

# Israel Update: February News Review

by David Dolan  
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## SHALOM FROM JERUSALEM,

Tension is high in southern Israel today after Hamas urged thousands of Gaza Strip Palestinians to gather near the border fence with Israel to protest non-violent Israeli government measures designed to halt the flood of rocket attacks upon civilian communities from the area. Israeli military forces have been significantly beefed up in anticipation of possible trouble. This comes during a month of extremely disturbing war threats emanating from Iran and its regional allies. In fact, I cannot recall a more serious stream of public threats against Israel during the over 27 years I have lived here, as detailed in this month's news summary, posted below. Security sources tell me that Israeli leaders do not wish to act militarily against the threats in the run up to the country's sixtieth anniversary celebrations later this year—expected to bring record numbers of tourists to the country—but realize the situation may slip out of their control. So there is much room for serious prayer.

I very much enjoyed my speaking tour in South Africa earlier this month, and it was good to see some of the subscribers to this monthly report while there. I also met a few lions and other exotic animals during a mini-safari, and got some sun during a visit to the beach in Cape Town—a lovely city for sure. Thanks to all who helped arrange my visit and hosted me there. It was especially pleasant to spend a few weeks in summer weather since I left just after a two day snowstorm in Jerusalem, and returned to yet another one just beginning! Double snowfalls occur only once or twice a decade on average here. We are expected to get much needed rain over the next couple of days as winter gives way to early spring.

My web site ([www.ddolan.com](http://www.ddolan.com)) is currently down for technical reasons for a few days, but should be on line again soon.

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## Israel Prepares For Showdown With Iran

By David Dolan

With Iranian leaders bombastically stating once again during February that Israel will soon be destroyed, Israel's top military leader warned mid-month that a decisive armed conflict could break out in the troubled region at any time. He added that it would be a major test over the resolve and preparedness of the country's regular and reserve armed forces.

This came soon after the army, air force and navy were placed on heightened alert after the Lebanese Hizbullah militia vowed to avenge the assassination of its top military commander, which it blamed on Israel. Tensions escalated even further after the group's main ally Iran hinted that nuclear warheads might have already been deployed in Lebanon.

The new war jitters came just two weeks after the release of the Winograd commission report on the intense conflict Israel waged against the extremist Shiite militia in the summer of 2006. Its

conclusion resulted in stepped up calls for Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to resign.

Tensions also escalated in the south as concentrated Palestinian rocket and mortar fire continued to pour down upon Israeli communities near the Gaza Strip. One exploding rocket severed an Israeli boy's leg in the besieged town of Sderot, sharply increasing public pressure on the government to do more to halt the blitz.

With IDF pinpoint strikes against rocket launchers occurring almost every day during the month, officials made plain that a major military operation to end the constant assaults was in the final stages of preparation. Meanwhile the first Palestinian suicide bombing in over one year took the life of an Israeli woman, leaving her husband critically wounded. The atrocity was claimed by Hamas.

### **All Out War On The Horizon?**

Lieutenant General Gabi Ashkenazi became Israel's Armed Forces Chief of Staff less than one year ago when his predecessor, Dan Halutz, was forced to resign in the wake of the controversial 2006 military stalemate with Hizbullah forces. Working night and day since then to restructure the armed forces—which the Winograd commission said generally performed poorly during the 34 day Lebanon conflict—he warned on February 20 that Israel may be facing an imminent new war that could threaten the country's very existence.

Speaking at an army officer's graduation ceremony, Ashkenazi said Israel's military forces must be fully prepared for possible conflict "in the near future." He added rather ominously that nothing less than "the continued existence and success" of the world's only Jewish-led country might depend upon the outcome of any such conflagration.

"There are dangers to our survival on the horizon and great challenges to Israeli security. The Israeli Defense Forces need to insure a rapid victory in any conflict, and I cannot guarantee that we won't need to act in the near future."

Some Israeli military analysts averred that the Armed Forces Chief was cryptically referring to an Israeli air force strike upon Iran's burgeoning nuclear program, which they assume would not only be followed by Tehran's threatened missile counterstrikes upon Israeli civilian and military targets (including the Dimona nuclear reactor), but by missile, rocket and probably ground assaults from Syrian, Hizbullah and Hamas forces. A few noted that such a wide-scale conflict could easily involve the use of non-conventional weapons, possibly even nuclear bombs, on one or both sides, which could be the "threat to Israel's very existence" that Ashkenazi referred to.

### **Olmert And Barak Warn Of Pending Battles**

Speaking at the same ceremony, Prime Minister Olmert pronounced that Israel's military forces were "ready to face any fresh challenge" that might await them. "The lessons of the last war are being implemented at all levels of command in the Israeli Defense Forces. Unprecedented resources today allow the IDF to train more, prepare better for a time of trouble, and train commanders and fighters at all levels in the best possible manner and for all scenarios."

Making an apparent veiled reference to Israel's assumed nuclear weapons umbrella, which he spoke of more openly during a German media interview nearly two years ago, Olmert added that "The State of Israel, in its sixtieth year, is a strong nation, with military might, a known deterrent force for all those who need to know, and a nation of the most impressive accomplishments."

It is also a country led by a very unpopular Premier. Opinion surveys taken in the wake of the late January release of the Winograd commission's final report showed most Israelis want someone other than Ehud Olmert at the helm of government at this critical hour. The report rebuked the PM for taking the country to war in a hasty manner without first checking to see if military leaders had a plan on hand to rout Hizbullah forces (the report said they did not). Still, Olmert vowed to remain in power, ignoring stepped up calls by many politicians for his departure. His ability to hang tight for the time being seemed assured when Labor party leader Ehud Barak announced in early February that he would not pull his party out of the coalition, as he had earlier pledged to do after the final report was released.

The London-based Al-Hayat newspaper, generally thought to be among the best sources of reliable information in the Arabic language press, reported that Defense Minister Barak had warned Syrian leaders that major new IDF military action was pending against both Lebanese Hizbullah and Palestinian Hamas forces. It claimed he delivered the stark message via Turkish leaders when he met them in Ankara mid-month.

The paper noted that Israel believes both militant Muslim groups have significantly stepped up their own war preparations over the past year while acquiring sophisticated new weapons systems that seriously threaten the Jewish state. Indeed, Barak told a parliamentary committee last August that Hizbullah has more rockets deployed today than it possessed at the start of the 2006 war. Al-Hayat added that he urged Syrian dictator Bashar Assad to move away from supporting Hizbullah militia forces or risk being targeted in the reported upcoming operation.

Barak was also said to have asked Turkey to consider joining a multinational force to be stationed in the Gaza Strip following any full-scale IDF operation to uproot Hamas forces that seized full control over the Palestinian coastal zone last June. According to Israeli media reports, the idea of putting together and stationing such an international force there—patterned on United Nations troops who have been operating in southern Lebanon since 1978—was being seriously discussed inside the halls of government power. Until now, Israeli leaders had always resisted ongoing Arab demands for foreign troops to be positioned in Palestinian areas, fearing it would ultimately restrict Israeli military options and increase pressure for UN forces to patrol parts of Israel's capital city, Jerusalem.

## **Master Terrorist Killed In Syria**

February's war jitters were largely sparked off when a notorious Hizbullah terrorist mastermind was killed in a bomb blast in an upscale Damascus neighborhood on. Imad Mughniyeh, who served as the radical group's "military chief of staff" in recent years, was thought to be behind some of Hizbullah's most horrendous atrocities, including massive explosions in Beirut in 1983 that left 241 American marines and 63 US Embassy workers dead and many others wounded,

and subsequent bombings in the early 1990s in Argentina that took the lives of 119 people at the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires and at a nearby Jewish cultural center.

Hizbullah leaders and their Iranian puppeteers immediately denounced Mughniyeh's February 12 killing as a "Zionist action" which they vowed to swiftly avenge. In a speech several days later, Hizbullah leader Sheik Hassan Nasrallah proclaimed "open warfare" against Israel until the Jewish state is no more.

Despite immediate denials of involvement from the Prime Minister's office, the vociferous threats prompted government leaders to order a full military alert in the north and the movement of Patriot anti-missile batteries to the Haifa area, hit hard by Hizbullah rockets during the 2006 war. Foreign airlines flying into Ben Gurion airport were later ordered by the government to take extra security precautions to prevent possible Hizbullah hijackings or sea-launched rocket assaults upon them.

Several Middle East analysts opined that Maghniyeh's murder was probably undertaken by American security agents who have long desired to see the demise of what some termed the "Butcher of Beirut." Others said anti-Syrian Lebanese forces were most likely behind the Damascus bombing, noting it came almost exactly three years to the day when former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was assassinated in Beirut by suspected Syrian agents. While refusing to speculate on who was responsible for the killing, US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack bluntly stated that "the world is a better place" without the wretched Hizbullah terrorist plotter in it.

### **Vemon Flows From Iran**

Speaking at a rally in southern Iran one week after the Damascus incident, bellicose Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad repeated his earlier contention that Israel was behind the bombing. "The world powers established this filthy bacteria, the Zionist regime, which is lashing out at the nations in the region like a wild beast," he thundered to cheering supporters, adding that Israel "uses terror as a threat every day, and afterwards is happy and joyful."

Other statements from Iranian military leaders added to the sense of looming conflict between Israel and the large Shiite nation and its regional allies. Iran's official news agency quoted a letter sent from Iranian Revolutionary Guards commander General Muhammad Ali Jafari to Sheik Nasrallah stating that "Hizbullah's might is growing with every passing day, and in the near future we will witness the disappearance of his cancerous growth called Israel." The statement echoed the Iranian Shiite revolution's late founder, Ayatollah Khomeini, who often referred to Israel as a "Zionist cancerous tumor" that would one day be eradicated.

An even more ominous outburst came from Iranian Armed Forces Chief Hassan Firouzabadi, who said in a similar letter to the Hizbullah leader that the Lebanese militia would soon deploy "radiation therapy" to wipe out Israel. Officials in Jerusalem worried that this might be a thinly veiled indication that field nuclear warheads are now stationed in Hizbullah dominated portions of Lebanon, probably under direct Iranian control. Hundreds of elite Iranian Revolutionary Guards are thought to be clandestinely stationed in the fractured country. The seasoned military

commander added that “jihad warriors of the Lebanese and Palestinian Islamic resistance will continue the struggle until the complete destruction of the Zionist regime and the liberation of the entire Islamic land of Palestine.”

Some analysts stated that field nuclear warheads would have a much better chance of striking Israeli targets than warheads on longer range Iranian surface to surface missiles. This is because the highly sophisticated American-funded Arrow anti-missile shield system is designed to take out such ballistic missiles in the upper atmosphere, but not the nearly 4,000 shorter range rockets shot at Israel during the 2006 conflict. While the Patriot system can intercept some of these low flying rockets, the war showed that most are able to successfully reach their intended targets.

The speaker of Iran’s parliament, Gholam Hadad, joined the evil chorus as well. He was quoted in an Iranian newspaper on February 21 as warning that “the countdown to Israel’s destruction has begun.”

General Yahya Safavi, the top military advisor to overall Iranian strongman Ayatollah Khomeini, added that “intense Hizbullah fury” over the killing of the Shiite group’s senior military commander had “brought forward” the day when Israel would be wiped off of the world map. He also accused Israel of carrying out the Damascus bombing, aided by the United States and one unnamed Arab country, thought by some to be Saudi Arabia. This came after the Saudi government began flying in emergency weapons supplies to the pro-western Lebanese government, apparently in anticipation of an imminent showdown with Hizbullah forces and their Syrian and Iranian backers.

## **Code Red Alert**

Israeli leaders quickly denounced the latest outbursts from nefarious Iranian political and military leaders, while sending a delegation of legislators from several political parties abroad to explain to foreign officials why the government feels it must take action to rebuff Iran’s now constant stream of threats to vanquish the Jewish state. Meanwhile a dissident Iranian group said it had recently passed on solid evidence to the White House detailing the Iranian regime’s continuing efforts to develop nuclear weapons.

Iranian leaders had the audacity to accuse Israel of ratcheting up tensions in the region by threatening to attack its nuclear program, as if it was not the regime’s constant vows to annihilate Israel, while ignoring repeated UN calls to cease enriching uranium, which is essentially forcing reluctant Israeli leaders to deal with the rogue nation. A complaint against Israel was filed by Iran’s UN ambassador on February 21. It cited PM Olmert’s mid-January statement that “all options are on the table” regarding Iran’s nuclear program as the basis for its absurd charge that it was Israel bringing the region to the precipice of all out warfare.

Israeli officials noted that a new International Atomic Agency report issued on February 22 confirmed that Iran’s dangerous uranium enrichment program continues apace, in defiance of UN demands that it be immediately halted. Experts say uranium enrichment is a key component in any nuclear weapons program. An Israeli Foreign Ministry statement said the report “reconfirms the State of Israel and international community concerns that Iran is continuing its

pursuit of nuclear weapons.”

## **Legless Near Gaza**

With over 400 Palestinian rockets and mortars fired into Israel during the first two months of 2008 alone, pressure on the government to do more to halt the barrage built up substantially during February. The boiling point came after a rocket landed near two Sderot brothers drawing money from an ATM bank machine in the besieged town to buy their father a birthday present. Eight year old Osher Twito, who had dreamed of becoming a national soccer player, lost his leg in the brutal February 9 attack. Doctors had no choice but to quickly amputate it below the knee to save the critically wounded boy’s life. His 19 year old brother was also severely injured in the blast, which occurred as over 40 rockets were fired at the town in a period of 48 hours.

Coming just one week after two Hamas suicide bombers launched an attack at a shopping mall in the Negev town of Dimona, killing a 73 year old Israeli woman and injuring dozens of others, the rocket blitz was the final straw for hundreds of Sderot residents. They flocked to the Israeli capital to call for urgent action to halt the daily assaults. Joined by protestors from around the country, speakers at the impromptu rally demanded that PM Olmert resign, and called for a stepped up military response to the rocket barrage. Similar protests were held later in the month in Tel Aviv.

While Palestinian Authority leaders said again they do not support such assaults upon Israeli civilian centers, they also expressed strong opposition to any major IDF response to the stepped up Hamas attacks. Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat warned that any significant military operation would halt struggling peace talks with Israel—which made headlines during the month when PA officials insisted the contentious issue of Jerusalem was already on the table; a claim Olmert’s office quickly denied in an apparent attempt to keep the wavering Shas party in the wobbly coalition. Brazen Hamas officials threatened to murder kidnapped IDF soldier Gilad Shalit if any senior Hamas leaders are killed by army action.

Despite the Palestinian threats, Israeli officials said the situation in the Gaza Strip had become intolerable, forcing the government to take major action. This came as Israeli sanctions against the coastal zone led to further fuel shortages and other consequences that were criticized by US, EU and UN officials. The army was meanwhile preparing for a threatened Hamas attempt to send thousands of Gaza residents to overrun the security fence with Israel, as occurred along the southern border with Egypt in January.

In light of February’s dramatic developments, it appears to this seasoned correspondent that 2008 will likely be a year of severe upheaval in the region. May all who love Zion keep fervent in prayer as Israel’s leaders make critical decisions regarding the escalating threats imperiling the country’s continued existence. *“Be gracious to me Oh Lord. See my affliction from those who hate me, You who have lifted me up from the gates of death” (Psalm 9:13).*

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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).

**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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