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Article 1.

The Guardian

**Assad knows that he can kill civilians with virtual impunity**

Ian Black

May 29, 2012 -- Expressions of outrage over the massacre at Houla in Syria echoed around the world over the weekend. From Hillary Clinton in Washington, to William Hague in London, and the UN security council in New York, and of course from Bashar al-Assad's Syrian opponents, the words were powerful and condemnatory - commensurate with the slaughter of innocents, including 32 children.

But words are the easy part. And words can be qualified and mislead. Russia, Assad's most loyal ally, signed up to the UN statement (which notably failed to ascribe blame), while its deputy ambassador quickly added that the circumstances of the carnage were "murky". Sergei Lavrov, its foreign minister, was also trying to sound even-handed when he met Hague in Moscow. Syria itself, defiant as ever, denied responsibility for the "terrorist massacre" and complained of a "tsunami" of abuse, as if it were the principal victim.

Agreeing a coherent and effective international response to the bloodiest crisis of the Arab spring is looking more rather than less difficult, despite levels of cruelty and depravity that will surely rank Houla alongside infamous killing grounds in conflicts elsewhere.

Responses so far suggest more of what has been tried and found wanting over the last 14 months: on top of a non-binding UN statement, there is talk of yet more EU sanctions; another meeting of the large and unwieldy Friends of Syria group; a frosty few minutes at the Foreign Office for the Syrian charge d'affaires in London.

Two encounters might, just, make a difference: Kofi Annan, below, is meeting Assad today to discuss what remains of the peace plan that bears his name. Six weeks on, the ceasefire remains a fantasy. Assad has yet to pull his forces out of towns, let alone launch a dialogue with the opposition. Armed actions by the rebels of the Free Syrian Army and suicide bombings that have been blamed (though far from definitively) on al-Qaida or other jihadi groups have made that even harder.

Hague, meeting Lavrov, was seeking to persuade the Russians, in effect, to stop backing Syria. But there was no sign that Lavrov will waive his veto and sign up to what the British call the "accountability track" - setting in motion moves to refer Syria to the international criminal court for war crimes. And anyway, would it make any difference? It didn't affect the Libyan regime at all last year.

Still, with evidence that the Syrian army deployed tanks and artillery against Houla - and that a Russian freighter docked in Tartous on Saturday, bringing in further supplies of weapons - there might be some discomfort that could be leveraged into greater pressure on Damascus.

Annan and Hague are both exploring whether the "Syrian-led political dialogue" element of the UN/Arab League plan could be merged into a more explicit scheme for transition, borrowing the negotiated Arab-backed model that led to Yemen's Ali Abdullah Saleh stepping down - albeit while leaving much of his regime intact.

US officials talked up this option but it is hard to see why its chances should be any better now than before.

Hanging over the whole bleak story is this unchanging truth: last year's Arab-backed Nato intervention in Libya will not be replayed in Syria.

Every idea that has been suggested to help the opposition and weaken the Damascus regime - for example humanitarian corridors, no-kill zones, safe areas or no-fly zones - would all require offensive military operations.

Those are just not on the cards. Assad knows that.

It is a cruel irony of the Syrian crisis that the world knows a lot about what is happening. In the age of YouTube and Twitter no one can claim ignorance as they did when Assad Sr sent tanks into Hama in 1982. But knowledge turns out to make no difference.

Syria in 2012 is looking more and more like Bosnia 20 years ago: efforts by the international community to mitigate the conflict either have little effect or actually make it worse.

If 300 UN observers have proved ineffective, would 10 times that number be any better? Will Houla prove to be a defining moment? The bitter truth is there may be many more such atrocities before anything much changes.

Article 2.

The Financial Times

## **For Syria, diplomacy still eats bombs**

May 28, 2012 -- Is this the moment when the world moves from “we can’t do anything” to “we have to do something”? The shock of the massacre of more than 100 people in the Syrian town of Houla, accompanied by horrifying pictures of dead children, is reminiscent of the impact of the shelling of Sarajevo market in 1994. The next day, the UN secretary-general called for air strikes on Serb positions surrounding Sarajevo. Advocates of military intervention in Syria cite Bosnia as a precedent and a warning. They point out that the world hung back for years in Bosnia, even after the Sarajevo market killings, while thousands died. Yet military intervention, when it eventually came, was surprisingly effective. People were left rueing the fact that outsiders had not been involved earlier. The pressure for military intervention in Syria will increase dramatically this week – and understandably so. Yet this is still not the time for western bombers to take to the skies. Savage repression by a government is not enough, on its own, to justify foreign military intervention. If it was, Nato would have intervened when Russia was laying waste to Chechnya in the 1990s, or when the Sri Lankan government was finishing off the Tamil Tigers in 2009, with scant regard for civilian casualties. Moral outrage is just the starting point. A decision about outside intervention is, inevitably, also a political and prudential calculation. In Syria, neither politics nor prudence yet allow for military action. After the experience of Iraq, the US and the UK are rightly very wary of intervening anywhere, without clear UN authorisation. And after the experience of Libya, the Russians are very wary of agreeing to any such UN resolution – for fear it would be stretched well beyond its original meaning. The Russians also clearly have much less noble motives than the scrupulous observation of international law. The parallel with Chechnya and the possible precedents for the future will also be in their minds. President Vladimir Putin, hypersensitive about any reminder of Russia’s declining global reach, is also clearly determined to preserve his country’s strategic relationship with Syria. It is possible that even the chilly nationalists in the Kremlin may be swayed by the horrific events in Houla. But the odds are that they will continue to oppose any UN resolution that might open the way to military action.

Some will argue that this just proves the UN is morally bankrupt and deserves to be ignored. Certainly, a UN Security Council that gives veto rights to Russia and China cannot be considered to be the last word on human rights. But that is not the point. Security Council approval is important not for moral reasons but because it signals that a potentially dangerous division of opinion between the world's major powers has been avoided. Intervening in Syria without the protection of an international consensus would be particularly risky, since the country lies in the middle of a region in flames.

The threat of fanning regional and great power conflicts is not the only reason to hesitate before starting the engines on Nato warplanes. Outside intervention involves the certainty of further deaths – but this time inflicted and sustained by western forces, not the Assad regime. Sending in the bombers and drones would also be enormously costly and destabilising, at a time when western economies are at great risk.

Trying to force the Assads out of power at the point of a gun would also heighten the risk that the transfer of power in Syria would be accompanied by sectarian killings. Syria's divided ethnic make-up ensures that there is a strong possibility that both Alawites and Christians will suffer badly after the fall of the Assad government. The brutality that the regime has used to cling on to power makes revenge attacks even more likely.

Worrying about future atrocities in Syria might seem a little beside the point when there are real atrocities happening right now. Outside pressure of some sort is clearly urgently needed. The well-trodden path of sanctions will doubtless be used once again. But a more promising non-violent path is offered by diplomacy. The Annan plan for a ceasefire and a pullback of troops has failed. A more ambitious diplomatic effort is needed that aims not just for a ceasefire but actually to lever the Assads out of power.

The Obama administration is looking at the precedent of the recent negotiated settlement in Yemen, in which President Ali Abdullah Saleh was persuaded to hand over power to his deputy. This is no panacea, since Yemen remains a violent and unstable place. But a negotiated transition in Syria would clearly be preferable to the huge risks involved in outside military intervention.

If the US and the Syrian opposition were to give Russia explicit guarantees that its security interests would be respected in post-Assad Syria, the

Russians might just be persuaded to join a diplomatic push to winkle the Assads out of power. The ruling family is simply the figurehead for a network of military, ethnic, party and business interests that is profoundly threatened by the Syrian uprising. That is why any negotiated transition would have to involve members of the existing regime in a transitional administration, before the holding of free elections.

Such an outcome is simultaneously hard to achieve and distasteful. But it is still worth striving for as the best realistic hope of stopping the killing in Syria.

Article 3.

Asharq Al- Awsat

## **Shafiq and the spectre of Mubarak**

Abdul Rahman Al-Rashed

28 May 2012 -- Why are the Egyptian people, or at least some of them, shocked by General Ahmed Shafiq's first-round success in the presidential elections, and the fact that he may be chosen as the next president of Egypt in two weeks?

They are shocked because this is like Hosni Mubarak returning to the presidency, or one of Gaddafi's children taking power in Libya, or the Syrian revolutionaries accepting Maher al-Assad – the brother of current president Bashar al-Assad – as the next president. Shafiq's victory in the first-round of the elections, practically speaking, represents a defeat for the revolutionaries, but this is not necessarily a defeat for the revolution. Is his victory a frank message from a broad section of the Egyptian people to the effect that they reject the new faces on the political scene? Or is this evidence that the powers of old have utilized their charisma, bringing together their ranks, in order to win the election battle? In Eastern Europe, including even Russia, some corrective revolutions have occurred to return old forces back to power. Although Communism collapsed, some communists survived, and what is Putin other than a member of the new generation of the old Soviet system, particularly as he was a member of the KGB? He was preceded by Boris Yeltsin, the first president of the Russian Federation, who had been a 30-year member of the Communist Party.

Shafiq's victory does not mean the return of the Mubarak regime at all, nor will Shafiq be a weak president, fearing the protests of the youth. Whereas if the Muslim Brotherhood win, this means that the Brotherhood will rule Egypt completely, from the presidency to the parliament.

The most dangerous thing that the youth are facing is not the old regime conspiring against them, nor the hegemony of the Muslim Brotherhood; rather the youth's greatest enemy is their own ignorance of the ABCs of the political process, and this is the sole reason why they lost the majority of the popular support they garnered following their quick and astonishing ousting of the Mubarak regime.

In reality, there is nothing surprising about what we are seeing today; there were five heavy-weight candidates, two of whom emerged victorious, whilst despite the media mobilization in the country half of all eligible Egyptian voters failed to go to the polls, as was the case with the parliamentary elections.

Had the elections taking place quickly after the revolution – say in September, at the latest – perhaps the results would have been in the youth's favor. The irony is that this is what Mubarak himself had proposed as plans for his withdrawal from power. The idea of early elections was a realistic proposition for those who understand the political mechanism in a large state like Egypt. The youth insisted on a range of demands, but elections and the presidency were not one of these. At a time when the post of president is the most important, leaving this vacant was the result of the conflict that has raged on the Egyptian political scene following the revolution. The presidential vacuum justified the military's administration of the country. The presidential vacuum justified the presence of the al-Ganzouri government to conduct business on an interim basis. The presidential vacuum brought about confrontations that were mostly, in essence, divisions over how to deal with crises, ranging from the Israeli embassy crisis to the Port Said disaster to the Abbasiya [prison] crisis. Dr. Mohamed ElBaradei, who won the confidence of the youth for a period of time, took part in the political battle from the beginning with the objective of putting an end to the presidency, and he failed because nobody understood the logic he was utilizing. He did not call for immediately presidential elections, but called for the establishment of a presidential council, which would include the major political forces, including the

youth, to rule the country for a period of two years. The Muslim Brotherhood were insistent upon early parliamentary elections because they – thanks to their political experience – were aware that they would have the best chance at these elections, as they had tens of thousands of political offices and activists already in place throughout the country. As for the youth, they enjoyed huge popularity but did not possess any headquarters, branches, funds, or political stars. In addition to this, the new constitution, which should have been drafted before anything else, as this document is the basis upon which the entire political process must be based, was postponed. This is something that was also in the interests of the Muslim Brotherhood, who emerged victorious during the legislative and parliamentary elections, particularly as everybody should be involved in the drafting of the new constitution, not just the election winners. This is precisely what Egyptian political thinker Dr. Abdel Monem Said asserted as he listened to the complaints and threats of one Egyptian youth during a political debate. He said “they are incapable of learning from their mistakes.” These Egyptian youth are angry following the outcome of the presidential elections because their political opponents were victorious and are now threatening to impose a state of instability on the country. Firstly, rejecting the election results is contrary to the concept of democracy which the youth took to the streets for the sake of, revolting against the Mubarak regime. Secondly, months of chaos and instability have shown that the general public are weary, and it is likely that many people voted for Shafiq precisely for this reason, namely in search of security and stability. There can be no doubt that the majority of Egyptian people were happy with the revolution and the promise of correcting the political process, uprooting corrupt individuals and institutions, and improving the living conditions of the Egyptian people. However fifteen months later, living conditions are worse than ever, whilst conflict between different political groups is on-going and the streets of Cairo have become the scene of confrontation and violence.

*Abdul Rahman Al-Rashed the general manager of Al -Arabiya television. He has been a guest on many TV current affairs programs. He is currently based in Dubai.*

# **Egypt's Presidential Choices: The Trouble with Democracy**

Abigail Hauslohner

May. 28, 2012 -- Cairo -- Not only did Egypt pull off its first democratic presidential election in the country's history last week, but it managed to make it a relatively clean vote. Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter told journalists in Cairo over the weekend that international monitors working for the Carter Center had noted minor violations during the election, but nothing so serious as to impact the result. Enthusiasm seemed high: Egypt's High Electoral Commission reported a relatively high turnout.

And yet, the results are not what anyone expected. Neither of the two initial frontrunners for the June 16 and 17 run-off vote qualified for that round of voting. Instead, the two men who are now expected to come out on top are the two most polarizing candidates on the ballot: the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsy, and ousted President Hosni Mubarak's former prime minister Ahmed Shafik. "It's a charade," laughs Adel al-Sobki, who owns a Cairo supermarket, and says he voted for the Arab nationalist candidate Hamdeen Sabbahi. "We're now stuck with either the old regime or the Muslim Brotherhood."

To Egypt's liberals and leftists, it's a nightmare scenario. In a race that involved 13 candidates, and five frontrunners — including three relative moderates, like Sabbahi — the country has wound up with two extremes to choose their next leader from. It's a reality that has left some Egyptians promising to boycott the June electoral finale, and others simply wondering: where did we go wrong?

Hassan Nafaa, a political scientist at Cairo University, has a couple of theories. And he says the biggest factor in Egypt's electoral outcome may be the failed strategies of the country's losing moderates and their supporters. Hamdeen Sabbahi and Abdel Moneim Aboul Futouh, an independent Islamist, may have been too similar to each other for either one to win, he argues. The two are expected to sweep third and fourth place respectively, but only Shafik and Morsy will proceed to the run-off. Both

Aboul Futouh and Sabbahi hold moderate political views, and were active participants in last year's uprising — factors that appeal to voters across the spectrum, from liberals to Islamists and socialists, and thus probably dissipating their support across the same range.

Other Egyptians voted for the popular, former Arab League chief Amr Moussa. But in the end, Egyptian moderates — perhaps a political force only as a combined mass — were too divided. "Had they coordinated and voted in one direction — either to support Aboul Futouh or Sabbahi — one of them would be in the run-off," says Nafaa. "There was a lack of coordination between the so-called revolutionary forces."

That lack of organization may have proven critical. When the high electoral commission announces the final results, Sabbahi and Aboul Futouh's campaigns are expecting to see numbers that reveal a tight race. But Morsy and Shafik were the only two candidates who have solid voting constituencies — a reality that most political analysts under-estimated going into the election. For Morsy, that was the Muslim Brotherhood, long the strongest opposition to Mubarak's rule, and in the aftermath of the uprising, Egypt's most organized political machine. The Brotherhood may be a minority among the country's 85 million people, but after competing in numerous parliamentary elections — including the sham votes under Mubarak — they know how to get voters to the polls. On election day their supporters pushed undecided Egyptians to the polls, and ran help tables to guide voters to their appropriate polling stations. Morsy's candidacy also appealed to the ultra-conservative Salafis, whose own candidate had been disqualified by the electoral commission ahead of the vote.

Analysts say Shafik, a former air force commander and Mubarak's last prime minister, had automatic backers too: the Egyptians who never supported the revolution to begin with as well as the country's powerful armed forces. Egyptians currently serving the military and police force are technically banned from casting votes, but some of Shafik's opposition allege that thousands of soldiers may have voted anyway, or at least used their clout to convince voters one way or the other. "The whole state apparatus was behind Shafik," says Nafaa. "Maybe there was no direct intervention, but all those who are enrolled in the army may have gotten directives to vote for him, and this is forbidden."

But there is no doubt that Shafik also struck a chord with millions of Egyptians who say they're fed up with a struggling economy and the plummeting public security since Mubarak's downfall. For many of the country's poor, Shafik's unapologetic attitude about his ties to the old regime seemed to promise a military toughness that would return security to the streets. To Egypt's Christian minority, and indeed many secularists fearful of an Islamist takeover, Shafik's hardline on the Brotherhood also harkened back to Mubarak's era, in which religious conservatives stayed in jail or under close watch by state security — never allowed to attain too much power or impose their will on the country's legal system.

It's that authoritarian image that has many moderate Egyptians in a dilemma two weeks ahead of the big decision. Will they use the country's first democratic presidential race to elect a man so similar to the one they ousted, or will they risk an Islamist government that may strive to write Egypt's soon-to-be drafted constitution in a far more conservative way and, thus, change their way of life?

The irony, many unhappy voters are quick to point out, is that the tough choice is unlikely to unite the moderates any more than the first round of voting did. Some say they're so dismayed by the options that they won't even bother to vote in the next round. Others simply disagree on which option is worse. "Shafik would be just like Mubarak, nothing more nothing less," says Magdy Mohamed, a small business owner. A Shafik win would wind back all of the democratic and judicial gains that Egyptians have accomplished in the past year and a half, he says. "They might even allow Mubarak to go free. Then the people will go to the streets, and we will demand our rights all over again," he adds. But Amr Shalabi, a university student who says he voted for Amr Moussa, sees it the other way around. "I have no choice now but to choose Shafik," he says. "We can't allow the Brotherhood to take power."

The next two weeks are likely to be tense as candidates square off in a fresh round of campaigning, and Egyptians debate the pros and cons of each. The Muslim Brotherhood has started holding talks with other political parties in an effort to rally a larger constituency that encompasses liberals, secularists and anti-military activists to take on Shafik. The group and its candidate, Morsy, have promised throughout the campaign to embrace policies that promote justice and equality for all of Egypt's

religious and ethnic groups, even if those policies are founded in Islamic law. But Nafaa says that inter-party talks may force them to make more concrete concessions on what their future government will look like and what kinds of articles wind up in the country's constitution. No matter. Whoever becomes Egypt's next president is sure to face plenty of opposition.

Article 5.

[Los Angeles Times](#)

## **Defeating jihad**

Dilip Hiro

May 29, 2012 -- If the 11-year war against jihadist terrorism is to succeed, then its leaders must change their approach. So far, the U.S. and its NATO allies have approached jihadist violence in Afghanistan and Pakistan as a single problem, to be met with a single strategy.

But success will require a more nuanced parsing of who is conducting jihad and why, because the jihadists are not a homogenous group.

An Arabic word, "jihad" has a broad range of meaning. It can refer to an individual Muslim's internal struggle to adhere more faithfully to the teachings of Islam or, at the other extreme, to a holy war waged against external forces threatening Islam.

In modern times, jihad has most often meant using violence against the regimes of Muslim leaders considered un-Islamic; and it has been waged with the goal of establishing a state administered according to sharia law. The jihadist agenda until quite recently was usually local.

This changed after the Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan in 1979. Pakistani-based leaders of an anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan invited militant Muslims from around the world to join their campaign. At that point, with support from the United States, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, jihadism went global.

The success of jihadists in forcing the Soviets to leave Afghanistan in 1989 led to the formation of Al Qaeda, which under the leadership of Osama bin Laden aimed to provide a global anchor to local jihads. During his 5-year-

long refuge in Afghanistan, Bin Laden befriended Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar, which led to Omar's adopting global jihad as his movement's ideological anchor. This lasted until Sept. 11, 2001.

Omar's support for Al Qaeda, and his harboring of Bin Laden, resulted in the overthrow of the Taliban by the U.S. and its allies. Since that time, chastened by the ongoing onslaught from U.S.-led NATO forces, Omar has reverted to a far more local agenda of jihad and has said repeatedly that if the Taliban regains power in Afghanistan, it would not allow foreign jihadist groups to operate there.

At the same time, Omar has also toned down his rhetoric against Afghan President Hamid Karzai, and the Taliban has reversed its earlier ban on photography and music, now using DVDs and music tapes as propaganda tools. These changes, along with the deep-seated resentment of the presence of U.S. troops most Afghans feel, have made many in the country more receptive to the Taliban.

Given all this, it would be hard to eliminate moderated Afghan jihadism that has merged with an ineradicable nationalism. Means must therefore be found to contain it.

That is why any resolution to the Afghan war must involve engagement with the Taliban and an attempt to draw them into a power-sharing deal in post-2014 Afghanistan. President Obama's recent signing of the U.S.-Afghan strategic partnership with the Karzai government should give the two presidents greater confidence in negotiations with the Taliban if and when these are resumed.

The challenge that the West faces in Pakistan requires a different approach. In Pakistan, Al Qaeda's leaders and their allies have established themselves in the semiautonomous tribal belt along the Afghan border, and they remain committed to pursuing global jihadism. Respect for Pakistan's sovereignty means that NATO troops do not have the same freedom to curb militant jihadism in its tribal belt that they have in Afghanistan.

Among other things, the fugitive Al Qaeda leaders in Pakistan inspired the rise of the Pakistani Taliban, which has targeted the state's security and intelligence agencies. Curbing these jihadists remains, exclusively, the task of the Pakistani government, whose troops are being trained in counterinsurgency tactics by American and British special forces. The

Pakistani Taliban are at one end of the jihadist spectrum, with the legal Islamist parties participating in electoral politics at the other.

In Pakistan, the roots of today's jihadism — militant and moderate, global and more locally focused — date to the rule of military dictator Gen. Zia ul-Haq from 1977 to 1988. A die-hard Islamist, he set out to Islamize Pakistani state and society. He made sure that school and university textbooks did not contravene Islamic precepts, and he introduced severe sharia punishments for such acts as drinking alcohol, stealing and adultery. This process was accompanied by relentless Islamic propaganda through local mosques and the state-owned broadcast media.

The generation of students who graduated under Zia's Islamized educational order is now ensconced in the middle and top levels of the security and intelligence services as well as in the civil service and judiciary.

Politically, in urban areas, Islamist groups have wide support among the lower, middle and working classes, who are apt to take to the streets on any issue related to Islam. Little wonder that whenever there is conflict between street power and electoral authority, the former trumps the latter. On the other hand, militant jihadists have made a grave mistake in their strategy. They have targeted not only non-Muslims and the symbols of Western thought in Pakistan but also the country's Shiite Muslims and Sufi followers of mystical Islam.

Though Pakistani jihadism is more difficult to curb because of its dual nature, militant jihadists have blundered by opening several fronts simultaneously. Doing so has made them vulnerable, and their opponents should exploit that weakness. So far the government has shied away from confronting radical jihadists, in part because many officials feel that a frontal assault on them could be counterproductive but also because of the sympathy they enjoy among some military and intelligence officers. Pakistan must end its equivocation and combine a forceful move against violent jihadists with a vigorous campaign of education, information and propaganda through state-run electronic media and through mosques run by moderate clerics.

*Dilip Hiro's latest book is "Apocalyptic Realm: Jihadists in South Asia."*

The Daily Beast

## **El Aviv: Beguiling bubble in Israel**

Etgar Keret

May 28, 2012 -- Most of the people in Tel Aviv weren't born there but escaped to it, and since there are so many things to escape from in this country, it's no wonder it has become so densely populated.

The average Tel Avivan, as I imagine him, was born somewhere else, went to the local high school there, was in the scouts, served in the Army—until at some point, he had enough and decided to move to the big city. The reasons that brought him to Tel Aviv were varied: maybe he came to find a drummer for his band; maybe he had a great idea for a startup and thought he could find a serious investor there; maybe it was because, where he comes from, they didn't like his hairdo or his nose piercing or his views about the occupation and he believed that in Tel Aviv no one would hassle him.

The average Tel Avivan fell madly in love with the city at first sight. Yes, it's true that the papers always described Tel Aviv as a bubble, and it was definitely nothing like the town he grew up in. But if Tel Aviv is a bubble, he thought, then he hoped it would keep growing and suck this whole damn country into it, along with the entire Middle East. Suddenly he's meeting open-minded people in the street. Suddenly he has an Arab neighbor, an ultra-Orthodox neighbor, a gay neighbor, and they all say hello to each other. That hello can sometimes be cold, but he'll take a cold hello any day over the curses and punches those people would probably be hurling at one another back in his hometown.

And at night, when he goes out for some fun, the restaurants and clubs are always open, there's a lot of noise, a lot of action; everyone wants to party, no one is tired. And when he has had enough, all he has to do is walk a couple of blocks to the west and sit down on the soft sand of the beach. The city and the sunrise are behind him, the salty sea in front of him, and

he knows, he just knows, that he'll never leave this city. He loves it, loves everything in it. When he opens the paper, he's likely to read that there's a war going on, or that religious fanatics spit on a little girl because she was immodestly dressed. But all that is happening somewhere else.

Meanwhile, he meets a woman, falls in love with her, and they get married. He gave up on the band, the startup, or his weird hairstyle a long time ago because he's past the age for stuff like that. And now that he has kids, his small, run-down rented apartment just doesn't suit his needs anymore. The boy wants a dog, they need a backyard to play in—and where can he even find a house with a backyard in Tel Aviv, much less at a price he can afford?

So one day he wakes up in a house with a backyard and a dog, just like the one his wife and kids had dreamed of, in a different city, slightly smaller, slightly less brash and vivid, but with an excellent school system, or at least that's what the lady at the local bank told him when he opened an account. The neighbors might not be so liberal. Whenever he buys milk and dog food at the grocery store, the owner insists on telling him what he really thinks of the Arabs and how the only thing they understand is force. Meanwhile, another guy is already living in the rented apartment he left behind in Tel Aviv. That guy had come to the city not too long ago from where he grew up in southern Israel. He always thought that the entire world was just like that town he came from, until he arrived in Tel Aviv to go to law school. Within a week, his eyes are opened. At night, he goes out for a walk and sees a synagogue next door to a sushi bar, and standing in front of it, a fat prostitute listening to an iPod and singing along with Adele: "Never mind, I'll find someone like you."

On the TV in his small living room the newscaster is talking about the drums of war. But here, in Tel Aviv, no matter how hard he tries, the only thing he can hear is the chanting of the imam coming from a mosque in Jaffa mixing with the techno music coming from a nearby club, and he knows, he just knows, that he'll never leave this city, no matter what.

*Etgar Keret is the author of, most recently, Suddenly, a Knock on the Door.*