rule broke out in a full-scale revolt. Despite French attempts to restore order, the revolt had served to unite the various factions of Syrian Druze, Sunnis, Shiites, Allawis, and Christians. The rebel forces besieged Damascus, and the French responded with brutal and overwhelming force that included executions, population transfers, and the use of heavy armor in urban neighborhoods. The rebel forces were eventually subdued by the superior French.

Syria gained their independence from France in 1946. Two years later in 1948, they entered the Arab-Israeli War against the newly established state of Israel. Syria, however, remained in a state of political instability throughout the 1950s and 1960s. In a coup in 1970, Hafez-al-Assad, who presided over the Baath party, assumed power. Syria was then ruled autocratically by Assad during the period from 1970 until his death in 2000. He was succeeded by his son Bashar.

BASHAR AL-ASSAD

The present leader of the Syrian people since 2000 is Bashar al-Assad who serves as president and regional secretary of the ruling Baath party. He was born in Damascus in 1965 and succeeded his father Hafez-al-Assad who died after ruling his country for twenty-nine years. Bashar was reelected as Syria's president in 2007 and remains in power until now.

Bashar al-Assad grew up in the shadow of his father Hafez who had taken over the presidency after the Corrective Revolution of 1970. He received his primary and secondary education in the Arab-French al-Hurriya School in Damascus. After graduating from high school in 1982, he enrolled in Damascus University where he studied medicine. Later, he went to London, England, and began his postgraduate work at the Western Eye Hospital as a physician specializing in ophthalmology.

BRUTAL FORCE

As a result of the revolt, President Assad's government has cut off all communications and access to his country, and the outside world. He has deployed troops and tanks in a brutal campaign to quell the uprising with deadly force in cities and towns across the nation. The International Federation for Human Rights has reported that the Syrian government has deprived its citizens access to essential supplies of food, water, and medical provisions as well as restricting admission to hospitals.

Violence has been reported in cities and towns including Kanaker, Erbin, Albul, Kamal, and Zor. International alarm is increasing as the level of violence escalates. Human Rights experts are denouncing the grave violations of human rights by the Syrian government under Assad. There has been a unified response to end the targeting of its civilian population. The indiscriminate targeting of civilians has led to thousands of Syrians fleeing to Turkey for refuge. In an effort to prevent further escapes, Syrian troops have been sent to the Turkish border to deny them the opportunity to escape the carnage.

THE ARAB LEAGUE

The Arab League is a regional organization of Arab states in the Middle East that was formed in Cairo, Egypt, in 1945. Currently the League has twenty-two members whose main goal is to establish relations between member states and to coordinate collaboration between them. They also want to safeguard their independence and sovereignty.

The Arab League says it will maintain the sanctions that have been imposed upon Syria. This move is in response to the Assad government's demand to remove the sanctions as conditions for allowing monitors to enter Syria. Some member states are accusing Syria of attempting to bargain with the Arab League. Sanctions were imposed because of President Assad's violent crackdown against his own people. The Syrian government reports they would agree to let Arab League monitors enter their country provided that Syrian membership in the League is restored and that the sanctions are ended in an agreement that could be signed in Damascus. However, Arab League Secretary-General Nabil el Arabi stated that this agreement would not lead to suspending sanctions against Syria. The League ordered a freeze on the assets of nineteen Syrian officials, and a ban on their travel. This included a reduction in flights to Syria, the release of political prisoners, and an end to the crackdown against the protestors. The ultimate impact of this action will depend on the effectiveness of enforcing these regulations.

Assad faces growing economic and political pressure to end the violence against the unrest that began several months ago. These events are similar

to those that were inspired by the movements that toppled leaders in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. However, the increasing violence risks moving Syria closer to a civil war as military personnel defect and take up arms against the government, the United Nations, and top human-rights officials.

WESTERN RESPONSE

Leaders in both France and Great Britain state that concerted action is necessary to contain the Syrian crisis before it deteriorates into a civil war. They believe that the situation is even more dangerous than the Iraq war. In the meantime, Syria continues to intensify their war preparations, fully expecting that diplomatic efforts will fail. Washington sources report that their pessimism emanates from the conviction in the region that, even if Bashar al-Assad pretended to cooperate, it is the government's determination to fight until the last man before relaxing their grip on the Syrian uprising.

As part of the drive for negotiations, Washington and Paris have returned their ambassadors to Damascus after an absence of several weeks. Their goal is to open direct channels to President Assad and to accept an orderly transition of power to avert a regional war and to save Syria from plunging further into civil war and chaos. Leaders from the United States, France, and Great Britain are of one mind about pursuing diplomacy to end Assad's rule, although there is yet no sign that he is willing to cooperate and step down from the presidential palace in Damascus. Even the Arab League's proposal to send monitors into Syria was met by rejection.

SYRIA'S ALLIANCE

If the Assad regime were to collapse, it would upset a major strategic alliance in the Middle East. Syrian opposition forces that have been challenging the regime, are shaking the very foundation of the axis formed between Damascus and Tehran, along with their Lebanese ally Hezbollah. Furthermore, the alliance is at the core of the Islamic Republic of Iran's intention to ensure its supremacy over the region. If this alliance collapses and Assad is forced to step down as Syria's president, it will cause a major reshuffling in the entire Middle East. The three partners also form a unified front of rejection that is particularly opposed to any changes in the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

WIDENING THREAT

When the regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya were removed and their leaders forced to resign, a virtual tumult of revolutionary fervor was released that will ultimately transform the entire Middle East. However, the potential collapse of the Syrian regime could wreak even more havoc. The fall of President Bashar al-Assad and the collapse of his government would unleash sectarian strife and extremism that would spread far beyond its borders. It could threaten not only the entrenched rulers that are already battling the movement for democratic change, but also the entire balance of power in one of the most volatile regions in the world.

Syria's minority Shiite Alawite government has control over a majority Sunni population. Furthermore, Syria has a strategic location, and alliances with Iran and the radical Hamas and Hezbollah

movements. If the regime were to collapse, it could lead to a civil war that would spread throughout the region, including Lebanon, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia.

Reporters have pointed out that the Western powers, including the United States, have offered a tempered response to the bloodshed in Syria, the latest Arab country to be swept up in the tumult in the Middle East. For example, hundreds of people were detained recently as the violent crackdown of government military forces swept through towns and villages all over the country, and raided homes in search of those who may have participated in the protests. Yet, there has been no call for Bashar al-Assad to step aside. One analyst describes Syria as the Middle East equivalent of a bank that's too big to fail. The spillover effect is difficult to contemplate.

Little is known about what could happen next if Assad is forced to resign. Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya were faced with much uncertainty when their regimes fell, but in each case the army asserted its independence and seized power to oversee the transition. In Syria, however, the army is tightly bound to Assad's Alawite Shiite government. The fall of the regime could lead to its disintegration, and set the stage for the majority Sunni to seek revenge on a minority that has asserted their own interests. Thus a struggle for control of Syria would thus be ignited.

THE DESIRE OF ALL NATIONS

Despite the tumult in the Middle East at this time, we rejoice in the knowledge that our loving Heavenly Father has all things under the control of

his mighty hand. As we witness the tumultuous winds gathering, let us continue to rejoice in the prophetic words of Haggai, who wrote concerning the wonderful promises of God, “Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land; And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the LORD of hosts.”—Hag. 2:6,7

When the shaking work will have accomplished its purpose under the mighty hand of God, the nations will be humbled, “Thou shalt bring down the noise of strangers, as the heat in a dry place; even the heat with the shadow of a cloud: the branch of the terrible ones shall be brought low.”—Isa. 25:5

Christ’s kingdom will establish true righteousness over all the earth. Then will blessings of life be made available for all who will obey the law of God. “In this mountain shall the LORD of hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined. And he will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the vail that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from off all faces; and the rebuke of his people shall he take away from off all the earth: for the LORD hath spoken it. And it shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us: this is the LORD; we have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”—vss. 6-9 ■