

Turmoil in the Mideast

***“Men’s hearts
failing them for
fear, and for
looking after those
things which are
coming on the
earth: for the
powers of heaven
shall be shaken.”***

—Luke 21:26

THESE PROPHETIC WORDS, which mark the closing features of this present Gospel Age, were spoken by our Lord Jesus to his followers when his earthly ministry was coming to a close. He would soon give his life as a sacrifice for the poor sin-sick human family that would be manifest to all during his future kingdom over the earth.

HEARTS OF FEAR

As we contemplate the Master’s predictions, we see evidence in every quarter of earth’s present social, financial, political, and ecclesiastical systems that we are now living in this foretold time. An awakening world of discontents has created a rising tide of violence, evil, and corruption that has become commonplace. The hearts of the world’s statesmen and religious leaders are failing them for fear as they consider a bleak and uncertain

future and seek answers to the multitude of perplexing problems that confront them. As the Prophet Ezekiel had written many centuries ago, “All hands shall be feeble, and all knees shall be weak as water.”—Ezek. 7:17

ONE SMALL SPARK

In the closing weeks of December, 2010, a relatively insignificant event touched off the present Mideast crisis, and it became fully ignited during the first weeks of the new year 2011. The incident took place in an unlikely small Tunisian town called Sidi Bouzid. This is a dusty, provincial community in the remote interior of Tunisia where groups of young unemployed men loiter on the sidewalks and in cafes. It is far from the glittering coastal resort towns located along the Mediterranean Sea that attract large numbers of tourists every year. It is also several hours drive by car from the nation’s capital city, Tunis.

It was in Sidi Bouzid that a young street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi, set himself on fire to protest the confiscation of his fruit and vegetable cart because he had not obtained a permit to sell his produce. He also suffered harassment and humiliation at the hands of the local municipal officials when he had gone to retrieve his wares. He died a few days later from the extensive burns that he had suffered.

UNRESOLVED ISSUES

Except for the meager protests of a few close friends whose outrage was quickly crushed by the Tunisian state police, Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation and subsequent death might have gone

unnoticed as the very epicenter of a social quake that would soon rock the entire Arab world. However, the incident soon sparked deadly demonstrations and riots throughout Tunisia's interior, and then spread to the capital city, Tunis. Large numbers of youth protested the many unresolved social and political issues. The government's violent crack-down, which was broadcast through the social media, only served to fuel further public outrage. The intensified anger and violence of the uprising led to the ultimate collapse of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's regime, and forced him to step down on January 14, 2011, after 23 years as one of the Arab world's strongest autocrats.

THE WIDENING CONFLICT

The spark that was touched off in Tunisia inspired and galvanized countless numbers of people to protest unresolved issues in other regimes, and they quickly turned their attention to Egypt and the Mubarak regime. Egypt is the region's largest and most important state, and its government was considered to be stable and firmly entrenched. The Suez Canal is located within its borders, one of the world's most important waterways. It was also a major ally of the United States and had kept the peace with its neighbor Israel during the past thirty years.

The Egyptian revolt began in the city of El Mahalla El Kubba where labor unrest had long been prevalent in the pollution-ridden textile industry. The local shops sell their merchandise, including brightly colored blankets and quilts, bolts of striped cloth, wedding dresses, and other products that

are produced in the city's mills and factories. The movement's leaders also had a previous history of resisting harassment and enduring time in the local jails. They had called for improved living standards when violence erupted in the area in 2008.

NEW DEMANDS

Now the protestors were demanding change, and a significant incident to the ruling regime's symbol of power took place when a giant portrait of President Mubarak was torn down and stomped on in the central square of the city. This was an unheard of event because respect for the ruling leader of the country is enforced by a widespread security network. However, this uprising was the first to break the barrier of fear that was prevalent all over Egypt, and the country would never be the same again. Although the more established opposition groups moved cautiously in the wake of the recent Tunisian revolt, the youth movement urged the residents of Cairo to gather in the streets. Thus the revolt was centered in Tahrir Square, where thousands of people gathered to demand the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak, who was forced to resign after only 18 days. He had been Egypt's leader for thirty years. The success of this revolt began a far-reaching and growing movement of protest that quickly spread to Yemen, Bahrain, Jordan and other nations beyond.

YOUTH AND TECHNOLOGY

Analysts and news reporters point out that the violent tensions that have been let loose in the Middle East encompass two very powerful forces

that will inevitably spread to other nations in the region, and are unlikely to disappear before accomplishing their ultimate goal of removing the long-entrenched and corrupt power regimes. These two powerful forces are youth and technology.

Youth is one of the underlying forces in the crisis that focuses on the growing number of people under 30 years of age. This group now represents 60% of the population in some of the main areas of conflict, and these young people have aspirations that they want to have fulfilled. However, these demands are readily dismissed by the regimes as being a product of Western interference and greed. This huge mass of protesting youth now poses a growing and very serious threat to the stability of all the Middle Eastern regimes as well as to the United States and other Western powers. The protestors demand to be treated like equal citizens within their respective societies and not as mere subjects.

SURVEY RESULTS

In a recent survey of Middle Eastern youth, it was learned that the fundamental concerns of the young people throughout the area were the need for well-paying jobs, the desire to have a well-run modern society and the ability to live in freedom from oppression and want. Without economic growth and the means to fuel that growth, young men especially are denied the ability to obtain gainful employment and to realize a sense of dignity. In the Middle Eastern countries where the growth in youth population is said to be the largest of any area of the world, the lack of these basic desires has been a factor and will lead to further discontent. The

survey noted that from 1970 to 2007, 80% of all outbreaks of conflict occurred in regions where 60% or more of the population was younger than 30 years of age.

Journalists, politicians, and scholars have all noted the Middle East's youth problem, but the region's governments have done little to address it. It is estimated that unemployment within this vast and growing segment of the population remains at close to 25%. The oil boom has helped some countries pay their people in various ways, but more than half of those who live in the Middle East are in lands that do not produce oil. Moreover, oil has proven to be a curse even in the rich countries where armies of foreigners do all the work and where regimes continue to offer their people little as long as they obey their rules. In light of recent developments, Kuwait and Bahrain have both decided to give all of their citizens bonuses this year (\$3,000 in Kuwait, \$2,700 in Bahrain). However, these payments are a reminder that in the Middle East, there are two modes of control: mass repression and mass bribery.

TECHNOLOGY

Across the Arab world, people living under the thumb of repressive leaders are rising up against the rulers who once seemed omnipotent. They are using the Internet to network and to spread the word. They are watching themselves on satellite television, and are drawing strength from the energy shown by the young people who have been discarded and dismissed by their governments. It is a contagious spirit.

This is a population that is increasingly aware, informed, and connected. Technology based on satellite television, computers, mobile phones, and the Internet has played a powerful role in informing, educating, and connecting especially the young people throughout the Middle East. Such technological advances serve to empower individuals, while at the same time disarming the state. In former times, information technology favored those who were in power. For example, revolutionaries tried to take over the radio stations back in the 1930s in an effort to thwart the government propaganda that was broadcast to the public. Today's technologies are networks in which everyone is connected but no one is in control. This is a powerful tool that may be used against anyone who attempts to suppress information.

LIBYA

The revolt in Libya was inspired by the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, and began as a series of protests and confrontations against the government and its de facto leader Muammar al-Gaddafi. Protests were centered in Libya's two largest cities, the capital of Tripoli in the west and Benghazi in the east. The unrest quickly spread to other parts of the country where demonstrators, with some help from local police and defecting military units have taken control.

Muammar al-Gaddafi has ruled Libya since overthrowing the monarchy in 1969, which makes him the world's longest ruling non-royal head of state. His government reacted with extreme force against the protestors by sending elite troops and

mercenaries to curb the conflict. At the time of this writing, the Libyan Air Force has been sent to attack civilians. This marks the government's crack-down as the bloodiest conflict in recent history, and has drawn international condemnation against Libya. Several Libyan officials have stepped down while others have distanced themselves from Gaddafi, accusing him of genocide and crimes against humanity in his attacks against his own people.

At this time, Muammar Gaddafi and his supporters are in two principal fortified compounds in Tripoli, the capital city of Libya. Government mercenaries are on patrol to shoot anyone who is found on the streets, and witnesses say that bodies are scattered throughout the city. In a recent speech Gaddafi's son said that he and his father "will fight until the last drop of blood." There are reports of ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity committed by government forces against peaceful protesters. It is apparent that Gaddafi is not going to relinquish his position of power over Libya without using every means at his disposal to maintain it, even to the point of massacring his own people.

WINDS OF CHANGE

Only a few weeks after the world watched Tunisia celebrate the collapse of the country's strong-armed ruler, the scene in Cairo and the end of President Hosni Mubarak was an even greater display of the youth-driven revolt. This has raised serious questions concerning the long-term stability of other Western-allied regimes across the Middle East. At the time of this writing, reverberations are already being felt in significant ways.

The impact has already been noted in reforms that are now forthcoming. In Saudi Arabia, another traditional cornerstone of United States interests in the Mideast, opposition activists sent a letter to King Abdullah, who had been one of Mubarak's staunchest supporters before his forced resignation. The letter asked the Saudi king for the right to form a new political party. This was a direct challenge to the absolute power of the ruling dynasty.

Jordan's new Prime Minister, Marouf Bakhit, promised to continue the political reforms demanded by protestors who had forced King Abdullah II to reshuffle his cabinet. In Yemen, another key United States ally for more than three decades, President Ali Abdullah Saleh was forced to bow to protestors' demands, and announced that he would not seek reelection in 2013, nor would he attempt to pass power on to his son.

Pressure is also mounting in the Gulf kingdom of Bahrain, home to the United States Navy's 5th Fleet. This is the most politically divided country in the region where Shiites face allegedly second-class status under continuing Sunni rulership. In the summer of 2010, the nation was torn by clashes and riots after a wave of arrests against perceived Shiite dissidents. In light of Mubarak's resignation, Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa granted each Bahraini family the equivalent of approximately \$2,700 in a bid to calm tensions.

Kuwait is another ally with key United States military bases and is an important way station for the United States military withdrawal from Iraq. It is another Gulf nation with serious political opposition, and has outlawed all gatherings, rallies and

marches after Friday prayers. The country's citizens were told that everybody should put the interests of the homeland above all other considerations. This indicates how close any unrest in the region comes to United States military and political bulwarks, and is also seen as a critical front-line alignment against Iran.

THE MIDEAST'S FUTURE

The Middle East is facing an uncertain future, with the possibility of further revolution and anarchy. Governments across the region are scrambling to address long-standing political concessions for their people, giving out financial benefits and deploying riot police in an attempt to ease further instability and uncertainty. Protestors from Morocco to Iran are setting aside the traditional religious and geopolitical differences that may divide them, in order to confront what is seen as a common enemy of the people. Their unresolved issues include widespread corruption, police violence, political repression, and the vast gaps in the distribution of wealth. Stability cannot be realized until these issues are addressed and acted upon. At the time of this writing, it is too early to predict the outcome of these revolts and others that will no doubt follow.

ISRAEL'S NEIGHBORS

With the recent violent protest movements in the Middle East, the nation of Israel is being increasingly surrounded by hostile neighbors, and there is growing fear that the toppled regimes may ultimately be dominated by Islamic extremists groups.

The long-held peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan are now uncertain, and many are asking

whether there will ever be a degree of stability that would be acceptable to Israel's security. They envision Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, even if it remains a minority party, as pressing for closer ties and cooperation with the Palestinians and Hamas, which is the Palestinian branch of the Brotherhood.

Any new form of government in Egypt is likely to have a more open policy toward the Palestinian cause with promises of economic and other kinds of aid. As of this writing, Egypt has already reopened its border crossing with the Hamas dominated Gaza region, and the Egyptian army is now allowing Iran's warships to pass through the Suez Canal. This is viewed by Israel as a direct provocation which has not been seen since the Iranian revolution in 1979, when the Shah's monarchy was overthrown and replaced by the Islamic Republic of Iran under Ayatollah Khomeini.

Not having solved the Israeli-Palestinian issue will no doubt complicate relations between the newly emerging Arab governments and their peoples on one side, and the Western nations hope for stability on the other. Israel fears that their country will be encircled by Islamic extremists supported by Iran. They also fear that Israel's partners in checking Iran's nuclear ambitions are also being threatened. Most of Israel's people prefer a Gaza that is dependent on Egypt, rather than on Iran.

TAKING CRAFTY COUNSEL

The Scriptures speak of the time when Israel's neighbors will take "crafty counsel" and resolve with one consent to destroy it as a nation. "Lo, thine enemies make a tumult: and they that hate

thee have lifted up the head. They have taken crafty counsel against thy people, and consulted against thy hidden ones. They have said, Come, and let us cut them off from being a nation; that the name of Israel may be no more in remembrance. For they have consulted together with one consent: they are confederate against thee.”—Ps. 83:2-5

God’s Prophet Jeremiah also pointed to the time when the nation of Israel would stand alone because all of her allies have abandoned her. “She weepeth sore in the night, and her tears are on her cheeks: among all her lovers she hath none to comfort her: all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they are become her enemies.”—Lam. 1:2

A BURDENSOME STONE

We learn from the Scriptures that Israel’s enemies will take counsel in an attempt to destroy her as a nation, but that they will not succeed in their determination to do so. Speaking through the Prophet Zechariah, God said, “Behold, I will make Jerusalem a cup of trembling unto all the people round about, when they shall be in the siege both against Judah and against Jerusalem. And in that day will I make Jerusalem a burdensome stone for all people: all that burden themselves with it shall be cut in pieces, though all the people of the earth be gathered together against it.”—Zech. 12:2,3

The prophet assures that God’s providence will surely be with Israel. We read, “I will gather all nations against Jerusalem to battle; and the city shall be taken, and the houses rifled, and the women ravished; and half of the city shall go forth into captivity, and the residue of the people shall not be

cut off from the city. Then shall the LORD go forth, and fight against those nations, as when he fought in the day of battle.”—Zech. 14:2,3

GOD'S POWER TO BE MANIFEST

It was long ago prophesied that the nation of Israel would be threatened with hostile neighbors at the end of this present Gospel Age, and with no one to lend her support. However, our loving Heavenly Father will manifest his mighty power against those people that take counsel to destroy the nation of Israel.

There is increasing evidence that we are now living in the final years of this present Gospel Age. As we look into the future, we may do so with full assurance of faith that God will save the nation of Israel from destruction and total annihilation at the hands of its enemies. Their deliverance will open the eyes of Israel's blinded people as well as the world of mankind.

“Thus saith the LORD; We have heard a voice of trembling, of fear, and not of peace. Ask ye now, and see whether a man doth travail with child? wherefore do I see every man with his hands on his loins, as a woman in travail, and all faces are turned into paleness? Alas! for that day is great, so that none is like it: it is even the time of Jacob's trouble; but he shall be saved out of it.”—Jer. 30:5-7 ■

“With my soul have I desired thee in the night; yea, with my spirit within me will I seek thee early: for when thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness.”

—Isaiah 26:9

“The original plan of God was to have a perfect, beautiful earth, comfortably filled with perfect, beautiful human beings. . . . This will indeed come to pass, despite Satan’s interference, and the intervening 6,000 years of the permission of evil. In Revelation, the closing book of the Bible, we see that God’s purposes will be certainly accomplished by the end of the kingdom age. The lesson of good and evil will have been learned, Satan destroyed and all who keep the righteous commandments of God will have the right “to eat the fruit from the tree of life,” and live forever. The curse of death will be forever removed.—Rev. 21:4; 22:3,14,17

—The Golden Thread