

Israel Update - January News Review

By David Dolan
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Below is this month's Israel news review and analysis report, naturally focusing on the intense three week war between Israel and Palestinian Hamas movement. It is of course impossible to cover something as significant as this conflict was in just one report, but I have striven to give a fair overview of what went on, the immediate implications of that, and what the possible future effects might be.

It is remarkable that the Israeli civilian and military death toll was not significantly larger than it was, as detailed below, and one can only assume that prayer made a big difference. Many more Palestinian non-combatants were killed or wounded in the conflict than Israeli ones, but that is sadly to be expected when their leaders deliberately shoot at Israeli civilians on a regular basis, meaning return fire is bound to come upon them sooner or later. Also their leaders do seem to use their own people as human shields at times. We can only hope that the Hamas movement's iron grip will continue to weaken over the million plus Arab residents of the Gaza Strip.

I recently authored a special background article on the Hamas movement for the Israel My Glory magazine, published by Friends of Israel in the American state of New Jersey. We hope that the rest of 2009 will be quieter in the land, but with Iran still developing its nuclear program while making additional bombastic statements about Israel's supposed coming destruction, and with Hizbullah still rearming in the north, that may not be the case. Already we have broken all records by having three separate conflicts in one decade...the Al Aksa uprising from September 2000 until around 2004, the Second Lebanon War in 2006, and now a significant conflict with Hamas, not to mention a major war beginning in 2003 in nearby Iraq. So we can probably expect that the time remaining in this dramatic decade will be interesting as well!

Israel Regains Credibility in War with Hamas

By David Dolan

After nearly four years of frequent Palestinian rocket and mortar attacks upon Israeli civilian centers in the vicinity of the Gaza Strip, the government in Jerusalem finally launched a major military operation against the militant Hamas movement which has illegally ruled the small coastal zone since June 2007. The operation, dubbed Cast Lead, began on the Sabbath day during Hanukkah just after Christmas, and ended with a unilateral Israeli ceasefire declaration, which went into effect before dawn on January 18 despite the fact that some Palestinian rockets were still fired into Israel after that. Hamas only accepted the ceasefire a few hours later, declaring its forces had been victorious in the conflict—an assertion not remotely shared by independent observers.

In all, three Israeli civilians and ten soldiers were killed during the three week conflict (four of the dead IDF soldiers were mistakenly struck down by "friendly" Israeli fire in the heat of battle). This was a significantly smaller number than officials and analysts had anticipated when the campaign was being carefully planned. Hamas television falsely claimed that over 80 soldiers had perished in the conflict while "brave resistance fighters" successfully captured other soldiers (none were actually abducted). The reports also erroneously maintained that air force helicopters had been shot down.

Hamas and its allies fired over 800 rockets into Israel during the war, hitting targets further away from the Gaza Strip than ever before, including the strategic port city of Ashdod located less than 20 miles south of Israel's main urban center, and the city of Beersheva, not far from Israel's strategic Dimona nuclear reactor—which Iran and Hizbullah have threatened to destroy in any further conflict involving them.

Still, the Israeli civilian death toll was remarkably small considering the large number of rockets involved, although there were many close calls: and well over a million Israeli civilians were forced to rush to shelters with little or no advance warning throughout the conflict. Officials said 28 civilians were severely injured in the attacks, and another 37 were moderately wounded. The relatively minute civilian and military death toll was termed miraculous by some rabbis and politicians, calling to mind the 1991 Gulf War when Saddam Hussein aimed his powerful Scud missiles at Tel Aviv and Haifa, with no direct deaths reported in the unprecedented and unprovoked barrage.

Triumph For Israel

Most military experts both at home and abroad agreed that the Gaza conflict was a major success for Israel, going quite far to restore the Jewish State's battered military credibility—and therefore significantly enhancing future deterrence power—after the inconclusive outcome of the 2006 war with Lebanese Hizbullah militia forces. Israeli officials were relieved that the hostile anti-Israel Lebanese group did not actively join the fighting, although the military was fully prepared for that possibility, and remains on heightened alert for any possible post-conflict surprise. Several rockets were fired on two occasions from Lebanon into northern Israel during the Gaza battle, probably by Palestinian groups.

On the Palestinian side, the unavoidable Israeli military operation led to yet another river of blood, taking the lives of nearly 1,300 people, with over 5,000 others reportedly wounded. Although Israeli intelligence officials believe that at least half of the dead and a majority of the wounded were active Hamas and Islamic Jihad fighters or political operatives. Hamas claimed that it lost only 48 warriors in the three week war—a contention that was quickly dismissed by foreign observers and the Israeli army. Hundreds of non combatant Palestinians sadly also perished; over 40 alone when a school located in a United Nations outpost sheltering civilians was bombed by Israeli air force jets. Even though Israeli officials insisted that their aircraft were only responding to Hamas fire from the UN location—a well known and despicable tactic going back to Yasser Arafat's days in Beirut of deliberately using fellow Arabs sheltering in hospitals, schools and public buildings as human shields—the international condemnations of Israel were quick to come.

Most military analysts agree that the intense winter war was not the end of the story, with some foreign experts and politicians even complaining that Israeli forces did not go far enough in uprooting the anti-peace Hamas movement from the Gaza Strip, as was the case with Hizbullah in 2006. Most predict that Hamas will now rearm, with Iran's already declared assistance, getting ready for the next round of conflict in the coming months or years.

Soon after the ceasefire was declared by Ehud Olmert, the race to succeed him as Prime Minister in national elections scheduled for February 10 got back on the fast track. Official campaigning had been suspended by all political parties as the nation battled Hamas. Although the popular military operation—supported by over 80% of the public according to opinion surveys—boosted the fortunes of Olmert's Kadima party, as it did Defense Minister and Labor party leader Ehud Barak's personal standing, election polls indicate that opposition leader Binyamin Netanyahu is still very likely to become the next premier. Meanwhile the discovery of a huge natural gas reservoir under the sea off of Haifa's coastline was announced just hours after the conflict ended, which should give Israel's struggling economy a much needed jolt.

The Camel's Back Is Broken

Israel's longsuffering patience with the Hamas movement was finally broken soon after the Egypt-brokered ceasefire was officially ended by the militant Sunni Muslim group on December 19. When some 200 rockets and mortar shells came crashing down onto Israeli homes and fields around the Gaza Strip during the following week, the decision was made by Ehud Olmert's security cabinet on December 27 to let loose the powerful Israeli air and ground military forces against the country's most implacable Arab enemy. The "Cast Lead" operation was unleashed that afternoon with a pre-planned and well calibrated wave of intense air force strikes on Hamas targets in the southern Gaza Strip, followed quickly by a second wave in the central and northern sectors of the fenced coastal zone. Over 60 aircraft took part in the opening stages of the operation, the largest single air assault upon Palestinian targets since the 1967 Six Day war.

International media reports quoted senior Hamas operatives and politicians as saying that the scope and power of the initial Israeli air force blast caught the Iranian-and Syrian backed terror group totally by surprise. Analysts said the less than impressive Israeli air campaign against Hizbullah forces and rocket positions in Lebanon during the summer of 2006, followed by a belated and disorganized ground operation, left Hamas with a false sense that Israel was no longer the military giant it once was—as was loudly proclaimed after the Second Lebanon War by Hizbullah, Syrian and Iranian leaders. In summary, Hamas officials simply believed the bloated rhetoric that Israel was now merely a "weak spider's web" that could be easily broken, as stated by Hizbullah's notorious leader Sheik Hassan Nasrallah. Instead, the once vaulted Israeli Air Force fully regained its well earned international reputation as one of the best fighting machines anywhere on earth—to the chagrin of Hamas and its radical Muslim allies—even if the pilots faced no significant counterforce against them.

Still, Hamas leaders confidently boasted that their estimated 20,000 strong trained militia force would gain the upper hand when Israeli army ground forces joined the battle, as they did on January 5. But that proved to be empty nonsense as well, with troops fighting with remarkable precision, planning, endurance and dedication, vastly outclassing their armed Palestinian opponents. This was most blatantly proved when the IDF death toll—expected by many officials and experts to rival the 119 brave soldiers who perished in the Lebanon conflict—proved to be remarkably small, given the fierce combat that took place, while the Hamas toll was embarrassingly high. The same was true with the massively uneven number of wounded combatants on the two sides of the struggle. Officials said 317 Israeli soldiers were wounded in the fighting, 11 of them severely, while the Palestinian number of injured fighters was probably over 2,500.

On top of casualties, around 300 Hamas smuggling tunnels hidden underneath the Gaza border with Egypt were wiped out by Israeli air attacks deploying over 100 tons of explosives, followed up by clean-up ground operations. Still, Palestinian builders were spotted working on new tunnels one day after the ceasefire went into effect. Officials say most of the rockets, guns and other weapons that Hamas successfully spirited into the sealed off coastal zone came via the clandestine tunnels in the past three years, with a relatively small amount coming in by sea due to constant Israeli naval patrols. Massive Hamas weapons caches were also bombed and largely destroyed by air force jets and helicopter missiles and bombs, later assisted by ground troops, hopefully signaling that Palestinian Muslim fighters and rocket launchers will be forced to pause for some time before they can resume effective and sustained attacks upon Israel.

Several prominent Hamas leaders were killed during the successful Israeli military action. The senior police commander in the Gaza Strip was killed during the initial IAF raids on December 27. One week later, the top Hamas clerical official, Sheik Nizar Rayyan, was hit and killed by Israeli targeted fire. However the most prominent casualty took place in the closing days of the

conflict, when Israeli missiles took out Saed Siam, the Hamas Gaza Strip Interior Minister, who acted as the main liaison between the political and militia wings of the extremist movement. He was also known to be close to overall Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal, who safely resides in Damascus.

Great Victory or Stunning Defeat?

Despite major losses, former Hamas Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh went on Gaza television to declare that his movement had achieved “a divine and important victory” over Israel. The absurd speech was carried live by several Arab news channels throughout the Middle East—the same channels that focused on Palestinian civilian casualties during the conflict while mostly ignoring continuing Hamas terrorist rocket attacks upon Israeli civilian centers, which naturally enhanced Arab world wrath against Israel.

Hamas leaders staged a dozen rallies two days after the conflict ended to hail their fallacious ‘victory over the Zionist enemy.’ The rallies, which attracted thousands of people amid the rubble of war, were held in public squares and at the obliterated homes of several senior Hamas officials and militia commanders. However the vast majority of Gaza’s Arab population stayed away from the pretentious “victory celebrations.” Many were upset that thousands of Hamas militiamen had hardly proved to be the fierce jihad warriors they were portrayed to be, but had instead abandoned their uniforms and melted into civilian neighborhoods as the ground fighting intensified, drawing unwanted Israeli fire after them.

Speaking outside the bombed parliament building in Gaza City, Hamas official Ismail Radwan proclaimed that his movement would go on to achieve much grander victories than the supposed one in the decimated Gaza Strip: “Controlling Gaza is not our final goal. The liberation of all Palestine, from the river to the sea, will, Allah allowing, be achieved.” Of course, Hamas could not possibly annihilate a powerful modern country like Israel without the substantial help of such allies as Iran, Syria and Hizbullah, but at least the militant group’s rejection of Israel’s very existence was stated quite clearly once again for all the world to hear—if the nations will only listen.

Despite the ridiculous claims of a brilliant Palestinian rout over Israel, Khaled Mashaal did admit that the movement he heads was shocked and awed by Israel’s impressive firepower and internal political cohesion and overwhelming public support for the conflict. Soon after the fighting stopped, the Hamas leader was quoted in an Egyptian newspaper as admitting that Hamas “didn’t expect the level of crimes that were committed against our citizens.” In other words, the scope and precision of the massive Israeli military operation struck the militant Islamic movement like a bolt of lightning, and apparently especially rocked its many deserted fighters. Mashaal’s indirect confession that his “resistance” group was overwhelmed by Israeli firepower came in a closed door emergency Arab leadership conference in the Qatari capital, called to discuss the conflict.

However, the Doha conference only served to reveal the deep Palestinian and larger Middle East political divide concerning the extremist Hamas movement. It was attended by only three Arab countries, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq—all with significant ties to Hamas and its main regional patron, Shiite Iran. But Syrian dictator Bashar Assad chose to make an appearance at a rival conference in nearby Kuwait City sponsored by the Palestinian Authority and its main Fatah political party, which was ousted from Gaza in a violent Hamas coup in June 2007. After the gathering ended, Iran’s notorious President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad phoned Mashaal to “congratulate him on the “great victory,” according to Iranian media outlets. He was quoted as predicting that the supposed triumph was just “the beginning of the victory that will be completed with patience,” which Israeli analysts said was a veiled reference to Iran’s nuclear program and intention to ultimately use such weapons to wipe Israel off of the world map.

The more moderate Arab gathering secured a much larger participation, attended by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and several small Gulf countries. At that parley, Saudi King Abdullah announced he would donate one billion dollars to help rebuild Gaza's battle-scarred cities and towns, while also condemning Israel for supposedly using massively excessive force against the Palestinian people. Assad echoed this, but in typically much harsher terms, blasting Israel as a "Zionist terrorist state that committed grave crimes" in Gaza. He also called on the entire Arab world to "support the Palestinian resistance" (mainly meaning Hamas) "in every way possible."

UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon also attended the Kuwait forum after visiting the Gaza Strip and Israel, where he rebuked the Olmert government for the UN school killings and Hamas for firing rockets at Israeli civilian centers. He told the assembled Arab leaders they should reject the path of violence chosen by Hamas while backing PA leader Mahmoud Abbas, adding that "We cannot rebuild Gaza without Palestinian unity." The UN chief did not comment on Israel's supposed use of outlawed phosphate bombs against Palestinian civilians, which the IDF brass had earlier made clear did not take place. Traces of phosphate were indeed found in some bombed locations, they admitted, but clarified that this was only because the substance is used in luminary rockets that help light up the night sky. Later, Moon returned to Gaza and also met with acting PM Olmert. He called the IDF shelling of three United Nations outposts "outrageous" even though Olmert again insisted that they had not been deliberately targeted, but only accidentally struck because Hamas was firing rockets from next to them, probably deliberately so. The premier added that any formal investigation into the firings—as demanded by the UN leader—include a report on the damage and casualties caused by deliberate Hamas rocket attacks upon Israeli civilian communities stretching back to 2001."

After The Fighting Ended

With campaigning resuming for Israel's February 10 Knesset election just hours after the ceasefire was declared, government officials admitted that all of the goals outlined when the Gaza campaign began were not fully met. Still, they insisted that the operation had been an overwhelming success—which most Israeli commentators agreed with. While basically supporting this assessment, several prominent American, European and Israeli military analysts said that the government had not gone far enough in allowing the IDF to destroy the Hamas infrastructure in the Gaza Strip, allowing the militant group to hold onto power and to probably rearm for another round of conflict. Indeed, Iranian officials indicated soon after the ceasefire went into effect that it will begin sending fresh weapons supplies to Hamas right away.

Analysts said the Shiite regime was very disappointed by the poor Hamas performance during the conflict, and especially that its Grad rockets caused so few Israeli civilian casualties, and also that not a single IDF jet or helicopter was knocked out of the sky by anti-aircraft missiles it had supplied to Hamas. Reports said Israeli officials were worried that Tehran will now attempt to smuggle longer-range Fajr missiles into Gaza, with a range of up to 44 miles, meaning they could reach Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Ben Gurion airport. Israeli leaders warned that any new smuggling attempts will immediately be met with force. Meanwhile American media reports said US warships had intercepted an Iranian boat carrying rockets and other weapons south of Egypt's Suez Canal in the closing days of the war, apparently on a re-supply mission.

On the diplomatic front, several countries broke relations with Israel over the Gaza conflict, including Marxist Venezuela, allied with Iran. This came as no surprise. However officials were alarmed when Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan said Israel deserved to be destroyed for killing Muslim civilians in the Gaza Strip, adding "Allah willing, it will happen." He later said Israel should be barred from the UN for ignoring a ceasefire call. Turkey had been Israel's most important regional ally over the past decade.

The successful Cast Lead operation boosted the ruling Kadima party's political standing during the conflict. However post-war opinion surveys showed that the opposition Likud party, headed by Binyamin Netanyahu, would still emerge with around four more seats than Kadima in the upcoming national vote. Another right wing party added to its popular support base—the Yisrael Beiteinu party headed by Russian immigrant Avigdor Lieberman. Overall, right wing parties are still projected to pick up a clear majority of seats in the 120 member Knesset, giving Netanyahu the edge in forming a new government.

Whoever becomes Israel's next leader will obviously face many serious challenges ahead. But at least one of them may not be energy supplies. A consortium of American and Israeli companies announced that a massive natural gas deposit has been discovered off of Haifa's Mediterranean coast containing enough gas to meet Israel's internal needs for up to 15 years. Officials said the estimated 88 billion cubic meter field was three times larger than any previous discovery. Along with the remarkably low Israeli casualty toll during the Gaza conflict, it was a timely reminder that the God of Israel is watching over His people: "Jacob will again have peace and security, and no one will make him afraid" (Jeremiah 30:10).

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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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