

Israel Update - July News Review

By David Dolan
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Shalom!

Below is my news and analysis report covering important developments in Israel and the region during July. The controversial prisoner swap with the Shiite Lebanese Hizbullah groups leads the news review, as it did the headlines in Israel for many days during the month. I also report on the shaky ceasefire with Hamas in the Gaza Strip, and the growing likelihood that Prime Minister Ehud Olmert will be forced out of office in the coming months, in fact as soon as mid September when his Kadima party will hold a primary vote to replace him. I apologize that I was not able to send out my monthly report in June, due to technical difficulties while traveling in Europe.

CAPTURED SOLDIERS LAID TO REST

By David Dolan

The Israeli public was saddened and distressed to finally learn for certain in mid July that two reserve soldiers abducted by Lebanese Hizbullah forces in 2006 were deceased. Widely anticipated confirmation of their deaths came in an exceptionally cruel manner—via a terse Hizbullah announcement broadcast around the world just seconds before two simple black coffins containing their remains were placed on Lebanese soil in preparation for transport to Israel.

The handover of the fallen soldier's bodies came in exchange for Israel freeing several notorious Lebanese terrorists as part of a government endorsed, and very controversial, "prisoner exchange" between the Jewish state and the extremist Shiite group. Hizbullah's clerical leaders hailed the deal as yet another "magnificent victory for the Lebanese resistance" movement which brought the country to the brink of civil war just a few months ago.

A senior Israeli military intelligence officer warned cabinet ministers soon after the dramatic exchange took place that heavily armed Hizbullah forces appeared to be preparing to launch additional terrorist assaults along the country's tense northern border. Political analysts speculated that such attacks, if they come, would probably be under orders from the group's main regional sponsor, Iran, whose Shiite Muslim leaders wish to divert world attention from their continuing uranium enrichment program in defiance of UN sanctions. All this came as Iran's other main ally, Syria, appeared to be inching closer to serious peace talks with Israel—a possible further reason for Iran to provoke a fresh conflict in the coming weeks.

Meanwhile two bizarre Palestinian terrorist attacks took place in Jerusalem, both involving bulldozers. The second assault came just hours before American presidential candidate Barack Obama was scheduled to arrive at the nearby King David Hotel. In the Gaza Strip, the June ceasefire between Israel and the extremist Sunni Muslim Hamas group was threatened by more rocket attacks upon nearby Israeli communities. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert—who is likely to be replaced as Kadima party leader during a primary vote scheduled for mid September, thereby losing his grip on power—warned Hamas leaders that a major IDF military operation could still be launched at any time if the ceasefire violations do not end.

REST IN PEACE

Slain IDF soldiers Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev were finally laid to rest in their beloved homeland after being abducted from inside Israel's border with Lebanon on July 12th 2006. An international campaign to secure their release, involving many international dignitaries spurred on by their devoted families, had been conducted ever since. The missing soldiers were part of a five man unit patrolling along the border fence in two army humvees that were suddenly struck by Hizbullah anti-tank rockets from across the border. The three other soldiers were instantly killed in the heinous assault.

Autopsies revealed that Goldwasser sustained a fatal chest wound during the unprovoked attack, while Regev was probably instantly killed when a bullet penetrated his skull, possibly while attempting to flee from infiltrating Hizbullah terrorists. Their bodies were confiscated by the rogue militia and held for ransom, while information concerning their fate was withheld in a transparent attempt by the militant Lebanese group to up the price in any future "prisoner exchange" with the detested "Zionist entity." Israeli army and government leaders had always suspected that both reserve soldiers were killed during the raid, but confirmation only came as their remains were being delivered to Israel as part of the "prisoner swap" brokered by Germany.

Their abductions, and the subsequent deaths of five other soldiers slain later in the day while trying to retrieve the two men, dead or alive, would prove to be the catalyst for a 34 day war with Hizbullah militia forces in Lebanon—callously featuring the longest sustained missile bombardment of civilian population centers in any conflict on this troubled planet since World War Two.

Ehud Goldwasser, who held a degree in environmental engineering studies, was buried just one day before what would have been his 33rd birthday. The somber ceremony, attended by hundreds of Israelis including government and religious officials, was held in the northern border town of Nahariya, where he resided with his wife. The popular seaside resort community suffered heavy Hizbullah missile barrages during the war. His grieving father Shlomo, who had tirelessly campaigned for his beloved son's release, thanked "the entire Jewish nation" for its support during his family's long ordeal, saying stirringly that "this nation is our answer to (Hizbullah leader Hassan) Nasrallah, who is trying to play with our emotions."

Elad Regev, just 26 when abducted and studying pre-law at Tel Aviv's Bar Ilan University, was laid to rest in the city of Haifa, which also suffered many missile strikes during the Second Lebanon War. Both funerals were broadcast live on all three Israeli television channels on what became an unofficial day of mourning throughout the Jewish state.

THE HIGH COST OF HONOR

In exchange for recovering the remains of the two abducted soldiers on July 16th, Israeli leaders agreed to free Samir Kuntar, the most notorious Lebanese terrorist imprisoned in the country. That move—hailed by many in Lebanon and indeed throughout the Arab world as further evidence of Hizbullah's increasingly prominent role in the struggle to "liberate Palestine," i.e. to destroy Israel—was highly criticized by opposition Likud party leaders and many other politicians, along with not a few Israeli commentators. Four other Hizbullah fighters captured during the Second Lebanon War were also released from captivity, along with the remains of 199 Lebanese and Palestinian fighters who fell into IDF hands during or after the 1982 Israeli operation to push Yasser Arafat and his PLO fighters out of the Land of the Cedars.

The 48 year old Kuntar, a member of Lebanon's minority Druze community, was just 16 when

he volunteered to lead a group of four members of the Palestinian “Popular Liberation Front” on a terrorist raid into Israel in 1979. Setting out before midnight from the Lebanese port of Tyre, the group landed in a rubber dingy on a beach located in the very seaside town where Goldwasser was laid to rest. They immediately shot dead a local Israeli policeman who spotted them, and then proceeded to break into the nearby apartment of Danny and Smadat Haran.

Smadar managed to hide in a crawl space with her two year old daughter Yael, along with a neighbor who rushed to their apartment when the policeman was shot dead. But Danny and four year old daughter Einat were taken captive by the terrorist gang. Yael tragically suffocated as her terrified mother tried to suppress her toddlers whimpering in an attempt to spare all three lives.

Danny and Einat were quickly taken to the nearby beach by Kunter and his terrorist comrades as local security personnel hurried to the scene. The Israeli father was then shot dead and tossed in the sea in front of his hysterical young daughter. Kuntar then picked up the screaming four year old Einat and bashed her head against some rocks on the beach. Then to make sure she was dead, he crushed her fractured skull with the butt of his rifle. The brutal young terrorist was given five life sentences by an Israeli court in 1980 (Israel has no official death penalty, although an exception was made for notorious Nazi killer Adolph Eichmann, who was hung to death in 1962).

The Israeli public was especially shocked and sickened when the vicious murderer—freed in exchange for two decomposed bodies—was enthusiastically welcomed as a war hero in Beirut. Greeting him warmly on the afternoon of July 16th at a televised state ceremony were new Lebanese President Michel Suleiman, Prime Minister Fuad Seniora and other high ranking government officials. Many Muslim clerics attended the ceremony, along with a few Christian ones, which particularly irked some Israelis. Many were also upset that the “Hizbullah victory” was highly praised by Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas and openly celebrated in many Palestinian cities and towns.

Hassan Nasrallah made his first public appearance since the war ended on August 14, 2006 at a rally in south Beirut later the same day. With a beaming Kuntar standing next to him, the Muslim cleric crowed over his vile group’s “latest triumph” over Israel. He spoke to cheering crowds comprised mostly of Shiite Lebanese citizens, claiming his ability to secure the release of Kuntar and his death dealing comrades was a sign that Hizbullah was the instrument that Allah would use to annihilate the hated Israel. He pledged to “free the rest of our lands” from Israeli control, which some saw as a reference to other portions of disputed territory along the international border, while others thought he was actually referring to Islam’s claim over the entire biblical Holy Land.

An opinion survey taken in a number of Arab countries in recent months, and coincidentally released the same day as the swap took place, showed that the turbaned Nasrallah is now the most popular regional Arab political figure, with 26% of all respondents choosing him ahead of runner-up Syrian dictator Hafez Assad, picked by 16%. Another 10% named Iran’s Israel-bashing President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as their favorite leader. One Israeli Middle East analyst said the poll, conducted by the Washington DC-based Brookings Institute, was further proof that the Arab world in general reveres strong dictators and thugs over moderate West-leaning leaders.

Not to be outdone by his Lebanese Shiite surrogate, Iran’s senior Islamic clerical leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, vowed just hours after the exchange took place to “cut off the arm” of anyone who would dare attack his country’s nuclear program, mentioning in particular the “Zionist regime” and the US government led by George W. Bush. He further threatened that Bush would be personally “punished even after his term in office is finished” if he orders an American military strike or backs an Israeli one.

The fiery televised speech came just days before Iran rebuffed fresh attempts by European and American leaders, backed by Russia and China, to persuade the Shiite regime to stop its uranium enrichment program—a key component in producing nuclear weapons. The international community gave Iran until early August to halt its program or face additional economic sanctions. Israel has come under stepped up verbal threats from Tehran in recent weeks after a large IDF military exercise was held in June that many Israeli and foreign military analysts said was clearly a dress rehearsal for a possible air force attack upon Iran's extensive nuclear facilities.

OLMERT UNDER FIRE

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert defended his government's controversial decision to set free Kuntar and four other living terrorists for what he had previously warned would likely be just the remains of the two missing soldiers. He noted that Israel's official policy has always been to leave none of its captured or slain soldiers in enemy hands if at all possible. Indeed, many said it was a badge of honor that Israel would pay such a steep price in order to bring closure to the Regev and Goldwasser families and friends, who had endured much anguish and pain over the past two years. Olmert's position was supported by President Shimon Peres, who met with Smadar Haran and others involved in the 1979 Nahariya terror attack, telling them that while "We do not want murderers to go free, we have a moral obligation to bring home soldiers whom we send to defend their country."

Olmert admitted that an 80 page Hizbullah report on missing Israeli airman Ron Arad, handed to Israeli officials as part of the exchange, was "not satisfactory." Other Kadima party cabinet ministers echoed this, with Transportation Minister Saul Mofaz, who was a military commander serving in Lebanon when the pilot was shot down there in 1988, insisting that "Nasrallah knows more about Ron than he is willing to divulge."

The embattled Premier said the contested prisoner release would also make it easier for his government to focus attention on securing freedom for Gilad Shalit, kidnapped by Palestinian Hamas terrorists in June 2006 inside the Israeli border with the Gaza Strip. But critics suggested that the massively lopsided exchange would only serve to increase Hamas demands in indirect Egyptian-sponsored negotiations to secure Shalit's freedom. Some opined that it might even prompt his Palestinian captors to kill the abducted young soldier, who holds dual French and Israeli citizenship, since they would assume that doing so would not significantly lessen their chances of securing a similarly one sided deal.

Olmert is also coming under criticism for agreeing to a ceasefire with Hamas in June, which has only been partially kept by the Palestinians. Officials say the group has used the timeout to step up weapons smuggling into the coastal zone. Meanwhile peace talks with the Palestinian Authority have stalled, prompting one PLO official, Salah Rafat, to warn in late July that the Palestinians might unilaterally declare statehood in the coming months and sever all ties with Israel.

IMMINENT HIZBULLAH ATTACK?

A senior Israeli army officer warned the cabinet on July 22 that Hizbullah is likely to soon launch another major terrorist assault along the border, or possibly fresh missile strikes, in order to "demonstrate that its fight against Israel is not over." IDF Intelligence chief Amos Yadlin added that the extremist Shiite group is receiving large arms shipments from Syria and Iran in preparation for another round of fighting, and is busy reinforcing its positions in south Lebanon.

Yadlin added ominously that several regional countries are also rapidly building up military forces in anticipation of a possible showdown with Israel later this summer. He was thought to be referring to both Iran and Syria, despite the fact that Turkish-mediated indirect peace talks

are continuing between Israel and the Syrian regime. Syrian President Hafez Assad and PM Olmert actually passed close by each other during a mid-July conference in Paris sponsored by French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

Ehud Olmert may not be sitting in the Premier's chair long enough to oversee future decisions affecting war and peace in Israel. Kadima party officials decided on July 21st to hold a leadership primary in mid-September to select someone else to replace him at the party's helm. The embattled former Jerusalem mayor may not even participate in the vote, given continuing police investigations against him and the fact that all opinion polls show he would be trounced by several other candidates, especially Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and Mofaz. Former Shin Bet security chief Avi Dichter and Interior Minister Meir Shitreet are also expected to seek the top spot. Media reports revealed that Olmert and Livni had a vicious argument when the primary vote was announced, with the PM reportedly calling his Foreign Minister "a backstabbing liar." He later bitterly told Israel's Channel Two that Livni "is the least qualified" of the potential candidates to replace him, averring that "she cannot make big decisions, and has never been able to do so."

BIZARRE TERROR IN JERUSALEM

The capital city that Olmert once ruled over was the target of two bizarre Palestinian terrorist assaults during July, leaving several dead and scores wounded and both of the attackers shot dead. On the first day of the month, a 30 year old Palestinian construction worker from the eastern Jerusalem neighborhood of Sur Bahir suddenly exited a construction site and navigated his Caterpillar bulldozer onto Jerusalem's main commercial street, Jaffa Road. He quickly rammed the bulldozer's heavy blade into several cars, crushing them in the process, and then used it to overturn two city buses. Three Israeli women were slaughtered in the unprecedented assault, and dozens of other civilians wounded. The startling attack, which took place close to the international media's main center of operation, Jerusalem Capital Studios, was recorded by several TV film crews.

Three weeks later, a 22 year old Arab construction worker from another eastern Jerusalem neighborhood carried out virtually an identical assault, although this time on King David Street, close to the world renowned hotel which also features the name of Israel's ancient monarch. The incident left several cars and buses damaged or destroyed and around two dozen people wounded. It came just hours after British PM Gordon Brown left the nearby hotel, and just before presumed American Democratic Party candidate Barack Obama arrived for an overnight stay there. Security measures were quickly stepped up for the Illinois Senator's visit. The twin assaults prompted current city mayor Uri Lupolianski to announce that he was considering banning Arab residents of Jerusalem from working on construction sites in Jewish portions of the capital city.

Despite the latest displays of regional malevolence and arrogance against the Lord's chosen people, the God of Israel WILL have His way in the end. In the meantime we can only rest in Him, living our lives in the sure knowledge that "The fear of the Lord leads to life, so that one may sleep satisfied, untouched by evil" (Proverbs 19:23).

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- **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

Dolan's New DVD, "FOR ZION'S SAKE" is now available for purchase. Click the title under **"BOOKSTORE"** for more details.