

Israel Update - March News Review

From David Dolan – Week of March 24, 2008

SHALOM FROM JERUSALEM,

Below is my Israel news and analysis report covering the main news events during March—a month overflowing with important developments. The worst ever Hamas rocket assault upon Israel and the army's response tops the news, along with the terror massacre in Jerusalem and new tensions with Hizbullah in the north. Yesterday actually marked the end of the 40 day mourning period that Hizbullah declared over the car bombing death of the Shiite Muslim group's most notorious terrorist plotter, after which group leaders indicated they would launch significant revenge attacks upon Israel and Jewish targets abroad. Israeli forces are on full alert this week to prevent or quickly respond to any such actions.

Here in Israel, the small community of Jewish, Arab, and expatriate believers are praying for the 16 year old teenage boy—Ami Ortiz—who was severely injured when a package he was opening at his family's home in the town of Ariel exploded last Thursday. Some have written to ask if I know the Ortiz family. Several years ago, I interviewed Ami's father, David, who pastors a congregation in the town. The interview, conducted for a major media outlet, centered on several violent attacks against former Muslims from northern Samaria who had become Christians under David's ministry. While police initially suspected Muslim terrorists had delivered the Purim style gift package to the home, media reports say they are now leaning toward pinning responsibility on anti-missionary Jewish groups who have publicly opposed David's presence in Ariel.

According to a report sent out by my longtime friend Ron Cantor, who met with David on Sunday, doctors had warned Ami's parents yesterday morning that they would probably have to amputate at least one of his severely injured limbs (he earlier lost some toes). However, the senior doctor later informed them that Ami had made "miraculous" progress in his recovery during the day, and would therefore not need any amputations after all! The Chief Physician answers prayer! Still, Ami has many serious wounds and skin burns that will necessitate additional operations, unless of course the miracles go on! Thanks for all around the world who have joined in prayer for Ami and his family.

Fighting Rocks the South Amid Tension in the North

By David Dolan

March roared in like a lion as Hamas continued to pulverize Israeli communities in what became the group's largest rocket barrage since Jewish residents and IDF forces evacuated the Gaza Strip in August 2005. An Israeli man was killed when a rocket exploded in the besieged town of Sderot. For the first time, longer range Grad rockets supplied by Iran were aimed at the coastal city of Ashkelon, hitting several homes and cars. Israeli ground forces then entered the Gaza Strip, attacking rocket

firing positions amid heavy Hamas counterattacks, which caused additional casualties on both sides.

The threatened Hamas terrorist reaction to “Operation Hot Winter” came swift and furious, as a young Arab resident of Jerusalem infiltrated a Jewish seminary in the heart of Israel’s capital city. The lone terrorist fired hundreds of bullets at dozens of young students studying there, killing seven teenage males and one young adult, and wounding eight others. That in turn ignited Orthodox-led rioting one week later in the Jerusalem Arab neighborhood where the terrorist had resided with his parents.

Meanwhile Israeli forces were ordered on heightened alert as the 40 day official mourning period for an assassinated Hizbullah leader with close ties to Iran came to an end. The rogue Iranian regime and its Lebanese militia proxy force have vowed to avenge the Damascus slaying—which they blame on Israel—in a major way. Saying Iranian, Syrian and Al Qaida leaders were whipping up war fever with both Palestinian and Lebanese Islamic militant groups, security officials announced that the largest ever home front exercises will be held throughout the country in early April.

The end of the mourning period coincided with a visit to Israel by American Vice President Dick Cheney, which closely followed a two day stopover by Republican presidential hopeful Senator John McCain. Both US politicians spoke strongly about the continuing Iranian-Hizbullah-Hamas threat against Israel, vowing to stand with the Jewish state if any major military action breaks out.

Hamas On The Warpath

The Hamas rocket blitz against Israeli civilian centers began just one day after last month’s news report was filed. On Tuesday night, February 26, Israeli military forces spotted a wanted Islamic Jihad terrorist leader operating near the Gaza border fence. They said he was apparently involved in an operation to plant landmines near the security fence (one later killed an Israeli soldier). He was quickly shot dead by IDF marksmen.

Early the next day, Israeli troops entered the Palestinian town of Nablus, north of Jerusalem, to arrest members of a Fatah terror cell they said was planning to carry out an imminent attack in a nearby Israeli city. In the ensuing firefight, one of the wanted men was killed and four others wounded. Later that morning, Israeli Air Force jets went into action over the Gaza Strip, bombing a van that officials said was transporting five wanted Hamas gunmen who had recently returned to the area after receiving military training in Syria and Iran.

Hamas leaders in the Gaza Strip then ordered their rocket squads into full-scale action, lobbing over 40 Kassam rockets into the nearby Israeli town of Sderot in just a matter of hours. One rocket killed a 47 year old student from the Sderot’s Sapir College, which has struggled to stay open during the past few months of escalating rocket assaults upon the beleaguered town.

The victim, Ronnie Yechiya, left behind a bereaved wife and four children. Several of the 7,000 students who attend the college were wounded as the rocket exploded in a parking lot next to Yechiya’s car. Israeli jets went into immediate action, targeting the Palestinian squad that fired the rockets. At least one of the shooters was killed in that action.

Ashkelon Under Fire

Within hours of the rocket barrage and IDF response, the Israeli coastal resort city of Ashkelon—with around 120,000 residents—came under sustained Palestinian rocket assault for the first time ever. At least four Grad rockets landed in the city just after sunset, one close to the city's Barzilai hospital where some of the Israeli students wounded earlier in the day were being treated. Another landed in the Mediterranean Sea close to the Dan Hotel, the city's largest seafront resort. A third Grad, apparently targeting city hall, destroyed the car of Ashkelon's mayor.

Security officials say the advanced rockets, with a range of at least 10 miles compared to the Kassam's average four mile limit, and with explosive warheads some three times more powerful than the homemade Palestinian rockets, were recently smuggled into the Gaza Strip after being supplied to Hamas by Iran, possibly via Syria. A media source at the scene of the Grad explosion that destroyed the mayor's car told me officials found markings in the Iranian Farsi language on fragments of the rocket.

Israeli government and military leaders had always warned that a major attack upon the bustling coastal city would be considered a serious escalation in the Iranian-backed Muslim fundamentalist jihad war against the detested Jewish state. The decision was then taken at the highest levels to target the Gaza City offices of former Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, despite the fact that the senior Hamas politician was known to be in hiding since the group stepped up its rocket attacks in mid-February. The Air Force operation, carried out in the early hours of February 28, partially destroyed the empty offices. Sadly, the raid also killed a baby and wounded around 30 Palestinians living nearby.

Hamas leaders cynically expressed their "outrage" over the unintended casualties, despite the fact that they have been *deliberately targeting* Israeli civilians for many years now. Along with frenzied scenes of several funerals, their crocodile tears were repeatedly broadcast all over the Arab world by Al Jazeera and other satellite news networks, whipping up anti-Israel passions throughout the turbulent region.

Hamas leaders then ordered around ten more Grad rockets launched at Ashkelon, and at the western Negev town of Ofakim—located just five miles west of Israel's fourth largest city, Beersheva. Similar to the rockets fired by Hizbullah forces at northern Israeli cities and towns during the 2006 war, the blasts left more Israelis wounded, including a 17 year old teenage girl whose Ashkelon home was directly hit during the fresh barrage. Almost three dozen Kassams were also lobbed at Sderot and other Israeli communities near the Gaza Strip.

Paying The Price

Israeli military forces responded to the unprecedented volume and range of Palestinian rocket assaults with additional ground and air operations in the Gaza Strip. Defense Minister Ehud Barak warned that a major military operation designed to sweep the Gaza Strip clean of Hamas militia and terrorist forces, and by implication Hamas political leaders as well, might be launched at any time. He said Israeli government officials would "not flinch from our duty to protect our citizens from rocket assaults," adding ominously that "Hamas will pay the full price for its activities."

Later in the month, Deputy Defense Minister Ephraim Sneh, a former army general like Barak, said bluntly that the fundamentalist Hamas movement would soon be entirely uprooted from the Gaza Strip. “Israel will not exist side by side with this Iranian entity just three kilometers from Sderot and 10 kilometers (just over six miles) from Ashkelon.”

Before the fighting died down on March 4, over 100 Palestinians had been killed, including the son of prominent Hamas parliament member Khalil Al-Haya. Although the young man was a trained Hamas fighter, Israeli officials admitted that his targeted killing was designed to send a stern warning to all Hamas leaders that they too could be located and wiped out if the escalating rocket attacks were not quickly halted.

Israeli forces suffered casualties as well. Two soldiers were killed and several others wounded during ground operations inside the northern Gaza Strip, from where most of the Kassam and Grad rockets were fired by trained Hamas and Islamic Jihad squads. A third soldier, an Arab Bedouin tracker from the Negev Desert, was killed on March 5 when a hidden landmine exploded under the vehicle he was patrolling in next to the Gaza border fence. Under condemnation from many Palestinians, Israeli Arab politicians and regional Arab news networks for allowing their son to serve in the IDF, his grieving parents asked local media outlets to withhold his identity from the public.

Sporadic rocket firings continued all month, spiking again on March 12 after elite IDF forces killed the head of the Islamic Jihad branch in Bethlehem, Muhammad Shehadeh, known to have been behind several terror attacks upon Israeli civilians in recent years. Three other wanted men were also killed in armed clashes with IDF soldiers. The militant Muslim terror group, which works closely with Hamas in the Gaza Strip and does not launch rocket attacks without its permission—and sometimes under its direct instructions—responded the next day by firing over 30 Kassams and mortar shells into areas around the Gaza Strip, causing damage but no casualties.

Saturation Arab and Iranian media coverage of Israeli military strikes on Gaza (amid scant reports on the Muslim rocket attacks upon Ashkelon or Sderot) were seized upon by Al Qaida leaders later in the month to urge revenge attacks against Jewish interests worldwide. With opinion surveys showing a large majority of Palestinians, 64%, strongly support Hamas rocket strikes upon Israeli civilian centers, Osama Bi Laden released an audio tape on March 21 calling for a new international “jihad war” to “liberate Palestine.” His deputy, Ayman Al-Zawahri, then released a tape on March 24 calling upon Muslims “to strike at Israeli and American interests everywhere,” since the Jews “gathered against us from everywhere.”

Brothers In Arms

Regional media reports claim off the record ceasefire negotiations are underway in Egypt between Israeli and Hamas officials. Ehud Olmert’s office strongly denied the reports. Despite this, many military analysts said some sort of back channel Egyptian-mediated talks did seem to be occurring, although undoubtedly indirectly.

Many Israeli politicians, including opposition leader Binyamin Netanyahu, condemned the reported talks, saying they only strengthened the stature of the radical Muslim group, which most agree scored major propaganda points once again during the early March Gaza fighting—using its women and

children as human shields while decrying civilian casualties, and then hailing the same as *shahid* martyrs for the glorious Islamic cause. They added that previous experience demonstrated any military time outs only allowed Hamas and Islamic Jihad to get ready for the next round of rocket and terror assaults.

Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas harshly denounced the Israeli military action as “criminal” and “totally unjustified,” immediately breaking off American-sponsored peace talks with Israel. Analysts said this was largely due to massive street support for the Hamas bombing action, even by most Fatah leaders and supporters, intensified by the saturation Arab media coverage of the Palestinian non-combatant casualties. However Abbas backed down after visiting US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice arm twisted him into returning to the negotiation table, leading to the announcement that PA officials would resume peace talks when calm returned to the area. This came as both Israeli and Palestinian negotiators admitted that little actual progress has been made so far to reach George W. Bush’s stated goal of finalizing a peace treaty that would establish a Palestinian state by the end of this year.

In an attempt to heal the deep rift between the ruling PLO Fatah group and Hamas, the Arabian Peninsula country of Yemen invited officials from both sides to hold reconciliation talks in the country’s capital, Aden. After several days of acrimonious negotiations, Hamas leaders said they would not agree to the Yemeni proposal that they hand back control over the Gaza Strip to Fatah in order to be allowed to run once again in fresh Palestinian national elections. On a late March visit to Jerusalem, Russian Foreign Minister Sergie Lavrov urged both warring Palestinian sides to reach some sort of compromise accord, while Secretary of State Rice supported Israel’s position that Hamas cannot be allowed to return to any form of leadership role in the Palestinian Authority.

Terror In Jerusalem

The Israeli capital suffered a major terrorist atrocity on March 6 after four years of relative calm following a three year Palestinian terror blitz that left over one hundred Jerusalem residents dead and many hundreds injured. Dozens of young Israeli religious students were gathered inside Mercaz HaRav yeshiva, one of Jerusalem oldest seminaries and the bedrock learning institution of the national religious movement, which strongly advocates Jewish resettlement in Judea and Samaria. They were gathered in a festive atmosphere to mark the beginning of the month of Adar II--a special leap month added every four years to keep the ancient Hebrew lunar calendar in line with the 365 day solar year.

Suddenly Ala Abu Dhaim, a 26 year old Arab from the southeast Jerusalem neighborhood of Jebel Mukaber, which abuts East Talpiot, burst into the seminary dressed as an Orthodox Jew. He immediately took his hidden AK-47 Kalashnikov automatic rifle out of a music case and opened fire. The Muslim terrorist managed to let loose around 600 bullets before being shot dead by an off duty IDF officer who heard the carnage from his nearby home and rushed into the building—past several Jerusalem policemen who were apparently hesitant to enter the fray, and are now under official investigation for their widely condemned non-action.

Before being killed, the wicked terrorist managed to kill seven teenage male students ranging in age from 15 to 19, all from Jerusalem or surrounding communities, along with a student in his mid 20s

from the port city of Ashdod. Eight others were wounded, three seriously. The emotional funerals of the slaughtered students received extensive Israeli media coverage the next day—the eve of the weekly Sabbath—adding to the country’s grief as suddenly bereaved parents and siblings said goodbye to their young loved ones amid anguished cries and rivers of tears.

Heeding warnings from security officials that anti-Arab riots could break out at any time in response to the heinous massacre—which was publicly celebrated in many Palestinian cities and towns (an opinion poll commissioned by the *New York Times* revealed an astonishing 84% of West Bank Palestinians supported the atrocity)—Prime Minister Olmert told his cabinet the following Sunday that the government would not rest in its pursuit of Palestinian terrorists and those that support them. However he also rebuffed calls from many quarters that he immediately suspend peace talks with PA officials.

Indeed, some 22 young Jewish protestors were arrested during scuffles with security forces one week later as hundreds gathered near the terrorist’s home to denounce the massacre. Amid many shouts of “death to the Arabs,” several policemen and some of the protestors were injured in the three hour melee. Dozens of protestors managed to break thru a police cordon around the home and hurl stones at it, while others mimicked the popular Arab protest action of burning tires in nearby streets.

The incident came just days after several Jewish Jerusalem municipal inspectors were ambushed with rocks and stones as they drove through the heart of the Arab business district northwest of the Old City. Several of the Arab attackers attempted to tip the city car over that the inspectors were cowering in, as windows were smashed by the angry mob. The ugly scene, broadcast on Israeli television stations, spread fears that mass violence could once again return to Jerusalem streets. Later in the month, a Jewish rabbi was stabbed and wounded as he was walking near the Old City’s Damascus Gate.

Demons In The North

Israeli forces were placed on an extra alert as the 40 day Muslim mourning period for slain Hizbullah terrorist mastermind Imad Mughniyeh came to an end on March 23. Iranian and Hizbullah leaders again blamed Israel for the February 12 killing in Damascus, a claim Israel has denied. Still, Israeli officials announced the holding of the largest ever countrywide war preparation drills beginning April 6. The massive five day emergency exercises will test preparations for a possible non-conventional chemical, biological and even nuclear weapons attack, involving military and civilian rescue and medical squads, hospitals, and other public emergency services. Air raid sirens will be sounded in many areas, with local residents asked to proceed to local bomb shelters as if an actual attack were taking place.

The unsettling drills will be held just a couple weeks after visiting American Vice President Dick Cheney said Iran may have resumed its nuclear weapons program—which Israeli leaders say is definitely the case. Along with visiting presidential candidate John McCain and Condoleezza Rice, he publicly vowed that the United States will stand by Israel if any major attack takes place. The same pledge was made with strong emotion by visiting German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who pledged in a speech before the Israeli Knesset that her country will never allow another holocaust to take place against the Jewish people.

As Israel's sixtieth birthday approaches in the midst of growing violence and gathering war clouds—a country created in the virtual ashes of the Nazi mass slaughter—we can take heart in the fact that “*Surely in the Lord our God is the salvation of Israel*” (Jeremiah 3:23).

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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