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Siege of the Cairo embassy; ADRIAN BLOMFIELD 'Israelis rescued by commandos after mob storms compound Envoys flee Egypt as assault triggers new crisis in Middle East

ADRIAN BLOMFIELD Middle East Correspondent and HUGH MILES in Cairo; ADRIAN BLOMFIELD; HUGH MILES

EGYPTIAN commandos stormed the Israeli embassy in Cairo yesterday to rescue six security staff trapped by a mob that had launched a spectacular assault on the building under the noses of Egypt's security forces.

The dramatic operation in the early hours came after Israeli officials appealed for US intervention in a series of frantic telephone calls made as thousands of angry protesters laid siege to the mission.

Baying their hatred of Israel, the mob broke through the building's defences, smashing down a perimeter wall with sledgehammers before marauding through the consular section of the embassy, destroying papers and smashing windows.

The attack, which followed days of protests after Israeli troops chasing suspected militants accidentally shot dead at least three Egyptian border guards last month, prompted the swift evacuation of all but one of the embassy's staff. The deputy ambassador volunteered to stay behind as Israel's sole diplomat in Egypt. The ambassador, Yitzhak Levanon, his colleagues and their families were flown out of the country in two Israeli military aircraft hastily sent to Cairo's international airport.

They left not just the ruins of Israel's oldest embassy in the Arab world, but a diplomatic crisis that leaves the Middle East facing renewed uncertainty.

Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, was swift to express his outrage, warning Egypt that the raid had severely jeopardised relations between the two countries. "Egypt must not ignore the severe injury to the fabric of peace with Israel and such a blatant violation of international laws," Mr Netanyahu said through a spokesman.

But as Israel seethed, there was also growing concern over its increasingly precarious position in the region. The attack was a stark illustration of Israel's growing isolation in the

Middle East following the Arab Spring, a phenomenon that has been the subject of intense suspicion within Mr Netanyahu's Right-wing government.

Senior Israeli officials have long feared that the Arab uprisings will see dictators whose pragmatism forced them to keep the peace supplanted by a new generation of leaders who have no choice but to reflect the popular mood, which is often hostile to Israel. Yesterday's incident will have convinced many in Israel that such pessimism is not misplaced.

Mr Netanyahu's government is also still reeling after a dispute with Turkey descended into open acrimony earlier this month, resulting in the expulsion of Israel's ambassador to Ankara and a downgrading of diplomatic relations.

The evacuation of its embassy staff from Cairo means that Israel no longer has top-level diplomatic representation in either Egypt or Turkey, the two states in the region whose friendship, however strained, is considered of fundamental strategic importance to its security.

There was measured relief, however, that the crisis did not unfold in the manner that some in the Israeli government feared. One Israeli official admitted that there had been grave concerns of a reprise of the Iranian hostage crisis of 1979, when a mob burst into the US embassy in Tehran after the country's revolution against the Shah and held 52 American diplomats captive for 444 days.

Such thinking, too, is a reflection of the conviction in some Israeli circles that Egypt is destined to follow Iran in becoming an Islamist state.

When the hostage crisis unfolded in Iran, a moderate interim government was in power, but it was helpless in the face of the mob that had taken over the embassy and eventually gave way to Ayatollah Khomeini's theocracy. "There are plenty of parallels," the official said. "The situation in Cairo was cause for genuine and serious alarm."

However, Egypt's transitional military leadership was able to respond far more robustly than the Iranians did in 1979. But for several hours, the six Israelis inside the embassy - all of them security guards with diplomatic credentials - had genuine reason to fear for their lives, according to Israeli officials.

As the crisis unfolded on Friday evening, most of the embassy's staff were at home, partly because they had been ordered to keep a low profile after previous protests outside the mission and also because of unrest in the city that day.

The six security guards were responsible for protecting the building. As the mob advanced, they were forced to abandon the consular wing of the embassy and retreat to its secure section.

Mr Netanyahu rang the men three times as the assault continued, urging them to stand firm and promising that help was on its way. As the rest of Israel sat down to Sabbath dinners, his government went into emergency mode. Ehud Barak, the defence minister, placed urgent calls to Leon Panetta, his US counterpart, and to Dennis Ross, President Barack

Obama's closest Middle East adviser.

Hillary Clinton, the US secretary of state, then phoned Mohammed Kamel Amr, the Egyptian foreign minister, to demand that his military superiors met their obligations under the Vienna Convention to protect diplomatic property and personnel.

The resulting rescue mission came just in time. One security guard had reportedly been beaten up, while the others were taking shelter behind the last locked door that stood between them and the mob.

Mr Netanyahu praised Egypt for rescuing the men. "The mob attack on the Israeli embassy is a serious incident, but could have been worse had the rioters managed to get through the last door and hurt our people," he said. "The fact that the Egyptian authorities acted with determination and rescued our people should be noted."

But for Mr Netanyahu and his government, many questions remain unanswered, ones that could exacerbate an already grave crisis. Most pertinent is how the mob was able to break into the embassy unchallenged.

For much of the day, Cairo had been stirred by unrest after protests in Tahrir Square, called to demand an end to military trials of civilians who have been jailed in their hundreds for taking part in demonstrations or criticising army chiefs. Similar protests in recent months have usually been peaceful, but Friday's demonstrations involved a group of hardcore football fans known as ultras, who had taken to the streets in anger over a brawl with police after a match earlier in the week.

These fans, rather than Islamists, are thought to have been behind the violence, leading the initial charge to demolish the wall the authorities had built around the embassy after protests against Israel erupted last month. As they attached ropes to cars to pull away sections of the wall, the security forces stood by.

"I got to the embassy at about eight o'clock yesterday evening by which time the protesters had already broken down the wall outside," said Nora Chalaby, an Egyptian activist. "It was completely destroyed. I saw people climbing on the remains of it and smashing it with hammers. Only the army were there at that time - no police - and they just sat outside without getting involved."

Riot police arrived and fired tear gas and rubber bullets at the mob. At least three people were reportedly killed.

The interim government raised tensions in Cairo yesterday by announcing that it would use the emergency laws against which many of the demonstrators had been protesting to deal with those involved.

Osama Hassan Heikal, the information minister, said those involved would be sent to the emergency state security court and added: "It is clear that the behaviour of some threatens the Egyptian revolution."

The army's earlier inaction could have been the result of the security forces being overwhelmed or because of a reluctance to use live ammunition.

Soldiers similarly stood by during the protests that unseated Hosni Mubarak, the ousted president, in February.

But there was also speculation in Israel and Egypt that the military authorities had allowed the violence to go unchecked, initially at least, in order to justify a powerful political role for the army when the transition to civilian rule is completed at the end of the year.

The future of the army, which has dominated Egypt since Gamel Abdel Nasser came to power in a coup in 1956 and enjoys many financial privileges, is in doubt as a result of a liberal campaign to minimise military influence in politics.

Perhaps seeking to assuage Israeli anger, Essam Sharaf, Egypt's interim civilian prime minister, offered the ruling military council his resignation yesterday, but was refused. He also declared a state of alert.

For all the acrimony, neither Israel nor Egypt's military leaders want a total collapse in relations. The Camp David accords of 1978, which resulted in Israel's first peace treaty with an Arab state, has served both countries well.

Egypt regained the Sinai peninsula, which it lost in the Six Day War of 1967, as well as nearly £1 billion a year in military aid from the US, while Israel achieved peace with the Arab world's most populous state and a more secure southern frontier.

But the peace deal has always been unpopular with a significant section of Egyptian society, angered by the perceived injustice of Israel's occupation of Palestinian land and the view that it remains an interloper on Arab soil.

Worryingly for Israel, the assault on the embassy appears popular among many Egyptians. Anti-Israeli sentiment has only grown since the three border shootings.

That incident also caused anger towards Egypt's military rulers, whose response to Israel was seen as being in the same cowardly vein as Mr Mubarak before them. This is perhaps of gravest concern for Israel. Following the Arab Spring, the Middle East's new leaders realise that they will have to take a more populist line, or risk being ousted by people revelling in a feeling of empowerment.

Popular sentiment against Israel is only likely to rise in the near future.

Over the next fortnight, the Palestinian Authority is expected to place a bid for statehood before the United Nations, focusing regional sympathy once more on its struggle against Israel.

Street protests against the occupation could again break out in the West Bank.

If Israel were to respond with force, outrage across the Middle East would almost certainly be galvanised. Already diplomatically weakened in the region, Israel's sense of isolation and vulnerability could become as marked as at any time in the past 30 years.

Last night large crowds were again gathering outside the Israeli embassy and outside the general prosecutor's office where the detainees were believed to be held. "Egypt must not ignore the severe injury to the fabric of peace with Israel

Security forces fired tear gas at the mob and commandos were forced to storm the embassy Egyptians demolish a

wall around the Israeli embassy and climb inside to ransack the building under the noses of security forces.
Thousands took to the streets for anti-Israel protests

