

# Shalom from the UK!

Israel News from David Dolan

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*I am here on a short speaking tour, currently in Norwich, northeast of London. I have had good meetings so far. My plan is to return to Israel early next week, in time for the Succot holidays. If you want to view details of my UK speaking tour, sponsored by Christian Friends of Israel, go to my web site, [www.ddolan.com](http://www.ddolan.com) and click on "David's Schedule."*

*Below is the September Israel news and analysis report, focusing on the continuing political and military ripples from this summer's war between Israeli and Hizbullah forces. I also examine Palestinian attempts to form a unity government, which are faltering. I trust you will find it helpful in understanding the significant after effects of the war, which has now basically dropped out of the news.*

## **WAR RIPPLES SHAKE OLMERT GOVERNMENT**

The ramifications of Israel's mid-summer war against Hizbullah forces in Lebanon continued to reverberate during September, with more calls coming for the sacking of senior government and military leaders. This came as Prime Minister Ehud Olmert struggled to put together a credible enquiry commission to investigate how the top political and military echelons handled the inconclusive conflict.

Meanwhile Palestinian officials attempted to form a joint Hamas -PLO Fatah unity government that they hoped would help terminate crippling international economic sanctions enacted against the Palestinian Authority's Hamas administration. Throughout the month, United Nations and Egyptian officials continued to work with Palestinian and Lebanese leaders to secure the release of three captured Israeli soldiers that sparked off the summer conflicts in the Gaza Strip and Lebanon.

Several prominent political and military figures joined the chorus of voices calling upon PM Olmert to resign during September; among them popular former IDF Chief of Staff Moshe Ya'alon and former defense minister Moshe Arens. Ya'alon said the officer who replaced him as armed forces commander, Dan Halutz, should also be replaced, along with Defense Minister Amir Peretz.

Calls for Peretz to step down came as well from inside his own Labour party, especially from prominent Knesset Member Ami Ayalon, who is preparing to challenge Peretz as party leader next year. Political analysts say the former IDF navy commander and Shin Bet security chief will pose a significant challenge to Peretz if he runs against him, as expected.

## **TAKE A HIKE**

Ya'alon's critical comments came in an interview with the Haaretz newspaper published on September 15th. Replaced by Halutz in June 2005 after expressing strong misgivings with the Sharon government's unilateral Gaza-northern Samaria withdrawal plan, Ya'alon said that even if the current Premier "was not an army

person in the past.he knows how one goes to war. This is not the way to go to war. And he knows how a war is managed."

The former armed forces chief maintained that the decision to launch a full-scale military campaign against Hizbullah forces based in Lebanon "was scandalous, and he is directly responsible for that." Ya'alon then accused Olmert of mismanaging the conflict, terming it "a failure, and he is also responsible for that."

Ya'alon especially condemned Ehud Olmert's controversial decision to launch a major ground operation just after United Nations ambassadors in New York announced on August 11th that they had finally hammered out a ceasefire resolution to end the conflict.

Noting that 33 soldiers perished during the short 60 hour ground offensive that followed-more than one-fourth of the war's entire IDF military casualties-the former military chief called the operation "a spin move" by Olmert to try to finish the conflict with some sort of military achievement. "It had no substantive security-political goal, only a spin goal. It was meant to supply the missing victory picture. You don't do that. You don't send soldiers to carry out a futile mission after the political outcome has already been set. I consider that corrupt."

Ya'alon said the massive ground operation, involving over 30,000 regular and reserve soldiers and designed to send army forces up to the Litani River, some 18 miles north of the Israeli border, was carried out because Olmert "did not heed warnings" given to him by military commanders. He added sternly that, "Therefore, he must resign."

## **IN THE RING**

Some Israeli political analysts said that Moshe Ya'alon's acerbic statements against the current Prime Minister probably indicate that he is planning to throw his hat into the political arena in the coming months. Several expect him to join the Likud and then challenge Binyamin Netanyahu as party leader. They say he would prove a formidable political opponent to Olmert, especially since he accurately warned Sharon, as did the current Likud leader, that unilaterally abandoning the Gaza Strip would only lead to the army's eventual return there under very difficult conditions.

Ya'alon's severe charges were strongly denounced by Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni. During a visit to New York, she said it was "absurd" to maintain that PM Olmert had ordered a major ground operation in order to place a final spin on the war's outcome.

The Kadima party leader himself did not immediately answer the grave charges against him, which are expected to be among many questions looked into by a special war investigation committee that was approved by the cabinet on September 17th. The committee, headed by retired High Court justice Eliyahu Winograd, was empowered to examine the government's conduct of the war. However the panel's establishment was deemed insufficient by many Israeli politicians and commentators, including opposition leader Netanyahu, who called instead for the setting up of an official state commission of enquiry which would have broader legal powers than the Olmert committee.

## **NOT JFK**

Retired politician Moshe Arens, who served as defense minister three times beginning in 1983, was among several other current and former legislators who

called for Ehud Olmert's immediate resignation. The veteran Likud party official told Israel Radio that the recent war had been "an unprecedented defeat for Israel." This grave assessment was later echoed by chief IDF education officer Ilan Harari, who became the most senior army leader to publicly state what many top commanders were reportedly saying off the record-that Israel had lost the war.

Noting that various Syrian government leaders, including Baathist dictator Bashar Assad, are now publicly threatening to take back the strategic Golan Heights by force, Arens said urgent steps must be taken to strengthen Israel's defenses. "We cannot afford to wait for round two before we move to correct our mistake," he said.

Equally strong words were employed against the embattled Premier by another longtime Likud party colleague, retired Knesset member Uzi Landau. The former Internal Security minister, who served in the first Sharon government, is currently a senior research fellow at the prestigious IDC Institute for Counterterrorism in Herzliya. He averred that Olmert "lacks the courage and historic wisdom needed to guide Israel in this treacherous region and difficult time."

In a scathing opinion article written for the Jerusalem Post, Landau said Olmert's biggest mistake was not going to war against Syria, who he noted was the main weapons supplier and political enabler for the Lebanese Hizbullah militia.

Landau recalled that the United States had found itself in a major crisis when the Soviet Union placed threatening surface to surface missiles on Fidel Castro's neighboring island nation of Cuba in 1962. Then President John F. Kennedy successfully rebuffed the Communist giant, forcing Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to back down and withdraw the missiles. "In comparison, our Lebanese 'missile crisis' ended with a victory for the Axis of Evil," wrote Landau. "If only Olmert had learned from Kennedy to threaten the messenger" (Hizbullah) "but place the onus on-and act mainly against-the actor actually calling the shots" (Syria).

The veteran Likud politician predicted that another round of fighting would soon break out in the north, adding that this time "Israel must view any act of aggression on the part of Hizbullah as an act of aggression emanating from Syria." He added that Israel "must be willing to go to war to prevent further rocket and missile attacks against our population centers. But what we need most is the kind of courageous, wise and determined leadership provided by a Jack Kennedy."

The Israeli public apparently overwhelmingly agrees with Landau's negative critique of the sitting PM. An opinion poll published in Haaretz on September 22nd showed Olmert's approval rating had plummeted to just 22% from 48% when the war ended. Defense Minister Peretz suffered an even bigger drop, with just 14% endorsing the way he is handling his strategic job.

## **SUBCOMMITTEE BLASTS GOVERNMENT**

Adding to PM Olmert's woes, a Knesset report also poured cold water on the government's handling of the intense mid-summer conflict, this time pointing a finger at the home front. The report was issued by a special Knesset subcommittee established out of the larger Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee. The subcommittee was chaired by Labor's Ami Ayalon, an acknowledged security expert who was appointed Shin Bet chief in the wake of the traumatic Yitzhak Rabin assassination in 1995.

The Knesset panel rebuked the government for "failing to adequately protect the citizens of northern Israel" during the conflict. It said the Kadima-led coalition,

established only last April, had "failed to comprehend that Israel was facing a new security situation," an apparent reference to Hizbullah's massive Syrian and Iranian-supplied rocket arsenal.

Comprised of members of several Knesset political parties, including Kadima, the subcommittee noted that "no formal government meeting had even been convened" to discuss the possible evacuation of the over one million northern residents who came under daily rocket attack during the 34 day conflict, which featured the heaviest sustained bombardment upon civilian centers anywhere on earth since World War II. Recalling that 43 people had been killed in the blitz, seven of them children, the report also warned that massive enemy missile strikes upon Israeli civilian communities is likely to feature prominently in future wars.

Subcommittee chairman Ayalon had earlier criticized PM Olmert and DM Peretz for "mishandling" the war, along with Chief of Staff Dan Halutz. He called upon Peretz to "own up" to his failures and resign his position as defense minister. The call, which followed the sudden September 12th resignation of the IDF's Northern Commander, General Udi Adam-who had sparred with Halutz during the conflict-was supported by many other Knesset politicians and editorial writers. It also came after the release of several opinion polls showing that most Israelis wanted someone with substantial military and security experience to assume the sensitive post in place of Peretz.

Earlier in the month, the embattled Defense Minister had attempted to shift responsibility for the war's widely perceived mishandling to his political predecessors, including several former defense ministers who sit with him in the current cabinet. In an interview with the mass circulation Yediot Ahronot newspaper, Peretz said he "cannot understand why those who should have prepared, trained, established, and defined the rules concerning the threats to the country are forgiven, while charges against me are exaggeratedly grave."

Analysts said the Peretz was apparently referring in particular to Shaul Mofaz, who served as defense minister under Ariel Sharon's Likud government and is now Olmert's deputy Premier and Transportation Minister, and to Labor's Benyamin Ben Eliezer, the current Infrastructure Minister. Although both former army commanders refused to publicly answer the serious charges, political analysts said the comments demonstrated just how weak and internally divided the Olmert coalition had become in the wake of the indecisive war.

## **SET THE CAPTIVES FREE**

As IDF forces continued to be withdrawn from southern Lebanon in September-replaced by United Nations peacekeeping forces arriving from various countries around the globe, including Turkey and China-Israeli officials revealed that Hizbullah's July 12th abduction of two reserve IDF soldiers was actually the fifth attempt by the Shiite Lebanese group to kidnap Israeli soldiers. The first incident, in October 2000, led to the deaths of three soldiers during an attack in the upper Galilee. Three additional kidnapping plots were subsequently thwarted by Israeli forces.

In May of this year, Israeli intelligence learned of a plan by the radical Muslim group to carry out an attack against an IDF patrol at the very same location where the July abductions occurred. However beefed up army forces prevented the plot from being carried out. At the time, Israeli government officials were said to have warned their American and French counterparts that any actual kidnappings would spark a full-scale IDF military response. They assumed that this warning would be

passed on to Lebanese government officials who would in turn inform Hizbullah leaders. As I reported in the July news review, IDF blueprints for a major operation against the extremist militia had been on the shelf for several years, with former PM Ariel Sharon determined to deal with the growing Hizbullah threat at some point.

United Nations chief Kofi Annan announced in early September that he was appointing an unnamed diplomat to carry out behind the scenes negotiations to secure the release of army reserve soldiers Eldad Regev and Ehud Goldwasser. However he warned that he would abandon the effort if any other parties attempted to intervene in the discreet diplomacy. The envoy was set to begin negotiations with Israeli and Lebanese officials about a prisoner swap that would reportedly include Samir Kuntar, serving multiple life terms in an Israeli jail for the 1979 murder of three Israeli civilians and a policeman in the border town of Nahariya. Israeli officials denied that Kuntar would be set free, as demanded by Hizbullah.

Meanwhile the Middle East media was abuzz throughout September with reports that Gilad Shalit, the IDF soldier captured by Palestinian infiltrators next to the Gaza Strip on June 25th would soon be set free in exchange for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners being held in Israeli jails. However it soon became clear that the release was not dependent on Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas, who seemed eager to end the affair which has led to the deaths and injuries of several hundred Palestinians in ongoing IDF operations inside the Gaza Strip. Instead, Shalit's fate was apparently in the blood-stained hands of overall Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal, who operates out of Damascus. Analysts said Mashaal appeared to be under intense pressure from Syria and Iran to hold onto the kidnapped 20 year old soldier in order to halt attempts by Abbas to restart long frozen peace talks with Israel.

## **DISUNITY**

Although Mahmoud Abbas announced mid-month that a new Palestinian unity government would soon be formed, linking the militant Hamas movement with his once dominant PLO Fatah party and joined by several smaller political groupings, the plans ran into fresh roadblocks as the month wore on. The main sticking point was the seeming Hamas inability to actually back away from its 1988 founding charter's call for Israel's complete annihilation and replacement by a Palestinian theocratic state ruled by Islamic shariya law.

Al-Ayam, the official PA newspaper, confirmed on September 18th that "apparently irreconcilable differences" had emerged between Abbas and Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh over the "basic guidelines" of such a unity government. Ahmed Yousef, a top aide to Haniyeh, later confirmed that "there won't be a unity government if Hamas is asked to recognize Israel." Abbas admitted late in the month that talks to form a unity coalition had "fallen back to square one."

The stalemate came after Israeli officials, backed by the United States, made clear that any such government would have to openly accept the three conditions set out by the road map international quartet group earlier this year after Hamas took over the reigns of power-complete renunciation of terror, recognition of Israel's permanent right to exist, and acceptance of all previously signed peace accords between the PLO and Israel.

The Hamas charter denounces all Arab Muslim attempts to make peace with the "illegitimate Zionist regime" and states that violent jihad is the only acceptable way to overthrow it. Backed by hardline governments in Syria and Iran, Hamas simply cannot bring itself to alter its bedrock beliefs, say many Israeli analysts, particularly

since they are based on the group's fundamentalist interpretations of the Quran. The group had earlier indicated it would indirectly recognize Israel by formally accepting a 2002 Arab League peace initiative that called for a two state solution, but later in the month backed away from that position-which was anyway considered far too weak by many governments to fulfill the "recognition" condition spelled out by the quartet.

European Union foreign ministers indicated during a mid-September meeting that as soon as a PA unity cabinet was unveiled, they would quickly lift economic sanctions imposed after Hamas took over the government last March. Cancellation of the crippling international sanctions was said to be the main impetus for Hamas to even consider sharing power with the rival Fatah movement. The foreign donor embargo has meant that over 150,000 PA workers, mainly members of several armed security forces, have not been paid their full salaries in six months, with some receiving nothing at all. This has led to intense rioting on several occasions, including a violent assault upon PM Haniyeh's motorcade outside the Gaza City parliament building on September 18th.

With the political situation in both Israel and the Palestinian areas chaotic at best, and with Iranian-backed Syria threatening to launch military action on the Golan Heights, it seems that more regional upheaval lies just ahead. It is good in such times to recall that whatever happens here on earth, "The Lord is righteous, He loves righteousness. The upright will behold His face." (Psalm 11:7)

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**DAVID DOLAN** is a Jerusalem-based author and journalist who has lived and worked 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 popular end-time novel, **THE END OF DAYS** (21st Century Press). You may order these books at a special discount price by visiting his web site at [www.ddolan.com](http://www.ddolan.com), or by phoning toll free 888-890-6938 in North America, or by e mail at: [resources@yourisraelconnection.org](mailto:resources@yourisraelconnection.org)

**DOLAN'S NEW DVD, "FOR ZION'S SAKE"** is now available for purchase. Go to [www.ddolan.com](http://www.ddolan.com) and click the title under "BOOKSTORE" for more details.

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