

Israel Update - January News Review

By David Dolan
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Shalom from Jerusalem,

Below is my latest news and analysis report from Jerusalem. It covers the most important developments during a very busy news month in Israel and the region, including the visit by US President George Bush and dramatic reverberations it set off in the shaky Israeli coalition government and on the Palestinian street. With reports coming in that some Israeli reserve soldiers are receiving notices to be ready for possible quick call-ups, the current upheaval in the Gaza Strip is also examined. Israeli officials continue to keep an eye on the tense situation in Lebanon as well, aware that Hizbullah-inspired political chaos in Beirut could potentially spark more trouble along the border with Israel.

I look forward to seeing some of you during my upcoming visit to South Africa, which begins next weekend. I will be in the Johannesburg and Pretoria area Feb 1-5, then speaking in George along the south coast from Feb 7-10, then finally in the Cape Town area the following weekend. Speaking tours that were being planned in the USA and the UK later this year have been cancelled due to personal family reasons. However these monthly Israel news reports will continue to be sent to you, and also posted on my web site, www.ddolan.com

Bush Visit Sparks Hamas Violence And Government Crisis

By David Dolan

Within days of January's first official visit by President George W. Bush to Israel, his declared "vision" of a final peace accord between Israelis and Palestinians this year was already rapidly crumbling into the desert sand. Although formal peace negotiations got underway between the two sides soon after his departure, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's coalition government began to collapse as one party quit and another threatened to follow suit. His partners were objecting to the American leader's insistence that Olmert finalize an historic peace accord during 2008 featuring the establishment of a Palestinian state in the Gaza Strip and in Judaism's biblical heartland, Judea and Samaria, and possibly also in portions of east Jerusalem.

Meanwhile pressure on Olmert to resign increased in the wake of the Bush visit, as an official committee investigating the 2006 war with Hizbullah forces in Lebanon prepared to release its findings—widely expected to sharply rebuke the Premier's overall handling of the conflict. The report is due to be published on Wednesday evening, January 30.

A violent reaction to the US leader's short visit came from the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip, where

an unprecedented barrage of rockets and mortars were launched at Israeli communities in the immediate days following Bush's departure. The sustained assaults, which saw over 100 rockets come crashing down in just four days, was seen as a demonstrative way for Hamas to show its extreme displeasure over the American President's peace push, and especially his public dismissal of Hamas as a legitimate player in the process. It came as IDF forces stepped up their campaign to target Islamic fighters firing mortars and rockets every day at Israeli civilian targets. Among Palestinians killed was the son of a prominent Hamas official. The group vowed revenge, which was quickly followed by three terror attacks upon Israelis near Jerusalem, leaving two dead and several others wounded, including two teachers who were stabbed when terrorists burst into their classroom.

An Israeli move to halt the rocket attacks by non-violent means backfired, ending in a major Hamas propaganda victory as sympathetic media reports about "Palestinian suffering" were accompanied by a fresh United Nations attempt to censure Israel. That was quickly followed by what commentators hailed as a brilliant Hamas PR move—the destruction of large sections of the Israeli built border security fence along the Gaza border with Egypt. They said the subsequent televised torrent of Palestinians pouring into Egypt significantly strengthened the radical group's popularity on the Arab street, while threatening the stability of the American-backed Egyptian regime and concurrently weakening the US-supported Palestinian Authority (PA), along with punching a huge new hole in the White House sponsored peace process.

Commanding His Audience

With just over one year left in office, George W. Bush decided to follow up last November's short Israeli-Palestinian peace parlay outside of Washington D.C. with a three day visit to the Holy Land. Before he arrived at Ben Gurion Airport on Jan 9, the US President repeated what he stated at the Annapolis summit—his main goal was no less than to prod the two longtime Middle East adversaries to sign a final peace accord before he returns to Texas in January 2009.

While holding a joint press conference with PA leader Mahmoud Abbas in Ramallah on the second day of his visit, Bush astonished most of his local listeners by stating that he "believes" such a treaty will actually be concluded this year. What the President's factual basis might be for making such a profession of faith was entirely obscure to regional politicians and pundits, given that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has raged on for more than six decades; that previous American-led peace attempts have ended in ashes; that the time frame put forward by Bush is incredibly short; that both sides are ruled by weak leaders who might be forced out of office at any time; that radical Hamas forces in the Gaza Strip staged a violent coup against PA rule only last June and continue to strengthen their hold over the area; and that nuclear-arming Iran and its regional allies repeatedly call for Israel's total destruction.

Many Israeli political commentators opined that the Bush visit was mainly designed to shore up the apparently compliant Ehud Olmert, and to reinforce the Hamas-challenged Mahmoud Abbas. Seemingly confirming the former contention, the American leader actually lectured the heads of two wavering coalition parties to stay on board Olmert's rickety government ship. The unusual public intervention was viewed as offensive by many Israelis, with some opposition politicians wondering aloud how Bush would feel if a visiting Israeli premier publicly

instructed American cabinet members or lawmakers how to behave on the Washington stage.

Despite the fact that formal peace negotiations were rapidly launched between teams headed by Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and Palestinian negotiator and former PA Prime Minister Ahmed Qureia, the visiting President's stated "belief" in what he termed "the vision thing" for peace was widely lampooned as entirely naïve. Others went further, terming it dangerous since it could easily ignite a violent reaction from Islamic peace process opponents (as it in fact quickly did in the Gaza Strip).

Israel's most popular satirical television program, *Eretz Nehederet* (Pleasant Land), had a field day lambasting the President's words, stopping just short of openly mocking his widely perceived naivety. This came as political commentators noted that Bush had hardly mentioned the violent Hamas takeover of the crowded coastal zone, as if ignoring that reality would make what is clearly a massive impediment to any final status peace treaty simply go away. The visiting leader's contention that Hamas would somehow "see the benefits of peace" and accept a PLO Fatah-negotiated accord once it is signed by Abbas signaled that he is woefully ignorant of the true nature and depth of the militant group's faith-based rejection of a Jewish state in the mainly Muslim Middle East, however large or small, said many analysts.

Lieberman Calls It Quits

The first defection from Ehud Olmert's fraying coalition quilt came just five days after George Bush departed Israel to visit several Gulf Arab states. Soviet-born nationalist politician Avigdor Lieberman, who emigrated to Israel in 1978 and served as Binyamin Netanyahu's bureau chief in 1996-97, yanked his 11-Knesset seat *Yisrael Beiteinu* (Israel is our Home) party out of the government. In doing so, he gave up his two official positions as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Strategic Affairs—a cabinet post focused on the Iranian nuclear threat which was created especially for him when he joined Olmert's government in October 2006.

The fiery Lieberman had made many enemies during his cabinet stint by calling for the prosecution of Arab Israeli legislators who have any dealings with Hamas or other declared enemies of the state, and by advocating that majority Arab portions of the Galilee region be handed over to any future Palestinian state in exchange for Israeli annexation of three large Jewish population centers in Judea and Samaria. He had always made clear to Olmert that any negotiations with the Palestinians which even hinted at the dismantling of Jewish communities or permitting Arab control over any portion of Jerusalem would be red lines that he would not cross.

When the embattled Premier confirmed during talks in Jerusalem with Bush that he is willing to dismantle at least some Jewish settlements, as America is demanding, and to possibly hand over parts of the holy city to Palestinian control, Lieberman decided the time had come to exit the coalition. However many Israeli commentators said the immigrant leader was mainly demonstrating once again that he is a masterful politician, instinctively knowing when to jump off a sinking ship.

Analysts said Lieberman realizes that PM Olmert is not nearly strong enough to secure support for such enormously controversial peace process concessions from many of his own Kadima

party legislators, let alone from Yisrael Beiteinu or the Orthodox Shas party—even if the feeble PA was strong enough to sign a final peace accord. And the fact is many Israeli leaders and security analysts, including Lieberman, suspect the PA may crumble this year in the face of growing Hamas popularity, bolstered by Iran’s threat to wipe Israel off of the world map. So why remain in a disintegrating government and risk losing future electoral support from his core voters? The Russian immigrant politician understands that his backers are hardly looking to bolster Bush’s legacy by agreeing to the establishment of a Palestinian state next to their homes, which most assume would only end up pouring deadly rockets down upon them.

Shas Threatens To Bolt As Well

Avigdor Lieberman’s dramatic action was a major blow to PM Olmert’s rule, taking his coalition from a very comfortable 78 majority in the Israeli Knesset to just 67 seats. However that number would still be more than enough to carry on—if another large party was not also threatening to leave over Olmert’s peace process positions. But the Sephardic Shas religious party, with 12 Knesset seats and four government ministers, is doing just that.

Analysts say that if Shas bolts, Olmert would find it impossible to govern, let alone push through a final peace accord. This is despite the fact that some non-coalition left-wing and Arab parties say they would support his continued rule in future no-confidence motions as long as he seriously pursues the final status treaty that Bush wants to see finalized this year.

Shas leaders are well aware that their party lost some of its public backing after they failed to strongly oppose Ariel Sharon’s 2005 pullout of Israeli soldiers and civilians from the Gaza Strip and portions of northern Samaria. They realize that a vast majority of Shas voters are totally opposed to a Palestinian state arising in Judaism’s historic heartland, let alone in any part of Jerusalem, especially if there is even the slightest possibility it will end up under Hamas control.

Therefore party leader Eli Yishai, also serving as a Deputy Premier, demanded an urgent meeting with Olmert soon after President Bush left the country. He made clear he wanted to discuss the reported peace concessions the PM had agreed to offer the Palestinians during private talks with the American leader.

During their January 22 meeting, PM Olmert was said to have argued that Shas needed to remain in the government to lend him a legitimate excuse to resist some of the more excessive PA negotiating demands, especially for control over parts of Jerusalem and for millions of Palestinians living in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the contested territories to be granted a “right to return” to pre-state family locations inside of present day Israel. Israeli media reports said Yishai responded by demanding that Olmert disclose what concessions he might have authorized Foreign Minister Livni to offer the PA negotiating team. He argued that all government coalition partners had a right to know in advance what Israel was preparing to offer the Palestinians, especially concerning the supremely sensitive issue of Jerusalem.

Yishai's warnings were later underlined by Shas spiritual leader and party founder Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, who basically sets the party's policies and agenda. "I want everyone to know that Shas will not divide Jerusalem, and will not sit in a government that divides Jerusalem," Yosef announced in a written statement. Analysts say although Shas leaders are loath to lose the large government largess they currently rake in for sitting around the cabinet table, they understand their future electoral success may well depend on how firmly they stand now over an issue crucial to most conservative religious voters—the unity of Jerusalem under full Jewish control.

Rockets Galore

While President Bush was meeting Abbas, some of the PA leader's top aides told local and international journalists they possessed hard intelligence evidence showing Iran and Syria had banded together to support Hamas in its attempts to gain complete control over the West Bank, as the Islamic group did last June over the Gaza Strip. The fact that Hamas has the ability to destroy the renewed American-backed peace process—as they effectively wrecked the previous Oslo accords through a series of terrorist attacks in the 1990s—was amply illustrated when the militant group gained the international spotlight by sponsoring various violent actions in the weeks following the Bush visit.

The Hamas counterstrikes actually began a few days before the President's entourage arrived at Ben Gurion airport, when a Katyusha rocket was launched for the first time from the Gaza Strip, landing over ten miles away in the northern part of the coastal city of Ashkelon. Israeli security officials had warned that the fundamentalist group was importing more powerful longer range rockets via the southern border with Egypt, paid for and supplied by Iran and the Lebanese Hizbullah militia. The Katyusha landed almost half way between Gaza and the southern outskirts of metropolitan Tel Aviv, Israel's largest urban area.

While Bush was busy talking with senior Israeli and Palestinian officials, a barrage of Kassam rockets and mortar shells were lobbed at the town of Sderot and at other Israeli civilian locations. In Gaza City, Hamas and Islamic Jihad leaders warned Abbas not to meet with the hated American President, with some calling for him to be assassinated while visiting PA controlled territory (echoing an Al Qaeda call issued earlier in the week). This was quickly followed by a nighttime rocket assault on the American International School in the city. The anti-tank rocket attack heavily damaged the building for a second time since early last year. As the perpetrators would know, the school is operated by local Palestinians and has nothing to do with the U.S.

The mortar and rocket barrage further escalated in the days following the President's departure, prompting IDF forces to step up their operations to take out the men firing the occasionally deadly weapons. In the process, the son of former PA Foreign Minister Mahmoud Zahar was killed, along with 18 other Muslim fighters. This gave Hamas an excuse to unleash over 40 rockets and mortars at the western Negev region four days after Bush left, with most landing in the beleaguered town of Sderot. Later in the week, one struck a factory there, prompting its owner to announce he was shutting his doors for good.

Under increasing pressure from the Israeli public to do more to halt the blitz, the Olmert government sealed all border crossings into the Gaza Strip, freezing all shipments of food and fuel into the small Palestinian coastal zone. However media savvy Hamas leaders saw this as a perfect opportunity to checkmate the “Zionist enemy,” urging local journalists to send out reports highlighting the “massive suffering” the move was causing their people. Sensing a rising Arab tide of support for Hamas, Abbas himself blasted the border closures and supported an Arab League call for an ‘urgent’ United Nations meeting to condemn Israel (a draft Security Council statement was later blocked by Washington, supported by several European countries, who noted that it did not even mention that unprovoked Palestinian rocket attacks had prompted the Israeli action).

See The Light!

Hamas staged its most dazzling media coup when it quickly shut off all electric power supplies to the estimated 1.5 million Gaza Palestinians under its control, claiming this was due to the Israeli fuel blockade. The blackout began just minutes before Al Jazeera’s main evening newscasts in Arabic and English were beamed to millions of homes in the region and around the globe. Indeed, the popular Arab network and others were live on the scene to report the dramatic power outage (Hamas political leaders were earlier filmed holding candles in the Gaza City parliament building, despite the fact that bright afternoon sunshine could be seen shining through nearby windows). Israeli officials countered—rather ineffectively most analysts maintained—by pointing out that only one internal Palestinian power plant uses the Israeli supplied fuel, while over half of the Gaza Strip’s electricity comes from Israel’s Ashkelon facility, which was not at all affected by the border crossing closures.

Sensing that they were on a propaganda roll, Hamas operatives then blew up the Israeli built Gaza border fence with Egypt in simultaneous explosions along the barrier. The brash move was hailed by most Palestinians, including many Fatah members. As up to half of all Gaza residents poured into Egyptian territory to take advantage of lower prices and more abundant goods (whose prices quickly rose), Israeli officials issued warnings to their citizens to evacuate popular Sinai resorts, assuming terrorists were among those flooding into Egypt—while additional armaments were undoubtedly smuggled back into the Gaza Strip. Analysts said the border breach increased the likelihood that Israeli leaders would order a full-scale military assault against Hamas in the coming months.

With quiet American prompting, a nervous Egyptian government, headed by the aging Hosni Mubarak, vainly tried to reseal the border several times, concerned that the mass exodus would only strengthen the militant Muslim Brotherhood movement that parented Hamas in 1988. Israeli analysts warned that if the emboldened and increasingly popular Sunni Egyptian movement was ever able to seize power in Cairo, it would produce a regional earthquake that would make the 1979 Shiite Islamic revolution in Iran seem minor in comparison.

Given the sad reality that January’s renewed talk of peace was accompanied by increasing acts of violence and war, it will be a month most Israelis will be glad to forget. This is all the more reason to recall the psalmist’s comforting revelation that “***He who watches over Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps***” (*Psalms 121:4*).

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, or by phoning toll free **888-890-6938** in North America, or by e mail at: resources@yourisraelconnection.org.

DAVID DOLAN'S DVD, "FOR ZION'S SAKE" which has been broadcast four times on nationwide television in the States, is available for purchase. Click the title under "BOOKSTORE" for more details.

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