

# **ISRAEL NEWS FROM DAVID**

## **DOLAN**

**March 28, 2005**

**Greetings from Jerusalem,**

As I completed my latest Israel news and analysis report this evening, I wrote my main headline title: ISRAEL SHUDDERS AS WITHDRAWAL NEARS. Just minutes earlier, I finished the entire report with this sentence: "With tremors shaking Israel and the region, the only firm ROCK is Israel's Sovereign Lord! He is the One who has *"again purposed in these days to do good to Jerusalem and the house of Judah. Do not fear!"* (Zechariah 8:15).

Some five minutes after I wrote my title, news broke on the television of another major earthquake on the other side of the continent of Asia, leading to fresh tsunami warnings and widespread panic despite the fact that the quake was not quite as powerful as the one that shook the region three months ago. It now appears that no such tidal waves have struck this time around, at least in the immediate area of the quake, to the great relief of those living in the affected areas.

Meanwhile Israel continues to experience its own political earthquakes and tidal waves over the scheduled civilian home uprootings later this year. In fact, the south Asian quake came just a couple hours after the Knesset voted against holding a national referendum over the divisive withdrawal plan. The details concerning the latest political and social rumblings are in this month's news and analysis report below.

### **ISRAEL SHUDDERS AS WITHDRAWAL NEARS**

**By David Dolan**

With the scheduled uprooting of 25 Israeli civilian communities drawing ever closer, the unity government of Ariel Sharon faced the real prospect of collapse during March. The embattled Prime Minister scrambled to secure last minute support for his 2005 state budget in the face of pledges by 13 Likud party withdrawal opponents to vote against it. Their threats formed the core of various last ditch attempts

to at least postpone the controversial evacuations, slated to get underway during the third week of July. According to Israeli law, governments automatically fall from power if state budgets do not receive Knesset endorsement by the end of March each year.

After weeks of intense political scrambling, Sharon secured last minute support that guaranteed budget approval. This came when the Shinui party—which quit his government when an Orthodox religious party was drafted into the coalition late last year—agreed to support it. In return, the PM promised to increase funding for several of Shinui's pet projects in the fields of education, culture and science. However Finance Minister Binyamin Netanyahu made clear that the additional 700 million shekel (\$160 million) allocation promised to the centrist party would necessitate that an equal amount be cut from other ministerial budgets, which angered several cabinet ministers.

Government budgets are normally passed around the end of each calendar year. However Sharon found it impossible to achieve that goal as 2004 came to a close, given the partial Likud party revolt against his emotive disengagement plan (labeled the “disconnection” plan in Hebrew). Further attempts to pass the budget failed in January and February, bringing the legislative issue down to the March 31<sup>st</sup> deadline. In the end, the budget was expected to be easily approved by the Knesset on March 29<sup>th</sup>.

## **NO NATIONAL VOTE**

The intense budget battle was symptomatic of a much deeper struggle which threatens to plunge Israeli society into chaos in the coming months. Many Likud party voters and parliament members, along with others from several small right-wing and religious parties, feel openly betrayed by Sharon's late 2003 adoption of the long-promoted leftist agenda to quickly evacuate all Israeli Jews from their homes in the Gaza Strip, and from other isolated settlements in Judea and Samaria. Although he had warned of “painful concessions” ahead during his successful electoral bid to remain in power earlier that year, Sharon had clearly campaigned *against* Labor leader Amram Mitzna's immediate Gaza withdrawal plan. This fact has made the PM's 180 degree policy switch extremely difficult for many nationalistic legislators and voters to accept, which is increasingly the case as the final hour approaches for the evacuations to begin.

Adding perceived insult to injury, the veteran Israeli leader and traditional settlement champion has consistently stood firm against a national referendum on his dramatic policy turnaround, even though

he had sent a letter to Likud MK Michael Eitan more than one year ago pledging support for such a countrywide plebiscite. During a Knesset Law Committee session on March 23<sup>rd</sup> which narrowly approved holding a withdrawal referendum, several lawmakers asked why Sharon is apparently afraid to take the crucial issue to the public if he is indeed following the correct course in accordance with majority public opinion, as he frequently maintains. After all, say many withdrawal opponents, the uprooting of some 9,000 Jews from their homes in the coming months will set a precedent that the world will surely point to as demands escalate for Israel to abandon *all* of the territory it's soldiers captured during the 1967 Six Day war, including the Old City's Temple Mount and the Golan Heights.

The Knesset voted overwhelmingly to reject a national referendum on March 28<sup>th</sup>, with only 39 legislators supporting such a ballot and 72 against. However, five Likud government ministers—including Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom—voted in favor of the bill. Not a few opponents were actually religious Knesset members who oppose the pending withdrawal. Still, they voted against out of fear that holding a referendum on the issue would open up a Pandora's Box, with demands following for national plebiscites on such controversial issues as Orthodox Jews serving in the army and Sabbath regulations.

## **DANGERS AHEAD**

Ariel Sharon had earlier dug in his ample heels as his Likud party underlings attempted to save the party from splitting apart by proposing a last minute budget-referendum compromise. According to the deal, all of the Likud's 40 legislators would be forced by party discipline to support the state budget in its final Knesset vote. In exchange, all Likud lawmakers would also be made to support the bill mandating a national referendum. Sharon refused to accept the compromise proposal, maintaining that he is "ideologically opposed" to national referendums—despite the fact that they have become common practice in most western democracies over issues that are usually far less important than the planned uprootings.

Many Israelis seemed baffled by Sharon's strong resistance to a withdrawal referendum, given that the scheduled evacuations are already causing his ruling Likud party to break apart, and could later lead to major unrest in the country. Such puzzlement only deepened in March when police estimates were leaked to the media predicting that up to 100 Israelis will likely be killed, and many more injured, while physically resisting evacuation from their homes this coming July and August.

The fact that the government itself anticipates big trouble during the uprootings was crystallized by the opening in mid-March of a newly built 900-bed “disengagement jail” near Ben Gurion international airport. The first anti-pullout prisoners arrived on March 23<sup>rd</sup>—charged with blocking major roads during rush hour in Tel Aviv and Netanya to protest the pending evacuations. Further evidence of anticipated trouble came when the government banned all Israelis from moving to the 25 communities slated for abandonment, followed by the issuing of instructional booklets to Israeli security forces detailing how to deal with expected violent resistance to the withdrawals. Meanwhile the Jerusalem police commander announced that he would bar a planned April 8<sup>th</sup> gathering of thousands of religious pullout opponents on the Temple Mount.

## **MOVING OUT**

While Israeli politicians wrangled in March over the state budget and the pending withdrawals from Gaza’s flat coastal plain and the hills of northern Samaria, Israeli forces evacuated several Arab towns, handing them over to full Palestinian Authority control. The pullouts, termed “goodwill gestures” by Israeli officials, were negotiated with new PA leader Mahmoud Abbas.

Jericho, the lowest town on earth, was transferred to PA forces on March 16<sup>th</sup>. As the handover was completed, a joint security patrol was ceremonially conducted by Israeli and Palestinian soldiers—the first combined patrol in nearly five years. The town was chosen as the first of five to be transferred to PA control since it has seen the least violence during the Palestinian attrition war that began in September 2000. Several Israeli political commentators noted that the town had also been the first to be transferred to full Palestinian control in 1994 as part of the failed Oslo peace accords, giving rise to speculation that the current handovers might prove equally futile in the end.

The Jericho withdrawal was followed five days later by a much riskier pullback from the Islamic fundamentalist stronghold of Tulkarm, just a few miles inland from the Israeli coastal cities of Netanya and Hadera. Both cities have been the scene of frequent terror attacks launched from Tulkarm and surrounding areas during the vile attrition war, including the worst atrocity in many decades which left 29 Passover-celebrating Jews dead in a Netanya hotel in 2002. However the recent construction of the world-contested security barrier separating predominantly Arab populated land in Samaria from Israeli coastal cities and towns prompted Israeli officials to take the risk of

handing control of Tulkarm back over to PA security personnel, who had patrolled the town from 1995 until late 2000.

The Jericho and Tulkarm transfers were supposed to have taken place several weeks earlier. They were delayed after an Islamic Jihad suicide bomber blew himself up outside a crowded Tel Aviv nightclub on February 25<sup>th</sup>, killing five young Israelis waiting to enter the building near the city's Mediterranean beach. Scores of civilians were injured in the cowardly late night attack. After learning that the homicide bomber came from a village on the northern outskirts of Tulkarm, Israeli officials decided to keep control over it and several nearby villages for the time being, to the chagrin of PA leaders.

Israeli officials fingered Syria for being behind the terror attack, noting that Islamic Jihad leaders in Damascus had taken open "credit" for the atrocity. As he has done before, PM Sharon warned the Baathist Assad regime to quickly mend its ways or face the possible wrath of Israel's military might. Analysts said the attack had probably been ordered by Syria, with backing from Iran and the Lebanese Hizbullah militia, in an attempt to divert regional attention from international demands that Assad pull all of his soldiers and plainclothes security agents out of Lebanon forthwith.

## **NO ACTION**

With Israeli officials expressing intense anger over the latest Islamic Jihad atrocity, new PA leader Mahmoud Abbas pledged to do more to curtail such terror attacks. Subsequent arrests were reported of terrorists planning to carry out additional assaults. However one month later, Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz said Israeli leaders were "not entirely satisfied with the pace that the Palestinians are dealing with the terror groups," adding that "we would like to see far more action taken against them." He added that withdrawal from a third Arab town—Kalkilya—would be delayed until the PA fulfilled promises to confiscate weapons from over 50 Palestinian fugitives known to be residing in Jericho and Tulkarm. He also expressed dismay over "strong evidence" that Strella anti-aircraft missiles had recently been smuggled into the Gaza Strip with the connivance of some PA security personnel.

Far from disarming and dismantling Palestinian terror groups, as called for in the Road Map peace plan, PA leader Abbas reiterated that he would draft Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Al Aksa Martyrs Brigades members into his own PA security forces. In other words, the terrorist's illegal weapons would merely be exchanged for PA-issued ones, and their annihilationist aims regarding Israel would

become part of the Palestinian mainstream.

Just how tepid Abbas has been in his approach to the several terror groups operating in his PA zones was illustrated in mid-March when he met with 13 Palestinian groups in Cairo in an attempt to secure support for his *hudna* (temporary ceasefire) plan with Israel. Hamas and other radical leaders bucked the ceasefire call, and would only agree to a temporary “calm” (*tahdiah*) in their heinous terror campaign, lasting until the end of 2005. While doing so, they cheekily issued their own “conditions” for observing a limited timeout in the conflict, including that Israel immediately release all jailed Palestinian murderers and withdraw from all Palestinian cities and towns. Israeli military analysts noted that terrorist leaders were openly signaling their core supporters that they had only agreed to the limited pause in order to regroup and prepare for the next round of violence against the hated Zionist enemy.

Meanwhile Hamas leaders shocked Abbas and company when they announced in early March that their candidates would take part in scheduled Palestinian parliamentary elections this summer. Until now, the extremist Sunni Muslim group—founded during the first uprising in 1988—had always said it would not participate in any such vote since Hamas does not recognize Fatah-led attempts to negotiate peace with Israel. However, Hamas victories during municipal elections earlier this year convinced group leaders that they have a fair shot at capturing a majority of seats in the Palestinian legislature, and might build upon this to eventually replace the fractured and bickering PLO Fatah movement as the main Palestinian political force. Several Israeli political analysts responded to the Hamas announcement by warning that the recent American push for “democracy” in the Arab world is likely to lead to even more radical governments coming to power if open votes are actually held in regional Arab countries, whose citizens are largely observant Muslims with strong anti-western leanings.

## **NO RECOGNITION**

At the annual Arab League summit meeting in Algiers in late March, regional Arab leaders disappointed many international officials and analysts by failing to even discuss the issue of democratic reforms, let alone recommend any action to enact such changes. In fact, the despotic leaders reiterated their long-held antipathy for the United States by condemning Washington's recent imposition of economic sanctions against Syria over its support for Palestinian terrorists and anti-coalition insurgents in Iraq. At last year's summit, Arab leaders promised to sign a letter endorsing democratic reforms in the region,

but it was never even produced in the end, let alone signed by anyone.

Even before this year's summit got underway, a majority of Arab leaders had shot down a proposal by Jordan's moderate King Abdullah that Arab states should normalize relations with Israel before a final Israeli-Palestinian peace accord is signed, as Jordan and Egypt have at least partially done. Noting that the Sharon government was preparing to pull all Israeli civilians and soldiers out of the Gaza Strip in the coming months, Abdullah argued that such recognition would help secure majority Israeli public support for a complete evacuation of territory captured from Jordanian and Syrian forces during the 1967 war. Syria led the outcry against the proposal, demanding that Israel abandon all disputed land before even the slightest Arab recognition was "granted" to it. In the end, the Arab summit officially re-endorsed the Saudi plan of 2002 which calls for Israel to evacuate every inch of territory seized during the Six Day war, including Jerusalem's hallowed Temple Mount and surrounding areas.

## **NO CHANGE**

The cold blast from Damascus against King Abdullah's peace initiative was just the latest sign of worsening relations between Syria and Jordan. The Hashemite monarch riled Syrian dictator Bashar Assad by strongly endorsing a UN Security Council demand for a quick Syrian exit from occupied Lebanon. Tensions also rose between Jordan and Iraq during March, with the interim Iraqi government charging that Abdullah was allowing Sunni Muslims in Jordan to secretly aid their insurgent cousins inside Iraq. Jordanian officials admit that some assistance is getting through, mainly from Palestinians living in Jordan, but not with the acquiescence of the Hashemite regime.

Israeli officials expressed satisfaction with Assad's declaration that he would pull all of his forces out of the Land of the Cedars before May in response to the UN resolution and massive anti-Syria protests in Beirut. However they were dismayed by the large show of force put on by the Hizbullah militia, which sponsored a pro-Syria rally in mid-March that brought hundreds of thousands into the streets. Even more annoying were suggestions by American and European leaders that they would ease up on Hizbullah if it wins a significant share of Lebanese parliament seats in scheduled May vote, as if contesting elections is a magic key that erases everything else a radical group like Hizbullah does or stands for.

Israeli leaders were also deeply concerned over a series of car bomb attacks in late March aimed at the Lebanese anti-Syrian Christian Maronite community. They sense that Syria and its Hizbullah and Iranian allies are attempting to spark off major internal Lebanese strife to forestall the UN demand for a complete Syrian pullout, and for the dismantling of all “illegal militias” (read Hizbullah) in Lebanon. Mideast analysts warn that rising tensions could spark off a new civil war in the tiny country, along with a possible Israel-Hizbullah clash that could easily involve Syria.

With tremors shaking Israel and the region, the only firm ROCK is Israel's Sovereign Lord! He is the One who has *“again purposed in these days to do good to Jerusalem and the house of Judah. Do not fear!”* (Zechariah 8:15)

**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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