

Israel News from David Dolan

April 25, 2012

Shalom,

Below is my monthly Israel news and analysis report, covering the most important news items from the Jewish State and the tense Middle East over the past month. This month I almost exclusively examine the crisis between Israel and Iran, which many suspect may be nearing a dramatic climax.

After several months of speaking engagements and visiting with family and friends in America, I am returning to Israel this week (in time for Independence Day, which begins at sundown on Wednesday evening) knowing that a military showdown could well be on the horizon. I will be reporting from there for several media outlets, including doing my weekday *Eye on the Middle East* radio reports, broadcast on hundreds of stations across America and posted on the Friends of Israel web site, regular weekend updates for the Prophecy Today radio program, and some television reports as well. This monthly news update, written primarily for CFI in the UK but also sent out to you, will once again be written in Jerusalem. I appreciate your prayers as I return to what the Bible calls the center of the world (Ezekiel 5:5).

IRAN REMAINS DEFIANT AS NUCLEAR TALKS BEGIN

By David Dolan

The conflict between Israel and Iran continued to dominate the headlines in the Jewish State during April. The main focus was on the meeting mid-month in Turkey between top diplomats from the P-5 nuclear powers and Germany, who met with several of Iran's defiant Shiite Muslim leaders. The one-day talks, termed "successful" by some of the Western participants despite the fact that little of substance was accomplished, came as further economic and political sanctions were imposed upon the rogue country. Israeli officials made clear they view the talks as just another path for the Iranian clerical regime to continue its nuclear weapons development program while avoiding possible military action from NATO forces and/or Israeli defense forces. However, the officials added that they had not promised the P-5 leaders that Israel would not attack Iranian nuclear facilities as long as the talks continue, with the next session set for late May.

Meanwhile tensions heated up significantly between Iran and its nearby Arab neighbors after Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinajad visited an island in the Gulf claimed by both Iran and by the United Arab Emirates. The visit prompted Gulf leaders to issue a formal warning to Iran not to interfere in the affairs of its Arab neighbors. This was quickly followed by new verbal threats of possible aggression from the feisty President. Just before this latest altercation, American media outlets stated that Israel has made an important military pact with a Muslim country located due north of Iran. At the same time, an Israeli television channel reported that Israeli leaders believe a war with Iran and its allies would last around three weeks, but would not result in severe Israeli casualties.

Israeli officials continued to watch the violence in Syria with intense concern during April, especially after a UN-brokered ceasefire failed to take hold mid month. The UN said over 11,000 people have perished in the growing conflict during the past year, with more deaths occurring every day. Israel's top military commander made an unannounced visit to inspect two IDF

outposts located on the Golan Heights near the tense border with Syria as tens of thousands of displaced Syrian refugees continued to pour into Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan.

The unstable situation in Egypt also continued to be in focus during the month as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited the Sinai border to check on the new security fence going up there. The interim Egyptian military government sent police reinforcements into the Sinai during April with the prior approval of the PM. The disqualification of a former senior official in the Mubarak regime to run in the presidential elections scheduled for late next month, along with the candidate that was to be fielded by the Muslim Brotherhood movement, produced more political chaos in the Arab world's largest and most influential country. The new Muslim Brotherhood candidate made clear he will make the Palestinian issue his top priority if he wins the election.

Two stunts planned by the Palestinians for late March and mid April basically fizzled; one the staging of planned huge rallies along Israel's northern, southern and eastern borders and in areas controlled by the Palestinian Authority, and the second a "fly in" of pro-Palestinian activists who had hoped to "take over" Israel's Ben Gurion airport. This came as the Quartet peace partners met in Washington DC to discuss their recent attempts to re-start the stalled peace process. A planned meeting between Netanyahu and the PA Prime Minister did not take place in the end, leading Israeli analysts to say that the PA is apparently not at all interested in getting any serious negotiations going at this time.

The Israeli public received some good economic news during the month. The Netanyahu cabinet approved a large trade deal with the world's largest country, China, including the expansion of joint research projects in the fields of hi tech, medicine and other areas. This came as talks continued between the two countries to set up a free trade zone between them, which Israel currently enjoys with the United States and several other trading partners. Another slice of good economic news was the government announcement that 752,000 visitors had arrived in the Jewish State during the first quarter of 2012, an all-time record that is two per cent higher than the corresponding first quarter of 2011. As is usually the case, officials said the majority of tourists were Christian pilgrims who came to the region despite the upheaval gripping many portions of the Middle East.

TALK TO ME

Just hours after American President Barack Obama met with Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu at the White House in early March, US government officials announced that Iranian leaders had agreed to attend a new round of international talks aimed at halting the Islamic regime's threatening nuclear development program. Israeli officials, along with many others around the world, believe the program is ultimately aimed at building deadly nuclear warheads that could greatly aid the Shiite country in its frequently declared goal of wiping Israel off of the regional map.

The world's five leading nuclear powers (the United States, Britain, France, Russia and China) were joined by Germany in attending the new round of talks, held in Istanbul Turkey with the participation of several Iranian diplomats. Earlier negotiations had failed to persuade the Iranian regime to curb its nuclear activities, and Israeli leaders said they anticipated the same outcome now.

When Israeli officials expressed public exasperation over the fact that Iran was being given more time to work on its nuclear program in exchange for merely attending the talks, which will only be resumed on May 23 in, of all places, the violence-torn city of Baghdad, President Obama defended the action. He told reporters in Washington that international pressure on Iran to halt its nuclear program would continue apace, despite the fact that occasional talks are taking place. "We're going to keep on seeing if we make progress," said the American leader, adding that "Now, the clock is ticking, and I've been very clear to Iran and to our negotiating partners that we're not going to have these talks just drag out in a stalling process." Obama also said the US and its partners "haven't given anything away" by returning to the negotiating table. He maintained that "We still have a window in which to resolve this conflict diplomatically." However he also warned Tehran that "The window is closing and Iran needs to take advantage of it."

After attending the Istanbul meeting, American Secretary of State Hillary Clinton also told reporters the US government will keep up pressure on Iran despite the talks. "I believe in action for action, but I think in this case the burden of action falls on the Iranians to demonstrate their seriousness, and we are going to keep the sanctions in place and the pressure on Iran as they consider what they'll bring to the table in Baghdad, and we'll respond accordingly," she said. On the question of the talks acting as a cover for further Iranian nuclear activity, the senior US diplomat promised to "take this one step at a time," adding that "any process would have to have reciprocal expectations and actions and there has to be evidence by Iran that they would be seriously moving toward removing a lot of their nuclear ambiguity that exists now, that they would be much more open and transparent, and that they would take steps to respond to the UN Security Council resolutions and to the international community's concerns."

FREEBIE

Although most participants expressed contentment with the short Istanbul parlay, Israeli officials were especially disturbed when it was announced that there would be another five week gap until the next round of talks takes place in Iraq. Reacting to the international gathering, PM Netanyahu said, "My initial impression is that Iran has been given a freebie. It's got five weeks to continue enrichment without any limitation, any inhibition." He noted it is a very critical period of time since Iran continues to move its uranium enrichment centrifuges to a deep underground bunker at Fordow, close to the Iranian holy city of Qom, and may now have time to successfully complete the process before the end of next month. "I think Iran should take immediate steps to stop all enrichment, take out all enrichment material, and dismantle the nuclear facility near Qom," the Israeli Premier told reporters at the end of the weeklong Jewish festival of Passover.

In an interview with CNN, Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak echoed the Premier, telling reporters in Jerusalem that the only concrete result from the talks between Iran and the international nuclear powers and Germany was that Iran had "gained five additional weeks to bring its efforts at deploying atomic weapons closer to reality." However Barak had earlier made clear that the Israeli coalition government had given absolutely no assurances to the United States or anyone else that it would refrain from taking any military action deemed essential while the world powers negotiate with Iran. The Defense Minister noted that once the radical Shiite regime is finished moving its uranium enrichment facilities underground, it will be nearly impossible to successfully destroy them, thus giving Israel a very good reason to attack above-ground targets in the coming weeks even if this might set off a major war and an international firestorm.

Just before the nuclear talks began in Turkey, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad declared once again that his regime would not alter its nuclear development program, period. Marking the Islamic Republic's "Nuclear Technology Day," he said his government would never give in to outside pressure to end its renegade nuclear program. Iranian Atomic Energy Agency chief Fereydoon Abbasi Davani later echoed this defiant stand, saying Iranian leaders utterly reject the two key demands issued by the United States, the European Union, Israel and other parties to immediately shut down the underground uranium enrichment facility near Qom, and to stop enriching uranium to 20 percent. In announcing the rejection, he maintained that the demands are "irrational," adding that "If they do not threaten us and guarantee that no aggression will occur, then there would be no need for countries to build facilities underground. They should change their behavior and language." Of course, he did not mention that Israel is only "threatening" to attack such facilities because Iranian leaders constantly vow to wipe out the world's only Jewish-ruled state, thus "finishing what Hitler started" as the late Iranian strongman Ayatollah Khomeini succinctly put it back in 1991.

Meanwhile the US government slapped additional economic sanctions on Iran during April as the talks in Turkey got underway. The US Treasury announced that two more Iranian companies involved in weapons production had been placed on the banned for business list. A Nigerian shipping company that the Treasury said has been funneling Iranian weapons to what the US termed "terrorist groups" involved in conflicts in the Middle East, Africa and other places around the world was also placed on the black list, as were three leaders of the "Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force" who were also said to be heavily involved in the illicit weapons trade. Press reports said Iran had responded by halting oil sales to several European countries, but Iranian leaders later denied that this action was being taken. Japan announced it would sharply curtail its imports of Iranian crude by the end of April, while Switzerland banned any business dealings with 11 Iranian companies.

PLAN OF ACTION

Two potentially crucial news items appeared in the American and Israeli media during April that point to what the world may expect to see if Israeli military forces are ordered by the Netanyahu government to strike at Iran's nuclear facilities in the coming weeks or months. The usually reliable American *Foreign Policy* magazine reported that the Muslim country of Azerbaijan has granted Israel permission to use its air force bases as launching pads for a strike on nearby Iran. The small country, known for its moderate version of Islam and progressive political policies, is located due north of Iran. It has had running disputes with Tehran over oil rights, pipeline locations and other issues. Israeli warplanes would be able to operate without mid-air refueling if they were flying out of bases in the Muslim country.

Israeli officials would not publicly comment on the magazine report, but they were said to be upset that news of their reported alliance with Azerbaijan, which most analysts said was undoubtedly accurate, had been leaked by someone with knowledge of the accord. However some said the news might have come from a junior Israeli pilot who had been to the country to inspect its air force bases and then shared that information with family or friends. More likely is the possibility that one of the few senior American officials who had been clued in to the secret information had leaked the report to the magazine in an attempt to scuttle the deal. *Foreign Policy* also reported that the Obama administration is not at all happy about the reported deal between Israel and Azerbaijan, but can do little if anything to stop it.

Analysts said there are two obvious major advantages to the potential use of air bases in Azerbaijan if Israel lashes out at Iran's nuclear production sites. The first is the relative closeness

of the bases in relation to Israel's own air bases, which are located nearly a thousand miles west of some of the main Iranian targets near Tehran. The second is the apparent fact that Israel could launch its operation without the prior knowledge or approval of the United States and other allies, even though this would not be PM Netanyahu's first choice of action. However to maintain the element of tactical surprise, analysts say Israeli leaders might only notify the occupant of the White House, 10 Downing Street and other world leaders that an attack was pending upon Iran after IAF jets were actually nearing their targets. This would at least give President Obama a few minutes to notify his military commanders that an Israeli strike was imminent. He would also be expected to place all US forces serving in the volatile Middle East on full war alert, giving them a chance to take cover in anticipation of possible revenge strikes upon them, an insidious action that Iran's Shiite fundamentalist leaders have vowed to take even if Israel acts alone.

Another media report, this time from Israel's *Channel Ten* television network, spelled out the probable details of an expected war if the IAF strikes at Iran's nuclear facilities. The network's news department said it had obtained the secret minutes of a recent meeting of the government's inner "security cabinet" headed up by Prime Minister Netanyahu. The report said that military leaders are projecting an intense war lasting up to three weeks, which would touch most of Israel's borders. Ground fighting would probably take place with Lebanon and Syria, and some sporadic clashes might also take place along the borders with Jordan and Egypt, mainly with irregular Muslim fighters financed by Iran.

However the main feature of the projected war is expected to be massive rocket and missile bombardments of Israeli civilian centers, mainly from the heavily armed Hizbullah militia operating out of southern Lebanon but also from Iran's other local allies Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip. The report said missile assaults would probably also be launched from Syria and Iran, which has threatened to attack Israel's nuclear reactor at Dimona near Beersheva, and also Tel Aviv.

The *Channel Ten* report said that officials anticipate a relatively low casualty rate during such an intense showdown, saying that less than 300 people are expected to be killed in such a conflict. An unnamed civil defense official told the network that things should remain "manageable if everyone does their part." However some military analysts scoffed at this low casualty projection, saying that thousands of soldiers and civilians would probably perish in such ground action coupled with a massive missile blitz. They noted that wars always have a powerful dynamic of their own, and predicting the final outcome in advance is always a precarious guess at best.

Another expected reaction to any Israeli or Western military action against Iran is the launching of Iranian terrorist strikes against Jewish targets around the region and probably around the world. The UK-based *Sky News* cable news network reported it had obtained evidence that the "Quds Force" (Quds is the Islamic name for Jerusalem), an elite terrorist unit under the control of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, has plans to carry out many terrorist attacks in Turkey and several other countries either before, during or after any IAF operation. The network quoted an unnamed intelligence source who said that "Unit 400 of the Quds Force has been developing an operating procedure over the past few months for carrying out an attack in Turkey against various targets, some of them Israeli and Jewish. It is our firm assessment that these procedures are in a very advanced stage, and that the intention is to act on the plans very soon."

ISLAND WRESTLING

A new crisis erupted during April when Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited a small island in the Persian Gulf called Abu Musa. It is claimed by both Iran and by the United Arab Emirates. Two smaller nearby islands are also claimed by both countries. Gulf Arab leaders termed the short visit "an aggressive and war mongering act" by the Iranian President, who reportedly won the last Iranian presidential contest with more votes than there are registered voters in his Shiite country.

The dramatic visit sparked off an emergency meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council based in Doha, the capital of Qatar. After the meeting, a statement was issued in the name of the council members, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman and Kuwait. The tough statement warned that, "Any aggression against the United Arab Emirates will be considered aggression against all GCC member states." It was the first time the Sunni Muslim Arab countries had warned of possible military action involving themselves against Shiite Iran. Israeli analysts called it another indication that the Sunni Muslim world would quietly back any IAF action to halt Iran's nuclear weapons program, which is threatening all regional countries and the entire world, not just the tiny Jewish State.

In typical fashion Ahmadinejad arrogantly denounced the joint statement. Speaking at an elaborate military parade marking Iran's annual "National Army Day," he vowed that "Our armed forces and the army will inflict heavy regret and shame" upon anyone who would dare to defy his country's claims to the three islands. He added that Iranian leaders "prefer cooperation to confrontation," but analysts noted that he has expressed no interest in discussing the conflicting territorial claims with his Arab neighbors across the strategic Gulf.

Meanwhile Prince Reza Pahlavi, the exiled son of the late Iranian leader, Shah Reza Pahlavi, told Israel's *Channel 10* that a military operation against his country's nuclear targets would actually aid the regime. Speaking in English, he said, "The best thing you can do for the regime is to tell it that 'we are going to attack you,' or in fact attack you. You will be giving (overall Iranian leader Ayatollah) Khamenei and all his clique, when they have no answers anymore to the country's ills, the greatest gift of all by doing that. That is just crazy. That just doesn't make sense. The best option is to utilize the best army in the world in place ready to strike, which is the Iranian people themselves." In response to the comments, several prominent Israeli military analysts said PM Netanyahu would like to see nothing more than the people of Iran rise up against their dictatorial government, as is occurring in Syria. However they noted that earlier attempts at revolt had been quickly crushed by the vicious Revolutionary Guards, who demonstrated their willingness to employ the most ugly violence possible to defend their Shiite leaders.

As Israel's decades-long struggle with Iran seemingly coming to a climax, it is important to remember that Israel's sovereign Lord remains in overall control of this world and universe. He will save His chosen people, as He has promised many times over the centuries through His anointed prophets: "*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. His latest book, a novel titled **MILLENNIUM: THE LORD REIGNS** is available for purchase at his web site, www.ddolan.com in both printed and electronic versions at special introductory prices. His first novel, **THE END OF DAYS**, which is a companion work to the new novel, is available for a very low price of just \$5.00. His earlier books are also for sale on his web site.

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