

Israel News From David Dolan

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The Israeli Parliament has voted tonight to give the Sharon government the authority to evacuate thousands of Israeli Jews from their homes in the Gaza Strip and four isolated communities in northern Samaria. However, the end of the coalition may also be near after a coalition religious party threatened to quit the government if Sharon does not agree within two weeks to hold a national referendum on the contested withdrawal plan. The ultimatum was supported by several Likud ministers, including former premier Binyamin Netanyahu—which adds significantly to the chances that the government's days are numbered.

Below is this month's Israel news and analysis report, which details this historic Knesset decision and its serious implications for Israel's future. It also looks briefly at the large army operation in the contested coastal zone this month, and the Sinai terror attack which left a dozen Israelis dead.

The Knesset vote came on the ninth anniversary of the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, according to the Hebrew calendar. It also comes one day before the tenth anniversary of the signing by Rabin and the late King Hussein of the Israel-Jordan peace treaty. I just returned from a weekend visit to Jordan, and noted that there appeared to be little Jordanian interest to publicly mark the anniversary, demonstrating how cold the regional "peace process" has become since the Palestinians launched their current attrition war four years ago.

KNESSET APPROVES JEWISH EVACUATION

In an historic and potentially explosive decision, the Israeli Parliament approved Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's controversial Gaza/northern Samaria withdrawal plan following two tense days of heated debate. For the first time ever in re-born Israel's short modern history, the government has been empowered to uproot long-established Jewish communities near the heart of the biblical Promised Land.

Sixty seven Knesset members voted to give cabinet ministers the option of evacuating all 21 Jewish communities in the Gaza Strip and

four others in northern Samaria came despite warnings from settlement leaders that civil war could break out if the government attempts to implement the retreat plan next year. Forty five politicians voted against, with seven abstentions. Most Orthodox Jewish politicians rejected the withdrawal plan, deepening the schism between Sharon and his former religious allies. The National Religious Party—supported by several leading Likud government ministers—announced that it will leave the government coalition if Sharon does not agree to hold a national referendum by November 9th.

The Knesset victory was bittersweet for the veteran Israeli leader, given that nearly half of his own Likud party legislators did not support his pullout plan, including one cabinet minister and one deputy minister. Even some of Sharon's supporters, including influential Finance Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom, stated emphatically that they were doing so very reluctantly. This embarrassing reality fueled growing fears that the ruling party might completely fall apart, adding to intensifying Israeli political chaos.

Contributing further to the strong emotions surrounding the Knesset vote, the decision came in the wake of the largest army operation in the Gaza Strip since the current Palestinian attrition war was launched in late 2000, and soon after another Islamic terror attack left a dozen Israelis dead—this time just outside the borders of Israel.

PHASED PLAN

The country's 120 elected legislators were asked to approve the June 6th cabinet decision to remove Jewish settlers from their homes in up to four stages. In a compromise at that time with several cabinet skeptics of his plan, Sharon reluctantly agreed to their demands that before any actual evacuations take place, the government ministers will vote once again whether or not to proceed with the process "in light of conditions at the time." As Silvan Shalom pointed out during the Knesset debate, this means that there is still a chance, even if a rather remote one, that Sharon's internal government opponents and their allies might yet derail his plan. Withdrawal opponents could also throw a spanner in the works by forcing the collapse of Sharon's government coalition, which seemed increasingly possible as October wore on. One other way that extreme withdrawal opponents might quash the evacuation is keeping security officials awake at night—the potential assassination of Sharon.

Although Knesset members all understood that the PM's oft-stated

goal is a complete evacuation of the Gaza Strip by end of 2005, along with four isolated settlements in northern Samaria, the June cabinet decision that they officially endorsed did not actually state that outright. Instead, it said that four groups of settlements were “candidates” for abandonment, possibly in stages.

If the final cabinet decision (expected either in March or May next year) is to go forward with the historic withdrawals, the ministers will then decide which communities will be uprooted and when, based upon a “decree” to be issued by Sharon. The first group in the Premier’s priority list is comprised of four relatively isolated Jewish communities in the Gaza Strip, located near densely populated Arab areas. They include the most frequently attacked settlement in recent years, Netzarim, and the oldest Gaza Strip Jewish community, Kfar Darom.

The next group of evacuation candidates is made up of four remote Israeli settlements in the hills of Samaria, located north of the Palestinian towns of Nablus and Jenin. Following that, the cabinet listed the 14 communities located in the Gush Katif block in the southern Gaza Strip near the international border with Egypt. The bottom tier in the evacuation priority list is three “bedroom” communities located along the northern pre-1967 Gaza border with Israel that are essentially suburbs of the coastal city of Ashkelon.

HANGING CHADS

Despite the categorical breakdowns, the Israeli leader has always made clear that he fully intends to uproot all 21 Gaza settlements, as he promised US President George Bush when they met at the White House last April, along with the four specified communities in northern Samaria. Indeed, political analysts said the main reason Sharon asked the Knesset to vote on the divisive issue now was that he wanted to secure approval for his plan before the US presidential election takes place on 2 November. The PM is said to be worried that if John F. Kerry becomes America’s next elected leader, the “understandings” he secured from George W. Bush—that the US would eventually recognize many, if not most of the remaining disputed Jewish settlements as part of sovereign Israel if all settlements in the Gaza Strip, and some in Judea and Samaria, were abandoned—might quickly become null and void.

Sharon emphasized Bush’s important pledge as he worked to secure Knesset approval for his contested plan. He maintained that since the current White House occupant is apparently ready to recognize Israel’s right to permanently hold on to most of the remaining

disputed Jewish communities, especially those located in three settlement blocks in the vicinity of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, there is a good chance of eventually annexing those areas to the Jewish state. He said this possibility is reinforced by overwhelming US Congressional backing for Bush's pledge, meaning it might even be honored by a Kerry administration.

Despite this rosy assessment, several Knesset opponents of the withdrawal plan countered that if the liberal Democrat is elected president, he will likely ignore his predecessor's pledge as he attempts to "repair relations" with the United Nations and the European Union, which demand a total Israeli pullout from all land captured in 1967. They added that even if Bush is victorious, Sharon and company are dreaming if they think the rest of the world, let alone Yasser Arafat's PLO and the Arab countries, will ever agree to Israeli annexation of the three large settlement blocks in Judea and Samaria. "It would be another case of America and Israel against the world, rendering Bush's pledge virtually meaningless," maintained one of them.

WILD RIDE AHEAD

Although all opinion polls reveal that a significant majority of Israelis support Sharon's withdrawal plan (as they do a Bush victory), many pullout proponents nevertheless share the deep concerns of evacuation opponents that the contentious uprootings could spark off significant civil strife in the politically divided country, if not the full civil war that settler leaders have been warning of. Many say they also worry that unilaterally abandoning any Jewish communities will only further encourage radical Palestinian groups and their regional Muslim allies to step up their jihad war against the detested "Zionist entity," seeing the Israeli retreat as a "heavenly sign" that Islam's ultimate triumph over Israel is drawing near.

Another major concern was highlighted in a 47 page legal report prepared for Sharon's own National Security Council. It warned that Palestinian leaders might declare a sovereign state in the areas evacuated by Israel, noting that such a state would probably gain immediate international recognition and "be free to conduct its own foreign relations, producing a flood of agreements with Arab nations and Muslim organizations." Analysts said the report was basically warning that Arafat would attempt to secure a threatening military alliance with Iran and Syria, along with more moderate Islamic states.

Even some of Sharon's staunchest Knesset backers admit that he has handled his contentious withdrawal plan rather poorly. More

reluctant supporters like Binyamin Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Shalom were among many government and Likud party leaders in October that pleaded with their superior to hold a national referendum on the explosive issue. Netanyahu went so far as to negotiate a deal with so-called Likud “rebels” (who insist that title is a misnomer since they are the ones sticking to the Likud’s 2003 election platform, not Sharon). In exchange for Sharon’s consent to hold a referendum, the dissenters would have agreed to abstain in the October 26th Knesset vote. However, the PM refused to go along with the proposal, saying the country’s elected legislators were the proper people to decide the issue, not the public at large. This prompted some angry and bewildered Likud politicians to allege that their leader seemed obsessed beyond reason with his “sacred” withdrawal plan, even if it spells the suicidal destruction of his own political party.

Cabinet Minister Natan Sharansky—who spent years in a Soviet jail due to his pro-Israel views—charged that Sharon is endangering Jewish unity by “failing to explain his plan to the people and hold a national referendum.” He said the government is proposing “draconian legislation” to deal with pullout dissenters, reminding him of “oppressive laws enacted by the Kremlin.”

RABBIS WEIGH IN

Israeli political analysts agree that the projected Gaza/northern Samaria evacuations are significantly different from the intensely difficult 1980’s retreat from the Sinai Peninsula. The desert area captured from Egypt in 1967 was hardly considered a central part of the biblical Promised Land, unlike Samaria. Although the tiny Gaza Strip is located more on the fringe of the holy land, its territory was still part of the area allotted to the ancient tribes of Simeon and Judah, they note. Both of these historic facts make it much harder for many religious Jews—especially those who are active Zionists—to agree to the projected uprootings of some 10,000 Israeli citizens from their homes.

Indeed, religious Jews have emerged as among the most vociferous opponents of Sharon’s pullout plan. Former Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Avraham Shapira announced in October that he strongly opposes the pending evacuations on both biblical and moral grounds, urging Orthodox soldiers to disobey orders to carry them out. His momentous call was backed by 60 leading rabbis around the country, many of them influential heads of Jewish “yeshiva” seminaries. Politicians from left and right condemned Shapira’s plea for soldiers to disobey eviction orders, with many direly predicting that such resistance would signal the end of the world’s only Jewish-run state.

To Sharon's dismay, the spiritual head of the large Shas political party, former Sephardic Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, also ruled against the pullout plan, warning that "the territory will be occupied by terrorists who will fire missiles at innocent people in Ashkelon and Ashdod." However, unlike Shapira, he added that soldiers must obey all evacuation orders "to preserve national unity." Other prominent withdrawal opponents echoed Yosef's call. The Shas founder had supported the Oslo "land for peace" accords, which was the decisive factor in their winning Knesset approval in the 1990's. Noting this, he maintained that "there was a true chance for peace in those days, but not now when there is no partner, and therefore no reason to abandon territory."

BIG BANGS

Even though Israeli military leaders say IDF forces will continue to patrol the Gaza Strip's airspace and seashore after the evacuation, many Israelis who live near the teeming zone share Rabbi Yosef's expectation that it will become a permanent launching pad for Palestinian rocket attacks after the retreat is completed. Not a few pundits scoffed at Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz's late October contention that "reasonable Palestinians" will end up ruling the strip. "If the internationally-backed Palestinian Authority could not fully control the area, even after President Bill Clinton came to address their leaders in Gaza City, why assume that the situation will be any better now that Hamas is much stronger there?" asked one Likud party dissenter.

Mofaz announced that some Israeli forces will remain after the withdrawal in the "Philadelphia Corridor" in the southern Gaza Strip to patrol the porous international border with Egypt. He added that others will be stationed just outside the Palestinian zone, ready to re-enter the territory "in a moment's notice" if necessary. However, withdrawal opponents pointed out that world leaders will hardly welcome any evacuation that is not complete and permanent. They maintained that any Israeli incursions into the Gaza Strip, not to mention any future significant military operations in the retained southern corridor, will surely be harshly rebuked by the nations, adding further fuel to growing world calls for UN economic sanctions to be slapped on tiny Israel.

While army leaders spoke of possible future action in the Gaza Strip, the largest military campaign since the current Palestinian attrition war began in September 2000 was carried out in the zone. At least 120 Palestinians and three Israeli soldiers were killed in the three

week operation, dubbed “Days of Repentance” for some unspecified reason. It was launched just hours after two Ethiopian-Israeli toddlers were slain when a Kassam rocket struck them in the beleaguered Israeli town of Sderot. A smaller operation was launched in the southern Gaza Strip as the Knesset was preparing to vote on the withdrawal plan. It followed intense Palestinian rocket attacks on nearby Jewish settlements, which came after another targeted killing of a wanted Hamas terrorist leader. Analysts said the stepped up military action reflected Sharon’s political need to try to destroy the growing Hamas paramilitary and political infrastructure before he yanks Israeli soldiers and civilians out of the coastal zone.

Army spokesmen said most of the dead were Palestinian fighters, although Arafat claimed many were women and children. UN officials said around one-third were non-combatants. Israeli leaders questioned that assessment, but still apologized for all civilian casualties while charging that some children were deliberately placed in harms way by Muslim gunmen. Illustrating their moral difference from Hamas terrorist leaders, senior army commanders dismissed an officer who was charged with firing multiple bullets into a dead girl’s body.

While the army operation was entering its second week, terrorists slaughtered a dozen Israeli tourists in twin attacks in the Sinai Peninsula. Twenty two other people were also killed in the car bomb explosions, a majority of them Egyptian hotel guests and workers. Officials had originally feared that over 30 Israelis were buried in the Taba Hilton Hotel rubble, but most of the reported missing were later accounted for.

Although Egyptian strongman Hosni Mubarak quickly echoed Yasser Arafat’s absurd charge that Israel was undoubtedly behind the attacks at the hotel and at another resort in Ras Al Satan, Egypt announced in late October that five apprehended Arabs had carried out the terrorist crime, along with two others who remain at large. The ringleader of the mostly Bedouin suspects was said to be a Gaza-born Palestinian living in Egypt. Israeli officials said they believe the arrested perpetrators were members of the Al Qaida-linked “Abdullah Assam Brigades” which claimed responsibility for the deadly attacks. The group vowed to carry out additional assaults on Israelis traveling or living outside of the Jewish state, prompting new government travel warnings.

As we finish our look at a month filled with much more dramatic and portentous news than is possible to relate in this overview report, it is especially good to recall that *“The Lord is good; a stronghold in the*

*day of trouble. And He knows those who take refuge in Him.
(Nahum 1:7)*

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- [**HOLY WAR FOR THE PROMISED LAND**](#) (Broadman & Holman), his latest book, is an overview of the history of the Israel and of the bitter Arab-Israeli conflict that rages there, plus some autobiographical details about the author's experiences living in the land since 1980. It especially examines the important role that militant Islam plays in the conflict.
- [**ISRAEL IN CRISIS: WHAT LIES AHEAD?**](#) (Baker/Revell), which examines the political and biblical prospects for a regional attack upon Israel, settlement in the disputed territories, and related topics, is also available for purchase, along with an updated edition of his popular end-time novel, [**THE END OF DAYS**](#) (21st Century Press).

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