

Israel Update - October News Review

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SHALOM!

Below is this month's Israel news and analysis report, which focuses on Foreign Minister's Tzipi Livni's failure to form a new coalition government, meaning Israel is heading to fresh elections early next year. Late reports say the date will probably February 10. The news that Israel is heading for a national vote was confirmed by President Shimon Peres today.

The dramatic news comes as tensions remain high in the region, ratcheted up just overnight after it was revealed that American helicopters struck suspected terrorist targets inside of Syria's border with Iraq. The action has been strongly denounced by Syrian officials today. I also examine Arab-Jewish clashes which rocked a northern Israeli town during the month, escalating inter-Palestinian tensions which could explode into new violence in the coming months, Muslim allegations that a Jewish conspiracy is behind the worldwide economic meltdown, and how Israel is responding to the latest annihilationist statements from Iran. These are increasingly dramatic days indeed, with lots more ahead. Keep your eyes focused on the Lord while interceding for shalom to reign in Jerusalem.

Heading To New Elections

Israeli prime minister designate Tzipi Livni announced on October 26 that she had failed to put together a new coalition government after struggling to do so for over one month. This came soon after President Shimon Peres granted her a two week extension to form a government. When her coalition building efforts fell apart, Livni called for new national elections to be held within three months time, meaning sometime early next year.

Despite signing a preliminary coalition accord with the 19 seat Labor party, the five week negotiating period proved insufficient to forge a majority 61 seat government after the 12 seat Sephardic Orthodox Shas party balked at joining her dovish government. This came in the wake of outgoing Premier Ehud Olmert's controversial revelation in late September that Kadima party leaders are prepared to hand over the eastern half of Jerusalem and most of Judea and Samaria to the Palestinians as part of a final peace deal.

Understanding that their religious rank and file would fiercely resist such a handover, Shas politicians announced on October 24 they would not join a Kadima-led coalition, and would instead work to hold new Knesset elections. Most public opinion surveys predict a fresh national vote will bring opposition Likud party leader Binyamin Netanyahu back to power. Analysts said Livni's apparent failure to form a viable government spelled the end of the Bush administration's frenetic efforts to push through a final Israeli-Palestinian peace deal before George W. Bush leaves office next January.

Livni's efforts were earlier frustrated when a small party she thought was in the bag—the seven seat Pensioners party—suddenly pulled out of coalition negotiations, saying Kadima's offers were not sufficient to make them jump on board. Representing Israel's growing retired population, the party's legislators complained they had not received the benefits promised them by Olmert when they joined his coalition in 2006.

Meanwhile most Israelis continued to focus on the growing international financial crisis during the month as the Tel Aviv stock market echoed all others around the globe in losing substantial value.

Officials warned that thousands of jobs will probably be lost in the country as the crisis deepens, especially in the tourism and high tech fields.

A Palestinian Hamas terrorist stabbed an elderly Jerusalem resident to death late in the month after wounding a local policeman in an attack in the southern Gilo neighborhood. In the Gaza Strip, Hamas officials vowed again to violently oust Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas if he does not voluntarily give up his presidential post next January.

Tensions remained high along Israel's northern border with Lebanon as the extremist Hizbullah movement again threatened to attack the Jewish State. Further east, Iran's Shiite fundamentalist leaders indicated they might take preemptive military action against Israel if they determine that the Jewish state is preparing to launch an assault on their internationally outlawed nuclear program.

Shas Says No To New Government

Just days after signing a preliminary coalition agreement with the Labor party, Kadima party leader Tzipi Livni was shocked when the Orthodox Shas party announced it would not join her government. Analysts agree it would be impossible for Livni to form a stable, long lasting coalition without Shas support. Both Labor and Shas had been the mainstays of outgoing Prime Minister Olmert's coalition, formed in May 2006.

Shas spokesman Roy Lachmanovich issued a statement on October 24 saying his party was unable to reach agreement with Livni over two main issues—the future status of Jerusalem and social welfare benefits for the poor. "Shas has asked for only two things: real financial help for the weak in Israeli society, and protection for Jerusalem, which is not some merchandise for sale," the statement said. Party leader Eli Yishai later said the decision to stay out of a Livni coalition was final.

Senior aids to the new Kadima party leader denounced the Shas action, claiming that Foreign Minister Livni had offered increased child allowances for the poor that Shas leaders had initially accepted. After she told Peres she had failed to form a new government, Livni told the media that "I was willing to make sacrifices to build a coalition government, but I was unwilling to pawn Israel's financial and political future to do so."

The Foreign Minister's advisors said that on the explosive issue of Jerusalem, Kadima had suggested that Shas legislators issue a letter stating their main objectives concerning the final status of Judaism's most sacred city on earth, which would then be "taken into account" as negotiations continue with the Palestinian Authority. But Shas leaders apparently saw this as a ruse, knowing full well that Kadima intends to offer full sovereignty to the Palestinians over the hallowed Temple Mount in Jerusalem's Old City, as Olmert openly stated in a media interview to mark the Jewish New Year in late September.

In the wake of the Shas action, most political pundits now expect new Knesset elections to be held before March of next year, and possibly as early as the end of January. Under Israeli law, they must occur within three months of any final failure to form a new government, meaning they will probably take place in mid to late February. Polls show Likud leader Netanyahu somewhat ahead of Livni, with Labor leader Ehud Barak substantially behind both of them. Shas would probably maintain its current Knesset strength, along with most other smaller parties.

Arab-Jewish Riots Rock Coastal City

Violent clashes erupted between Arab and Jewish residents of the northern Israeli town of Acre (also known as Acco) after an Arab man provocatively drove his car through a Jewish neighborhood at high speed during the onset of the annual Yom Kippur holy day, when most Jewish vehicles around the

country remain off the roads. Dozens of angry Jews chased the middle aged man, named Jamal Taufik, as he sped through the Acre streets toward his nearby home. Officials said he barely escaped alive, aided by local Israeli police. Although there is no formal law against driving through Jewish neighborhoods on Judaism's most sacred day of the year, Israel's million plus Arab citizens realize it is considered insulting, if not inflammatory, to do so.

Hundreds of masked Arab youths quickly took to the streets after it was falsely reported over local mosque loudspeakers that the speeding driver had been apprehended and killed by a Jewish mob. Five days of intense rioting followed as Arabs burned dozens of Jewish cars and vandalized storefronts in the ancient coastal city, which served as the main port during the European Crusades. Dozens of young Israeli Jews responded by torching two Arab homes and other targets. Israeli police struggled to contain the unsettling Acre violence, and to prevent it from spreading all across the Galilee region, as occurred in the wake of the outbreak of the Palestinian Al Aksa attrition war in September 2000.

The crisis was later defused when Taufik appeared before a Knesset committee to apologize for his action. Stating that he is an observant Muslim, and therefore was not drunk at the time of the incident as reported in several Israeli newspapers, Taufik added that "All I wanted to do was to get home before the holiday. I have made a mistake, and want to ask for forgiveness." Israeli officials accepted his apology and urged that calm be restored to the mixed Arab-Jewish town, located due north of the large Israeli city of Haifa. Officials had feared an eruption of country-wide violence if rioting had spread to the nearby port city.

Hamas Attack In Jerusalem

After several months of relative calm, a fresh Palestinian terror attack was launched inside of Israel on October 23. This came just days after several attempts were made to smuggle explosives into Israeli checkpoints north of Jerusalem. An elderly Jerusalem resident—86 year old Avraham Ozeri—was stabbed to death minutes after a 20 year old knife-wielding Palestinian terrorist from a village south of Bethlehem was stopped for questioning by Jerusalem policemen. A 30 year old officer was also stabbed and seriously injured during the incident, which occurred in the south Jerusalem neighborhood of Gilo.

The knifings took place after two local policemen asked the assailant for his identity card—a routine procedure to determine if he was legally inside Jerusalem's municipal boundaries. Officials say hundreds of Palestinians without valid work permits enter the Gilo neighborhood illegally each month, scaling a security barrier that was constructed several years ago along the border with PA-controlled territory in nearby Bethlehem.

A Jerusalem police statement said the young assailant, Muhammad Al Baden, was shot and disarmed soon after the stabbings took place. The quick action came when two nearby armed Israeli civilians ran after the Palestinian assailant, shooting and wounding him before pinning him to the ground until additional security personnel arrived at the residential scene. Israeli army soldiers later entered Al Baden's village of Tekoa to interrogate some of his relatives and friends. Several were taken in for additional questioning.

The Muslim fundamentalist Hamas movement took immediate "credit" for the latest terrorist assault. A Hamas statement called the attack "a natural response to continuing Zionist aggression against innocent Palestinian civilians in the Gaza Strip." Of course, the group did not mention that Israeli soldiers and over 8,000 civilians entirely evacuated the coastal strip in 2005, as demanded by Hamas and other Palestinian groups, and that the economic blockade imposed on the area earlier this year was in response to a series of unprovoked Palestinian rocket assaults on nearby Israeli civilian centers.

End Of The Truce?

Gaza-based terrorists fired a Kassam rocket into Israeli territory just two days before the Jerusalem stabbing attack. The rocket landed in open ground north of the Gaza Strip, causing no damage or injuries. Still, it was a clear and serious violation of the four month old Egyptian-negotiated ceasefire between Hamas and Israel.

In response to the rocket attack, Defense Minister Ehud Barak ordered all border crossings into the Gaza Strip temporarily closed, preventing fresh food and fuel supplies from entering the Palestinian coastal zone. This came several days after Israeli community leaders serving around the Gaza Strip were advised to step up security alerts in the face of intelligence reports that fresh Kassam launchings were being planned by Hamas and the smaller Islamic Jihad group, which takes its orders directly from Iran.

Hamas leaders made clear during October that they will probably end the six month ceasefire that was indirectly negotiated between them and Israeli officials in June. If so, Israeli civilian communities around the Gaza Strip can expect a river of fresh rocket attacks around the end of this year. Some military analysts expect the time out to come to an end before then, possibly followed by Israeli army action designed to sever Hamas control of the Palestinian coastal zone. Israeli soldiers remain on high alert in the area, ready for any possible action that may be ordered by the government.

Inter-Palestinian Tensions Rising Again

Palestinian Authority security officials announced in late October that over 500 PA policemen would soon be deployed in the holy city of Hebron, in coordination with Israel. The move was seen as yet another attempt to shore up PA control in the wake of ongoing Hamas threats to oust PA security forces from Judea and Samaria. The city—sacred to both Muslims and Jews—is a known Hamas stronghold.

Hamas again warned Palestinian Authority leader and Fatah party chairman Mahmoud Abbas that he risks an imminent full scale revolt inside portions of Judea and Samaria, currently controlled by PA forces assisted by the Israeli army. In an apparent effort to help deflect such a possible coup attempt, Abbas announced in late October that he would dismiss General Intelligence commander Tawfik Tirawi, as demanded by Hamas. He and another man that Hamas wants fired—Diab Al Ali—have been heavily involved in ongoing PA security operations against Hamas agents operating inside Jordan's former West Bank.

Israeli analysts say the PA crackdown on Muslim fundamentalist activists, which has led to the arrest of around 1,500 Hamas-linked Palestinians in recent weeks, is crucial if Abbas is to prevent a coup attempt against his rule early next year when his presidential term is set to expire. Abbas has hinted he will seek to stay in office for at least another year without new elections in order to finalize a peace deal with Israel.

With tensions rising between the rival Palestinian factions, Egyptian officials stepped up their efforts during October to secure some sort of understanding that might head off fresh Hamas-Fatah armed clashes. Despite the fact that the reconciliation talks were reported to be going fairly well, Israeli analysts warned that Hamas leaders seem determined to oust Abbas as PA president, replacing him with former PA Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh or some other Hamas official. They add that PLO Fatah representatives are unlikely to accept such a situation, at least not while Hamas remains in control of the Gaza Strip, which the group violently seized from PA security forces in June 2007.

“Jewish Conspiracy”

Extremist Iranian President Ahmadinejad issued yet another anti-Semitic diatribe in October, calling the world's only Jewish-run state “a germ of corruption” that must be eliminated from the regional map. In his typical hysterical fashion, he told Iranian reporters that “a small handful of Zionists, with a very intricate organization, have taken over the power centers of the world,” adding that the alleged secret group of “some 2,000 greedy individuals...want to take over all the peoples and countries on earth.”

Given Iran's barely disguised nuclear weapons program, the extremist Shiite leader added ominously that “the strong arm of the peoples will wipe these germs of corruption off the face of the earth.” Earlier on his way to speak at UN headquarters in New York, the Iranian president indicated that his country might preempt any possible Israeli military strike against its publicly declared uranium enrichment program with action of its own. This came as several Israeli news web sites reported that Iran might be able to assemble a nuclear warhead as early as next February.

The Israeli public watched with growing concern as Wall Street and other world stock markets suffered massive sell offs during October—including the Tel Aviv market. As they did so, Hamas chimed in with an indictment of its own. Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhum issued a statement in Gaza City on the group's behalf, claiming that the “American Jewish lobby” was behind the financial meltdown. He averred that a “bad banking system was put into place and controlled by the Jewish lobby,” adding with glee that Allah was bringing due judgment upon the United States for its substantial financial and military support over the years for Israel. The Hamas statement came as a sharp upswing in anti-Semitic statements were posted on the internet, most of them similarly blaming Jews for the international economic meltdown.

Poison

Another regional Muslim leader who regularly blasts Israel is Hizbullah's nefarious Sheik Hassan Nasrallah. On October 22, an Iraqi web site quoted diplomatic sources stating that the prominent Lebanese Shiite cleric had been poisoned the week before. Nasrallah was reportedly saved from probable death by Iranian doctors who were rushed to Beirut to help spare his life. The web site claimed that the fiery Hizbullah chief was in critical condition for several days. The unnamed diplomatic sources maintained that Israeli agents were suspected of involvement in the alleged assassination attempt.

While acknowledging that the Nasrallah had been out of the public eye for several days, a prominent Lebanese Hizbullah parliament member called the Iraqi report “a fabrication.” Nasrallah himself appeared on television a few days later to call the allegation that he was poisoned “psychological warfare,” which he claimed was part of a deliberate misinformation campaign launched by Israel.

Whether the Hizbullah leader was poisoned or not, Israeli analysts said the Iraqi report underlined ongoing high tensions between Israel and the rogue Iranian-backed militia group, which again threatened in October to launch fresh rocket and ground assaults upon the Jewish state as part of its supposed efforts to secure a tiny strip of disputed border land located near the base of the contested Golan Heights. Israeli leaders insist the area, known as the Sheba Farms, is actually captured Syrian territory and not seized Lebanese land as Hizbullah claims.

In a mid-October report released by United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki Moon, Hizbullah was accurately characterized as “a threat to Middle East security.” The UN chief called upon the Lebanese militant group and Israel to “stop threatening each other” via their respective media outlets, and also criticized Syria for continuing to smuggle rockets and other weapons to the rogue Lebanese militia in violation of the UN ceasefire accord which halted the Lebanese group's 2006 war with Israel.

Arms Race Escalates

Regional security analysts said in mid October that for the first time in several decades, Israel will spend more money on weapons this year than the oil-rich Arab country of Saudi Arabia. They said Jerusalem will shell out over 20 billion dollars by the end of 2008, mostly to purchase defense systems designed to protect the Israel from a possible missile assault from Iran. This comes as Iran's growing army is preparing for a major military exercise near its northwestern border with Turkey, which is allied with the United States and Israel.

Meanwhile the Israeli Air Force conducted its own military exercise the first half of October, designed to test readiness for a possible simultaneous missile barrage from several neighboring hostile states. The exercise began with a simulated Syrian missile strike upon an unnamed Israeli city, followed one day later by additional Syrian launches upon other targets, supported by missile assaults from Lebanese Hizbullah forces and Shiite Iran. Israeli security analysts say that such a three pronged missile attack upon their small country, supported by local Hamas rocket firings, is a genuine possibility, most likely featuring some chemical and/or nuclear warheads.

With events in Israel and all around this troubled planet increasingly seeming to be swirling totally out of control, it is essential to recall that the God of Israel is much greater than any of the disturbing circumstances that confront us. Indeed, "Great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel!" (Isaiah 12:6).

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- **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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