

Israel Update From David Dolan

DECEMBER NEWS REVIEW

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Below is my December Israel news review and analysis report. It is a bit unusual in that it begins this month with the enormous natural disasters that have struck south Asia. Late reports this morning say around 70 Israeli tourists—most of them young people—are still missing and increasingly feared dead as a result of the massive tidal waves that struck Thailand on Sunday morning. If most of the missing have indeed perished, it could be the largest single Israeli death toll connected to any one cause in the country's short modern history. Ironically, it comes after a major terror attack outside of Israel's borders in October left 11 Israelis dead in the Egyptian-controlled Sinai Peninsula.

Some Jerusalem rabbis are already saying that the two foreign tragedies in a row are a "divine warning" that the time has come for Israeli Jews to stay home, and for worldwide Jewry to move here. One said that he believed the "protective covering" over the Jewish people was slowly being removed outside of the Promised Land. Of course, many Israelis will argue that the numbers killed here in the land in terror attacks and auto accidents remains much higher than those killed abroad.

After enjoying a wonderful Christmas Day dinner with friends here in Jerusalem, I was walking home past the beautiful lit up walls of the Old City when I suddenly sensed that a major disaster was pending. I have had this feeling come over me a few times before, mostly just prior to deadly terror attacks in the land. As I began to pray about this sensation, I suddenly recalled for some reason that the massive Bam earthquake in Iran struck the day after Christmas last year. That recollection made me think that possibly a similar shaking was pending for Israel, since I had a strong sense that Israelis were in some danger.

I woke up the next morning with the unexpected thought on my mind that it was the very day when the History Channel would premier the program I participated in, called Countdown to Armageddon. I then went and turned on the Israeli TV news and listened as I walked to the kitchen to prepare a cup of coffee. I quickly turned back toward the screen as the newsreader spoke of a massive earthquake that had just shook southern Asia, and initial reports it had spawned huge tsunami waves in the region.

Who would have dreamed that a TV program featuring increasing natural disasters and other apocalyptic signs of the biblically-prophesied end of the age would debut on the very day when the worst disaster in decades struck the earth—sending the planet into a literal shudder and killing hundreds of tourists from around the globe, along with thousands of local residents? (By the way, the two hour program will be repeated in North America on Thursday night at 9:00 PM on both coasts, 8:00 Central and 7:00 Mountain time).

Although I could not watch the History Channel program here in Israel (where it will be shown later after being subtitled in Hebrew), I received several e mail messages from friends who had seen it. Some noted that my first comment on the program, near the top of the second hour, concerned the Lord's Olivet Discourse warning that earthquakes and similar things would

increase as the prophesied end of days approaches. I don't know if my comments after that were included, but I will repeat them here: We can react to such things with fear and panic, or we can place our trust in Israel's Eternal King, who has promised to hold us in the palm of His hand whatever occurs here on earth!

CORRECTIONS: I apologize for two typos included in my last message—which was a brief overview of possibly pending biblical prophetic fulfillments connected to Israel (posted on my web site at www.ddolan.com). One mistakenly said the Book of Revelation states that the Antichrist will reign for 48 months, instead of the correct 42 months (I don't want to lengthen his rule!). The other was the “wrong Victor” in the Ukraine. It was of course Victor Yushchenko, not Victor Yanukovich, who was apparently poisoned in that troubled land. That mistake resulted from the fact that I quickly pasted the two names from a news web site, and then eliminated the correct one next to the wrong one! It would not have occurred if one of the men had been named Uri or Jack!

DISTANT RUMBLINGS SHAKE ISRAEL

By David Dolan

As the Palestinian people prepared to elect a new leader to replace Yasser Arafat, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon ended 2004 without a viable coalition government. The final month of the year was an interesting dance as seven Palestinian Authority leadership candidates worked hard to drum up electoral support while Sharon labored overtime to patch several political parties into his badly torn coalition quilt.

However, as a year featuring a number of major terror attacks and the death of Yasser Arafat came to an end, the Israeli public joined most of the world in turning its attention away from domestic news stories. All eyes were quickly focused instead on the powerful earthquake and subsequent tsunami tidal waves that left tens of thousands of people dead in many portions of south Asia. This was especially the case since one of the most severely affected areas—Thailand's southwestern coast—is among the most popular international tourist destinations for young Israelis, with thousands of visitors at any given time in the region. As this is being sent out, the Israeli death toll is feared to be high, possibly up to 70 tourists who were known to be vacationing at several Thai resorts that were devastated by the sudden tidal waves.

Israeli authorities responded to the enormous tragedy by sending foreign ministry teams to the region to search for missing Israelis and to help stricken tourists quickly return home. They also attempted to send requested aid to the devastated island nation of Sri Lanka. However, the government in Colombo—despite its obvious overwhelming need—rebuffed Israel's plan to send a complete field hospital with 150 military medical personnel, apparently concerned that the Jewish army presence might upset some Muslims living in the land. Supplies alone were sent instead.

SHINUI OUT

The latest Israeli political upheaval came to a head on the first day of December when the 14 seat Shinui party voted against Sharon's 2005 national budget proposal. That dramatic move was swiftly followed by the immediate firing of all five Shinui cabinet ministers, leaving the Premier's shrinking government with just 40 official supporters in the 120-member Israeli Knesset. In fact, nearly half of those legislators—all members of Sharon's ruling Likud party—

are so-called “rebels” who strongly oppose his unilateral Gaza/northern Samaria withdrawal plan, and are therefore unreliable backers of his government at best.

Sensing that new national elections will be held sooner than later, Shinui leader Yoseph (Tommy) Lapid decided to take a “moral stand” on the budget’s last minute allocation of 290 million shekels to the United Torah Judaism party. Shinui deemed this an advance payment to “bribe” the party into joining Sharon’s government. Likud leaders admitted that this was basically the case. Still, the promised financial allotment did not succeed in sewing up a coalition deal with the small Orthodox party, which instead made additional budgetary and political demands later in the month.

The Shinui desertion resulted in an embarrassing 69-43 Knesset budget vote loss for the embattled Prime Minister, which also reflected poorly on his Finance Minister and frequent rival, Binyamin Netanyahu. At that point, Sharon carried out his threat to fire his five Shinui ministers, thus officially divorcing his two year old coalition partner.

CAREFUL CALCULATIONS

Most Israeli political analysts said Sharon had actually acted with careful deliberation when he ordered extra money budgeted for the small religious party. He fully realized that Shinui’s fiercely anti-Orthodox leaders would take the bait and reject the allocation, even if this meant their exit from the crumbling coalition. This would in turn open the door for the entrance of at least the United Torah party, if not the much larger Shas religious party. Given that the national election date may need to be advanced from November 2006, and that around one quarter of traditional Likud voters are fully observant Jews, it made sense to break the uneasy partnership with Shinui at this time. Now Sharon can concentrate on patching things up with the Likud’s usual government allies who were “shunned” by him when he formed his current secularist government in early 2003.

To no one’s surprise, the Knesset’s 20-plus Orthodox members were ecstatic to see the despised backs of Lapid and company as they left the government table. Even though most of the Shinui 2003 campaign platform had not been fulfilled—such as the institution of secular marriage, the further loosening of restrictive Sabbath laws and the drafting of most religious young adult males into the armed forces—the fact that the “hyper-secularist” party had controlled the pivotal Interior Ministry for two years (which doles out money to local councils, among other important functions), along with the influential Justice Ministry, had galled religious Knesset members every day.

Ousted Justice Minister Tommy Lapid accused Sharon of “buying off” religious parties as he attempts to rebuild his shattered coalition. But he saved his choicest arrows for the fellow secularist Labour party, warning its perennial leader Shimon Peres that he would “inherit his voters” if the party entered the Likud-led government. “If Labour accepts giving money to haredim (ultra-Orthodox Jews) just because Peres wants to become a minister, they will pay the price,” he warned.

SHOTGUN WEDDING

A strategic part of Sharon’s early December political gamble was the hopeful expectation that

his rebellious Likud party cohorts would finally permit a shotgun wedding with Shimon Peres and his Labour party colleagues. With Shinui's dismissal from the government, Sharon warned that the only remaining options were either a political union with Labour or imminent national elections. Although several Likud legislators who oppose his unilateral withdrawal plan would be happy with an early ballot date, most apparently agreed with their 75 year old leader that such a move would probably result in a reduced Likud parliamentary presence, and thus a loss of some of their jobs.

Sharon's threat to unleash early Knesset elections if Labour was not immediately allowed onto his derailed coalition train produced the desired result. On December 9th, the Likud Central Committee reversed its August decision to forbid an alliance with Labour, with 61% of voting members supporting the move. This opened the way for Sharon to form a solid majority government of 64 seats: 40 Likud members, 19 Labour politicians and five from United Torah Judaism. Sharon also hopes to add the Shas party's 11 seats in the coming weeks.

HEAVY HICCUPS

If the Prime Minister was hoping for a short and sweet engagement period before his betrothal to Labour was formally finalized, it was not to be. Instead, coalition negotiations ran into one snag after another during December as tempers—and sizeable egos—flared on both sides.

After two weeks of virtually non-stop negotiations failed to seal a deal, frustrated Labour chief negotiator Dalia Itzik let loose a personal volley against Sharon, charging he wanted to keep all law-related portfolios under Likud control since he and his sons had not fully resolved all criminal charges against them. This prompted a furious Sharon to temporarily pull the plug on the tendentious coalition negotiations, and to demand that Itzik be dismissed from her post. Several “rebel” Likud politicians then charged that their superior seems determined to get rid of everyone who stands in his way.

Meanwhile Shimon Peres—who has served in almost every cabinet position during his over five decades in the political arena—was miffed when Likud Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom refused to step aside in deference to the Nobel Peace Prize winner. Desiring a major role in the implementation of Labour's pet Gaza withdrawal plan, Peres then demanded the title of “Deputy Prime Minister.” Sharon readily acquiesced to this request, paving the way for a final coalition deal to be signed.

However there was one little problem that the PM failed to consider: He already has a deputy premier, Ehud Olmert, who fancies himself as Sharon's natural successor. The former Jerusalem mayor railed against his mentor's promise, pointing out that Israeli law only allows for one assistant premier, who is legally empowered to replace the government head for up to six months if he or she becomes incapacitated or is forced to resign.

Sharon seemed undaunted by the legal conundrum, announcing that he would simply order his party's legislators to quickly amend the law. However, he did not consider the fact that such a change to Israel's so-called Basic Laws (which act as a sort of constitution for the small country) must go through a Knesset committee controlled by one of his party's withdrawal opponents, Michael Eitan. He held his leader to the letter of the law during the month, insisting that the proposed change be carefully considered before being enacted. Eitan's “legalism” annoyed Sharon, and even more so Peres, who threatened on December 27th to scuttle the collation

agreement if he was not immediately named Vice Premier (some pundits scoffed that he really wanted his new title to be Co-Premier, if not Actual Premier).

WHITHER THE WITHDRAWAL?

December's protracted political wranglings prompted some withdrawal opponents to hope aloud that Ariel Sharon's unilateral pullout plan will not be carried out after all. However the veteran Israeli leader poured cold water on this contention, vowing again at the end of the month that he will execute the Knesset-approved evacuation in 2005, no matter what. In fact, he announced that he will present his detailed withdrawal plan for final cabinet approval during January, at least two months ahead of his previous schedule. This was in response to a recommendation by his Attorney General, who ruled that the 8,000 plus Israelis slated for uprooting needed at least a six month official warning of their pending displacement.

Although the proposed Israeli civilian and army pullback has already passed initial cabinet muster, it still faces several high hurdles during the new year. The most serious immediate challenge facing Sharon as he attempts to implement his unilateral plan is escalating Palestinian armed attacks in and near the Gaza Strip. Rocket assaults on Israeli settlements grew in number and intensity during December, leaving more Israelis wounded and a Thai worker dead.

Meanwhile political opposition to the pullout continued to show resilient strength as settler leaders and at least 12 Knesset members made clear that they are willing to go to jail in their quest to thwart the scheduled retreat. This came as a controversial anti-withdrawal campaign was launched featuring the wearing of orange Shields of David, virtually identical to the six-sided yellow patches which Hitler forced all Jews to wear during World War II. While most politicians and holocaust groups strongly condemned the action, settler leaders defended it on grounds that the "forced transfer of Jews from their homes" was at the heart of the Nazi's anti-Semitic program, even as it forms the core element of Sharon's withdrawal plan.

TERROR WAVES ROLL ON

The worst armed atrocity during the month put paid to absurd, yet widespread post-Arafat reports and speculations that the radical Hamas Islamic movement was now prepared to put aside its violent jihad and finally recognize Israel's right to exist. The attack came on December 12th when a massive explosion in an underground tunnel, jointly engineered by Hamas and a small PLO Fatah faction, destroyed an Israeli-run border crossing outpost next to Egypt in the southern Gaza Strip.

The huge blast instantly killed five Arab-Israeli Bedouin soldiers manning the outpost, and injured several others. More were wounded when Arab terrorists simultaneously attacked the facility on the ground. Originating inside a nearby Palestinian home, the 800 meter tunnel had been secretly dug in the direction of the outpost over a nearly five month period—right under the IDF's noses.

Calling upon all Arab soldiers to immediately quit the "Zionist army," Hamas claimed "credit" for the blast. More ominously, it pictured the attack as its concrete answer to calls by Egyptian and Palestinian Authority (PA) leaders for a ceasefire in the violent attrition war against Israel.

Adding further evidence that Palestinian hostility toward Israel has not lessened with Arafat's death, official PA media outlets hailed the attackers as "brave and cunning martyrs."

Obviously intimidated by the powerful Hamas-Hizbullah-Syria-Iran axis, Arafat's PA comrades ignored American and European Union calls to condemn the Hamas-led attack, terming it instead "a legitimate operation against a military target." Depressed Israeli officials pointed out that the border crossing had actually been opened in early 2004 to facilitate the free movement of Palestinians in and out of the Gaza Strip after repeated terror assaults forced the closure of the Erez checkpoint into Israel.

RETREAT UNDER FIRE

While hailing recently improved ties with Egypt, and maintaining that his withdrawal plan will help secure Israel's military and political future, PM Sharon admitted in late December that the Palestinians have every intention of stepping up their violent assaults in order to portray his planned Gaza withdrawal as a "forced retreat under fire." This prompted renewed criticism of the evacuation scheme from several reserve army leaders and military strategists who argue that a one-sided pullout will only worsen Israel's strategic position and encourage further terrorist atrocities.

Sharon also revealed that Gaza Strip terrorists have recently acquired shoulder-fired missiles capable of taking down army helicopters, or even light civilian aircraft like crop dusters which fly low over Israeli fields near the crowded coastal zone. He warned that use of such weapons would trigger "a very harsh response."

Reacting to the literal barrage of rocket firings during December, Likud Knesset member and military expert Yuval Steinitz said the army must prepare for "a massive operation along the lines of Defensive Shield" to root all terror groups before the scheduled withdrawal is implemented next June or July. That operation, mainly carried out in Judea and Samaria, was sparked in late March 2002 by the Passover terrorist massacre of 29 Jews.

MAN OF PEACE?

As the final weeks of the Palestinian Authority leadership campaign got underway, leading candidate Mahmoud Abbas sounded every bit as militant as his deceased patron. At first his hard-line comments were dismissed by most Israeli cabinet ministers as mere political posturing. But as his public pronouncements became harsher during the month, Israeli leaders expressed increasing concern that their hoped for "moderate peace partner" may prove to be a warlike dragon in the end.

Expected to easily win the January 9th PA leadership vote, Abbas repeated Arafat's oft-stated demand that Israel abandon all control over its holiest site on earth, the walled Old City with its sacred Temple Mount, and "evacuate every centimeter of Arab territory it occupied in 1967." All Palestinian refugees and their several million offspring must also be allowed to move to ancestral homes inside of Israel if they wish to, he stated, and every Palestinian prisoner, including terrorists who have murdered Jews, must be immediately set free.

While calling again for a halt to violent attacks upon Israeli civilians "for tactical reasons," Abbas

also made clear that he has no intention of lifting a finger to curb armed Palestinian terror groups—a key element of the Road Map peace plan. Israeli leaders stated that if the new PLO Chairman continues to refuse to act against such groups, all attempts to jumpstart the frozen peace process will fail, whatever position he takes on other contested issues.

As the year ended with the tragic news of a disaster of biblical proportions in south Asia, Israelis living on the western edge of the vast continent were at least reminded that theirs is not the only troubled region on earth. Although more local and international upheaval seems certain for 2005, the sifting and shaking will only prove in the end what is really worth saving. May each of you be comforted by His peace throughout the coming year, whatever it brings your way! *“For I, the Lord, do not change. Therefore you, oh sons of Jacob, are not consumed.” (Malachi 3:6)*

DAVID DOLAN is a Jerusalem-based author and journalist who has lived in Israel since 1980.

- **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 end-time novel, **THE END OF DAYS (21st Century Press)**.

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