

Israel Update - August News Review

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Shalom!

Below is this month's Israel news and analysis report. It naturally focuses on Ehud Olmert's announcement that he will step down as Prime Minister after a new Kadima party leader is elected next month. I detail who might follow him as Israel's next leader and what that might mean for the country and region. I also examine continuing high tension along Israel's northern border with Lebanon, where Hizbullah is threatening to attack Israel yet again, and look at recent important developments with the Palestinians and Iran. Russia's resurgence as a possible military threat to Israel is also included.

OLMERT OUT THE DOOR

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert announced in late July that he will step down as Israel's senior government leader after the results of a Kadima party primary vote become public next month. However several of the Premier's loyal party supporters later attempted to put off the September 17 election in order to give the veteran politician more time to negotiate a final peace treaty with the Palestinians. Meanwhile opinion surveys showed the race to follow Olmert tightening in his party, with Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni barely ahead of former defense minister and armed forces chief Shaul Mofaz. Opposition leader Binyamin Netanyahu remains more popular than either Kadima candidate in most of the polls.

The political jockeying came while tensions remained high between Hamas and Israel as more Palestinian rockets landed on Jewish communities in a clear violation of June's ceasefire agreement. This came amid the worst internal Palestinian fighting in the Gaza Strip since Hamas seized control of the small coastal zone in June 2007. Meanwhile recent tensions with the Palestinian Authority eased a bit after the Israeli cabinet agreed in mid-August to free nearly 200 Palestinian prisoners in a goodwill gesture to PA leaders. The decision was condemned by many opposition politicians as yet another government betrayal of Israel's vital security interests.

In the north, army forces kept a close eye on suspicious Hizbullah movements amid additional reports that the radical Lebanese Shiite movement may be preparing for another round of fighting in the coming days. Hizbullah leaders announced they will attack Israel if Iran's ongoing nuclear program is targeted by the Israeli military.

Officials were also warily monitoring indications that Russia is preparing to sell more high tech weapons systems to nearby Syria. The internationally condemned Russian military push into the small neighboring country of Georgia was also being watched with increasing trepidation in Jerusalem. Concerns increased sharply when a Russian army general angrily pointed out that Israel has significantly helped arm Georgia in recent years, in apparent cooperation with the United States which strongly supports the country's bid to join the NATO alliance.

PRIME MINISTER VOWS TO RESIGN

Ehud Olmert is apparently destined to become one of Israel's shortest serving prime ministers with his testy surprise announcement on July 30 that he will step down as head of government

when a new Kadima party leader is chosen in September's scheduled primary vote. While not even attempting to hide his intense anger over being essentially forced out of office by his own party, the embattled PM said he would not throw his hat into the primary ring due to "the mudslinging crusade which is being conducted against me, even by decent people who are truly concerned for the state and its image." He added that the purported slander campaign "brings up a question that I cannot and will not avoid: What is more important, my personal justice, or the public good?"

Olmert lashed out at his opponents without specifically naming any of them. He maintained that "almost from day one, I had to repel vicious attacks while making critical decisions that are pertinent to the security of Israel and its existence." Failing to even mention the six police probes into possible criminal activity committed by him, the departing Premier complained that "things have been blown completely out of proportion. Have I made mistakes throughout my long years of activity? Definitely yes, and I regret and am sorry for them. But is the true picture being presented to the public? Definitely not."

The embattled Prime Minister—who has faced fierce political firestorms ever since he took his country to war against the heavily armed Hizbullah militia just months after taking office following Ariel Sharon's massive stroke in early 2006—pledged to carry on negotiating peace with the Palestinian Authority and Syria. Speaking with palpable emotion, he defended his record, averring that "Israel's position has improved" since he came to power and crowing that he was "proud of these achievements." He also insisted he would eventually prove to be innocent of all the criminal allegations against him.

Olmert again stated that he will immediately resign if state prosecutors decide to indict him. The PM was questioned for several hours by police investigators two days after proclaiming that he will not enter the Kadima primary race. The latest probe reportedly focused on significant evidence that he had double billed the government and various private organizations for airplane flights to the United States and elsewhere and then pocketed the surplus money allotted to him. Analysts said the evidence was substantial enough to prompt a formal indictment at virtually any time.

In another clear sign that Olmert's ship is sinking fast, his top aid suddenly resigned just one day after the PM announced he will not participate in the Kadima leadership vote. Yoram Turbowicz, who has served as Olmert's chief of staff, main envoy to Washington and most trusted advisor since 2006, has also been in charge of Israel's indirect peace talks with Syria.

Although Turbowicz said he will continue to serve as an unofficial advisor to Olmert for the time being, government officials admitted that the peace talks, being mediated by Turkey, will probably languish until a new Israeli leader comes to power. This came as the Israeli Ma'ariv newspaper reported that a peace framework deal has already been hammered out that features a commitment by the Assad regime to break all ties with Iran and stop arming Hizbullah forces in Lebanon in exchange for a complete Israeli pullout from the strategic Golan Heights, captured from Syria in 1967.

THE RACE IS ON!

Most of Olmert's Kadima cabinet colleagues welcomed his decision not to contest the upcoming primary, although several said it was with sorrow that they did so. Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni was visibly exuberant over her chance to become Israel's next leader, following in the footsteps of the late Golda Meir who was the country's first and so far only female premier. Transport

Minister Shaul Mofaz, who believes he can beat Livni in the mid September party vote due to his previous vast military experience as both the overall armed forces commander and later as defense minister, likewise did not hide his enthusiasm at being given the sudden chance to seize the top post.

The two leading candidates are expected to compete in a runoff election one week after the initial primary vote unless either one captures the required minimum 50% in the first go around, as current polls suggest they won't. Two other politicians are participating in the election, Internal Security Minister and former Mossad chief Avi Dichter and Interior Minister Meir Shitreet. However the two politicians are significantly behind the leading contenders in recent opinion surveys. The polls show that in the anticipated second contest, Livni would handily beat Mofaz by around eight points.

Analysts expect President Shimon Peres will ask whoever wins the primary contest to immediately begin attempts to form an alternative government to the Olmert-led coalition. The Premier is expected to remain in office until that process is completed. However most Israeli political analysts say that whether it is Livni or Mofaz who prevails, he or she will only be able to form a temporary government before new national elections are held late this year or in early 2009.

Opinion surveys in August showed Binyamin Netanyahu prevailing in a vote to elect a new Knesset, although Livni has been creeping up in most polls in recent weeks. Several show her either neck and neck or slightly ahead of the Likud leader. Surveys published in several newspapers during August showed a Livni-Led Kadima party would capture at least 30 seats in the Israeli parliament, amounting to one fourth of the chamber, with the Likud only receiving around 27 seats. Defense Minister Ehud Barak's Labor party would end up with no more than 14 seats if national elections were held today. However if Mofaz headed up the Kadima list, the surveys predict Netanyahu's party would prevail, with Labor remaining firmly in third place. The poor projections did not stop Barak from echoing John McCain's critique of Barack Obama in America by stating that Tzipi Livni "is not qualified to rule the country."

UNITY GOVERNMENT?

Just after meeting with United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon in New York, Tzipi Livni said she will attempt to form a broad unity government with all Zionist parties currently represented in the Knesset if she becomes Kadima's leader. This would include the one she was once a member of, the opposition Likud party. "We must leave the small considerations aside and create unity, both inwardly and outwardly," she told reporters, adding that the Israeli public "desperately needs to have its faith restored" in its top government leadership, given that the past four prime ministers have all been charged with various violations of public trust. However Netanyahu rejected her unity government appeal, averring that Kadima's leadership has failed in its attempts to govern the country and should step aside and let others grip the national steering wheel.

A possible spanner was thrown into the primary works on August 20 when party judges serving on Kadima's internal court announced that the contest was being suspended for the time being. This came after several of Olmert's allies petitioned the judicial body, claiming that several party rules were technically violated when the primary was announced in July. Although the judges agreed to suspend the vote, most political analysts believe it will end up being held as originally scheduled.

The petitioners made clear that they did not necessarily want the primary to be permanently cancelled, but only to be organized on a more solid basis. They noted this would take some time, giving Olmert a few extra weeks or months in power. One of them, an Arab party activist named Hussein Suleiman, admitted that he and his backers are hoping any additional time might allow the exiting PM to complete at least a framework peace accord with his Palestinian counterpart, Mahmoud Abbas.

PALESTINIANS AT WAR

Fierce clashes broke out in the Gaza Strip in early August between armed Hamas militiamen and their PLO Fatah adversaries. Eleven Palestinians, most of them gunmen, were killed in the heavy street fighting, with dozens of others injured. Hamas members blocked the roads to local hospitals in a successful attempt to prevent wounded Fatah gunmen from being treated. Abbas then appealed to Prime Minister Olmert to allow the wounded men and their families to leave the sealed off Gaza Strip in order to receive treatment in Israeli hospitals, which was quickly granted.

The 188 Palestinians who fled were said to be mostly members of the Hilles family, a Gaza clan that openly backs Abbas and opposed the Hamas coup last year. After 23 men received medical treatment, the Palestinians were transferred to Jericho, which is under full PA jurisdiction. Initially Abbas asked Israel to return the refugees back to the Gaza Strip, fearing that if they stayed in PA-controlled territory it could ignite a mass exodus of thousands of other Gaza Palestinians who similarly oppose the violent Muslim fundamentalist movement. However when 35 of the refugees reentered the Hamas-run area on their own and were promptly jailed, Abbas accepted the Israeli offer to transfer the rest to the Jordan valley Arab town.

Later in August, Hamas reportedly rejected a fresh Egyptian offer to help end the internal Palestinian bloodletting. Details of the proposal were published on August 19 by a Cairo newspaper. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak suggested that Hamas allow a 3,000 men pan Arab peacekeeping force into the Gaza Strip, which would be stationed near strategic Palestinian government and security centers. However Israel Radio later reported that Hamas leaders were quick to dismiss the suggestion.

ROCKETS RED GLARE

Israeli security officials expressed grave concern when militiamen from the Hamas-led “Popular Resistance Committees” unveiled what they claimed was a new longer range version of a rocket named after deceased Egyptian President Gamal Nasser, who led the united Arab campaign to destroy Israel in 1967. The so-called “Nasser-4” rocket was said by the militiamen to have a range of 16 miles, which would be twice the distance the current version can travel. If true, the rocket could easily reach targets in the coastal city of Ashdod where Israel’s second largest commercial seaport is located.

Israeli government spokesman Mark Regev said the latest Palestinian rocket unveiling was a clear violation of the six month ceasefire between Israel and Hamas hammered out in Cairo earlier this year. He warned that Israel “has the right to act” if the timeout is merely “serving as a front for extremists in Gaza to rearm and regroup.” Officials believe that Hamas is indeed using the relative calm to build up its weapons stockpile and to induct new members into its estimated 20,000 man militia force in preparation for another round of rocket attacks upon Israeli communities when the ceasefire expires early next year, if not before.

All border crossings into Gaza were sealed later in the month when a Palestinian Kassam rocket landed in Israel's Negev desert. Defense Minister Barak ordered the move, saying no food or other supplies would be allowed into the coastal zone until a new security assessment was made by senior government and military leaders. The rocket caused no casualties or damage, but did set off Israel's early warning sirens, forcing thousands of nearby citizens to take immediate shelter. It was not the first time the odd rocket has been launched into Israel since the shaky ceasefire went into effect in late June. Earlier incidents also prompted a temporary shutdown of the border crossings, which have been frequently targeted for attack by Palestinian terrorists.

The Iranian-backed Islamic Jihad group revealed in mid August that it is busy training dozens of females to act as suicide bombers if Israeli military forces enter the Gaza Strip. International film crews were allowed to record the women as they received instructions on how to conceal explosives under their multilayered Muslim clothing. Some of the Arab women said they were "inspired" to use their own bodies as destructive weapons by Fatma Al-Najar, a 57 year old grandmother who injured three IDF soldiers when she blew herself up at a Gaza checkpoint in 2006. Meanwhile Hamas staged a mass drill of its growing militia force on the ruins of the Israeli Netzarim settlement, evacuated along with 20 other Jewish communities by Ariel Sharon in 2005. Security officials say several other groups are also preparing for an eventual Israeli military operation into Gaza in the coming months.

SETTING THE CAPTIVES FREE

Ehud Olmert persuaded a majority of his cabinet on August 17 to approve his proposal to release nearly 200 Palestinian prisoners, most of them Fatah members, as a "goodwill gesture" designed to support PA leader Mahmoud Abbas. The PM told his junior ministers it is "a gesture to Abbas and the Palestinian people for the upcoming month of Ramadan." He insisted that the release, expected to take place before the end of the month, "will strengthen the peace process and moderate Palestinians, and demonstrate clearly that the path of moderation and of negotiations is the path that can deliver results." Foreign Minister Livni supported the release while Transport Minister Mofaz opposed it.

Many opposition politicians criticized the decision. They especially objected to the fact that at least two terrorists "with blood on their hands," meaning that they directly killed Israeli citizens, were set to be included in the release. Israel's security officials also initially argued against the release, with Shin Bet chief Yuval Diskin reportedly telling Olmert it would only encourage other Palestinians to engage in violent acts since they would assume they will eventually be set free if apprehended. However Diskin later told local journalists that the scheduled release "creates pressure on Hamas that is likely to accelerate negotiations over Gilad Shalit," the IDF soldier kidnapped by Hamas fighters in June 2006. But he also warned that "the gesture will not make Hamas more flexible over its demands since the organization sees that Israel is releasing prisoners with blood on their hands, which merely causes Hamas to harden its position."

THE BEAR IS BACK!

Israeli leaders squirmed in their seats when several Russian government leaders blasted Israel for supplying weapons and training to Georgia's military in recent years. PM Olmert did not publicly speak about the Kremlin attack, but did order all weapons transfers to Georgia immediately suspended, at least until invading Russian soldiers pull out of Georgian territory. Syrian dictator Bashar Assad later traveled to Moscow to hold talks with Kremlin leaders, where he asked them to supply him with new Russian MIG jets and offered to host advanced Russian Iskander missiles, with a 200 mile range, on his soil.

Meanwhile officials expressed concern that the provocative Russian military action might spell the end of Moscow's cooperation with the West in attempts to force Iran to halt its nuclear program. This came as militant Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad once again called for Israel's imminent destruction, telling a Turkish newspaper that "the life of this regime has come to an end."

Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah maintained that Georgia's "defeat" was another reflection of Israel's supposed crumbling military power. The statement came as Defense Minister Barak revealed that he is preparing the IDF for another round of fighting with Hizbullah militia forces, which he said had been "significantly strengthened in the last couple years...by the transfer of advanced weapons systems from Syria to Hizbullah."

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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).

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