

Israel News from David Dolan

Week of May 28, 2012

Shalom from Jerusalem,

It is a very hot day here in the Holy City, where we celebrated both the Jewish holiday of Shavuot (Feast of Weeks) and its Christian equivalent, Pentecost on Sunday. It is rare for the two holidays to fall together on the same date, since Pentecost is always on the seventh Sunday after Passover, while that holiday and Shavuot move each year due to the fact they are based on the Hebrew 28 day lunar calendar. Thankfully it was a peaceful day, with only a few demonstrations taking place by some Palestinians and their visiting supporters near the security barrier east of Jerusalem. However it is was anything but quiet in the region. The Middle East is roiling like I have never seen it before in my over 30 years living and working as a journalist here in Israel, with Muslim fundamentalists assuming power in the Arab world's largest country, Egypt, and internal fighting escalating in Syria and now spreading to Lebanon as Iran speeds up its nuclear production program. The prospects of a regional war this summer seem quite high, as detailed in the latest monthly Israel news and analysis report below. It focuses this time on the totally unexpected formation of the new National Unity Government in early May and the latest threats to destroy Israel emanating from Iran. You may sign up to receive this report in your e mail box for free each month via my web site, www.ddolan.com if you do not already get it.

Thanks to the many who have sent positive comments regarding my new novel, Millennium: The Lord Reigns, which is also available for hard copy and electronic purchase on my web site. And for all of you in the United States, i wish you a peaceful holiday as you commemorate loved ones who have passed away on this Memorial Day, including our soldiers who have fallen in battle, which includes my late father who fought with US forces in North Africa during World War II.

BROAD UNITY GOVERNMENT FORMED IN ISRAEL

By David Dolan

The Israeli political scene was shaken to its core during May when the main opposition Kadima party unexpectedly joined the coalition government headed by Benjamin Netanyahu after Kadima leaders vowed never to do so. This has left Israel with one of its strongest governments ever, with over three-fourths of the current Knesset members included in the broad "national unity" coalition. Only the emergency government formed on the eve of the Six-Day War in 1967 was larger. The political earthquake sparked off immediate speculation in Israel and abroad that the unforeseen marriage between the country's two largest political parties, Likud and Kadima, might portend another crucial conflict ahead—this time an Israeli military attack upon nuclear production targets in the hostile Shiite Muslim country of Iran.

Kadima's surprise decision to join the government came just over one month after Shaul Mofaz was elected party leader, defeating former Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, a fierce opponent of Prime Minister Netanyahu. The dramatic merger was the apparent result of the PM's early May announcement that he had decided to move up national parliamentary elections from October 2013 to September of this year. This came after several public opinion surveys showed his Likud party would gain several more seats if national elections were held this year, while Kadima would lose around half of its current 28 seats. The veteran Premier seemingly hoped his proposal to advance the vote would draw Mofaz into his current coalition government, which it obviously did, thus staving off any need for early elections.

The new unity government policy guidelines focus on two controversial issues that have long been hotly debated in Israel: Spreading the military draft, or at least compulsory community service, to all

young Israelis, including ultra-Orthodox Jews and all Arab-Israeli citizens, and reformation of the country's electoral system. With 94 Knesset members now part of the ruling coalition, it is thought that significant legislation touching upon both issues has a real chance to finally pass muster in the 120 member Knesset. Until now, ultra-Orthodox parties, especially Shas, always threatened to bring down the various coalitions they were partners in if such legislation was enacted.

The speculation about an attack on Iranian nuclear targets was partially propelled by the fact that Kadima's new leader had a long and distinguished military career, and would therefore prove a real asset inside the cabinet if Israel goes to war with the Shiite regime and its regional allies. After serving in all of Israel's armed conflicts from the Six-Day War onward, Mofaz was appointed Armed Forces Chief of Staff during Netanyahu's first term as Prime Minister in 1998. In 2002, then-Likud leader Ariel Sharon named him Defense Minister, citing his skilled performance in quelling the armed Palestinian Al Aksa revolt that broke out in September 2000.

Meanwhile Iran's armed forces chief vowed during the month that his country would stick to its declared goal to eventually annihilate Israel, demonstrating once again just how serious is the Shiite regime's frequent vow to wipe out the world's only Jewish State. This came just one week before senior diplomats from six world powers met once again with their Iranian counterparts to try and persuade them to halt, or at least scale back, their country's threatening uranium enrichment program. As expected in Jerusalem, the talks produced little discernable results. Just before the diplomats gathered in Baghdad, Iran's controversial President denied his country is interested in producing nuclear weapons, a contention not at all believed by Israeli officials. A top expert on Iran's nuclear program said Tehran has already enriched enough uranium to quickly assemble several nuclear bombs. To the north of Israel, fierce fighting between supporters and opponents of brutal Syrian dictator Bashar Assad ominously spread to neighboring Lebanon during the month, where the heavily-armed Iranian-backed Hizbullah militia is based.

With his broad, more centrist government in place, PM Netanyahu sent a letter to Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas urging him to quickly return to the negotiating table. However the PA leader rebuffed the invitation and announced he would visit Cairo and other Arab capitals to brief them on his stand. Earlier in the month, Abbas phoned Netanyahu to offer condolences on the passing of his father, who died in Jerusalem at the ripe age of 102. Meanwhile the Israeli public and police were focused during May on a growing crime wave in south Tel Aviv involving illegal African migrants, who number around 50,000 in the area. Calls for them to be quickly repatriated to their homelands, mainly Eritrea and Sudan, grew as the alarming crime wave intensified.

As feared in Israel, the Muslim Brotherhood candidate for President of Egypt, Muhammad Mursi, came out on top in the first round of elections held late in the month. The extremist politician—who is highly critical of the Jewish State, calls for a Muslim caliphate to eventually rule over the region, and advocates scaling back relations with Israel, if not breaking them off entirely—will face Ahmed Shafiq, the last Prime Minister to serve under ousted President Hosni Mubarak. Although the final ballot is scheduled to take place the middle of June, challenges to the veracity of the preliminary vote might put off the second round election.

KADIMA JUMPS ON BOARD

In late March, the main opposition Kadima party held a national leadership vote, only the second contest inside the party since Ariel Sharon broke away from the Likud in 2005 to form the new center-left party. Nearly 15,000 registered Kadima members voted in polling booths set up all over the country. When the results were announced, Shaul Mofaz was the runaway winner, trouncing his opponent, then-party leader Tzipi Livni, by a whopping 61.7% to 37.3%. The defeated Livni, known

for her visceral loathing of Netanyahu, resigned from the Knesset in early May. Soon afterwards, Mofaz took the dramatic step of accepting PM Netanyahu's invitation to join his conservative coalition government.

Demonstrating his current political clout, the veteran Likud leader (hailed during May as "King Bibi" on an American Time magazine cover due to his enhanced political power) was able to persuade all of his coalition partners to accept the addition of Kadima into the broad unity government. This was despite the fact that the 11-seat Shas party, which was the third largest in Netanyahu's previous coalition and holds four cabinet posts, is light years away from the center-left secular party. Shas virulently opposes Kadima's calls for non-religious civil marriages in Israel and its demands for a radical change in the current military draft laws, as mentioned above. However Shas leaders apparently realized they would only serve to significantly weaken their own power and influence—not to mention lose their government largess—if they tried to veto the new unity marriage deal, or exited the Netanyahu coalition. After all, the Likud party and Kadima alone comprise nearly half the seats in the current Knesset, and the two other main coalition partners, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu party (with 15 seats) and Defense Minister Ehud Barak's Independence Party (5), were very unlikely to ever bolt the coalition. So the new unity government would have remained strong and viable even if Shas had headed for the opposition doors, rendering it pointless to do so.

It was crystal clear to all Israeli political pundits why Shaul Mofaz—who vowed earlier this year to never join a Netanyahu-led government—and Ehud Barak were eager to see the cancellation of advanced elections. Opinion surveys published by several Israeli newspapers in early May revealed that while the Likud party would move up from its current 27 seats to at least 30 (with some polls going as high as 32), Kadima would shrink from its existing 28 seats to around 13, less than half its current total. Shas would drop from 11 seats to just 7 or 8, while Defense Minister Barak's new party, which split away from Labor early last year, would not even secure enough votes to make it into the next Knesset. Mofaz is apparently hoping that his entrance into the unity government, and appointment as Acting Premier when Netanyahu is out of the country, will enhance his power and stature and thus win his party more mandates than the current polls predict in the scheduled late 2013 elections. Barak will at least secure another year and half in his important role as Defense Minister during a time when a military showdown with Iran, and possibly with Hizbullah, Hamas and Syria as well, seems increasingly probable.

Most Israeli political analysts concur that "Bibi's" almost unprecedented political power (only David Ben Gurion will have served longer as Prime Minister by this time next year) is the result of several factors. Chief among them is the virtual collapse of the American-brokered peace process with the Palestinians that was initiated by the once dominant Labor party in the early 1990s, which has never been successfully revived following the violent Al Aksa uprising that tore the land apart one decade ago. Ehud Barak is best remembered for trying, and failing, to secure a final peace accord with PA leader Yasser Arafat on the eve of the blood-soaked Palestinian revolt after defeating Netanyahu in the 1999 national vote. Mofaz is the leader of a party that was mostly formed by Likud members who supported Ariel Sharon's infamous Gaza withdrawal in 2005. As Netanyahu accurately predicted at the time, that fiercely contested pullout only led to a new wave of deadly rocket and terrorist attacks emanating from the Palestinian coastal zone, which fell under total Hamas control in 2007. Many analysts expect that some current Kadima Knesset members will return to their original Likud home in the coming months, further strengthening Netanyahu's influence and prestige.

PM OUTLINES NEW COALITION GOALS

Predicting that "We are going to achieve great things," Benjamin Netanyahu held a press conference with Shaul Mofaz at his side on May 8th, the same day the unexpected political merger was

announced. The two party leaders hailed their coalition accord as "historic," terming it also "a source of hope for Israel." Answering questions concerning his about face following earlier pledges to stay out of a Netanyahu-led government, Mofaz averred that he had "put the need for unity" above his previous statements and long-term political career. He added it had "been a mistake" for his Kadima predecessor, Tzipi Livni, to turn down Netanyahu's invitation to join his new government in 2009. When other reporters questioned the ability of the broad coalition to hold together, Netanyahu insisted the media should not "rush to bury" the new alliance, adding, "I think I'm steering the state and my party effectively."

The Premier stated that "Israel needs stability" at this time, insisting his accord with Kadima would bring that about. The statement was met with instant heckling by a legislator from the small left-wing Meretz party who shouted out that Netanyahu had "sunk to new levels of shamefulness," a position espoused by most members of leftist Jewish and Arab Israeli political parties, groups and media outlets. However the interruption did not seem to faze the popular PM, who went on to outline "the historic opportunities" that the 94 Knesset member alliance proffers in the areas of reforming the military draft and electoral systems, and reviving the moribund peace process. He noted that opinion polls demonstrate there is "wide public consensus" concerning these issues, meaning the secular Jewish majority in the country could easily have their reform wishes met in the face of vocal religious and Arab opposition if only their preponderant Knesset representatives are willing to work together.

Netanyahu hinted several times that major challenges loom on the immediate horizon, making the need for national unity both urgent and essential. This was widely interpreted as an allusion to a possible pending IDF military strike on Iran's nuclear program and the expected Iranian-led regional counterattack upon Israel, plus the growing armed conflict inside Syria, now spreading to Lebanon, and the ascension of Islamic militants to power in Egypt. Initially he stated rather mildly that "this is the time for unity," then adding a bit more strongly "It is a defining moment." Stepping up his tone, he stressed that "this unity is not a fiction...it is truly designed to strengthen Israel at a time of immense regional upheaval." In other words, he was insisting that the unity accord is not just a political act meant to strengthen his personal position, but an urgent national need at a critical time in the modern history of Israel and the explosive region.

All of the remaining small Knesset opposition parties poured scorn on the broad coalition deal, predicting it would quickly fall apart. Labor politician Isaac Herzog, son of the late President Chaim Herzog who was born and raised in Belfast, said the accord would "produce so much revulsion in the country" that it would work to expand Labor's predicted pickup of seats in the next election. Recent polls projected that under new populist Labor party leader and former television news presenter Shelly Yachimovich, Labor would have captured around 15 seats had early elections been held this year, meaning the once mighty party has every reason to vehemently oppose the new unity deal.

REFORMS

The political, electoral and social reforms that Netanyahu and Mofaz agreed to pursue have been hot button issues in Israel for several decades. Currently Israel's electoral system is entirely based on "proportional representation," meaning no individual politician is ever chosen to either sit in the Knesset or become Prime Minister. Instead, party candidate lists are voted into the legislature. The threshold to win a seat is currently set at a mere two per cent of the overall national vote, meaning several small fringe parties usually make it into the legislature along with three or four larger secular parties, several Orthodox Jewish parties, and various Arab Israeli parties. To form a viable coalition, the candidate for Premier—who normally comes from the largest Knesset party, but not necessarily, as was the case with Netanyahu in 2009 when Kadima gained one more mandate than Likud—must knit together a coalition quilt whose survival is often at the mercy of the smallest parties involved. The new

broad unity coalition is thought to have a fighting chance to enact proposed legislation to directly elect at least a portion of Knesset members in regional ballots, meaning the victors would most likely come from one of the large secular parties. This would diminish the number of Orthodox and Arab Knesset members since neither group is dominant in any one region.

An even more emotional issue for the two minority groups is the long-held issue of equal national service for all Israeli citizens. Currently most young ultra-Orthodox Jewish men and women are able to easily secure exemptions from compulsory military conscription, along with all Arab citizens, meaning the burden of defense falls to a full extent on the mostly non-observant Jewish public. This fact has long produced tensions in Israeli society, and even sometimes violence, given that many men in particular are forced to do extra annual reserve duty well into their adult years since around twenty per cent of all Jewish Israeli males contribute no service at all.

The issue came to the fore earlier this year when the Supreme Court overturned the 2002 "Tal Law," which basically enshrined already existing arrangements where most ultra-Orthodox males could avoid the military draft by declaring themselves fulltime students at one of the hundreds of Jewish religious seminaries which dot the land. Both the Yisrael Beiteinu and Kadima parties have been calling for new legislation that would mandate some form of national service for all Israelis, as have several other smaller parties, with the understanding that most ultra-Orthodox Jews and Arab citizens would choose to serve in their local communities rather than in the military. The two coalition parties also want to see civil marriages and burials made legal in the Jewish State, which is naturally strongly opposed by Shas and other Orthodox parties. It is thought that most Likud members will support the proposed alterations to the Tal Law, as agreed to by Netanyahu in his coalition agreement with Mofaz, but will oppose the even more emotive issue of allowing civil weddings and interments in Israel.

There are several other hurdles that lie ahead for the new unity government. One is Netanyahu's promise to appoint some Kadima legislators to cabinet positions by late this summer, meaning some current ministers will be forced to evacuate their posts. This is bound to stir up tensions inside the Likud and other coalition partners. Plus Mofaz only pledged to keep Kadima in the government until the end of this year, meaning new elections might be held during the first part of 2013 instead of the scheduled October. Still, many analysts say the broad government gives Israel a unique opportunity to enact some popular and necessary reforms, and to show its many enemies that they face a united people determined to survive as a thriving country located at the center of the world.

ANOTHER BLAST FROM TEHRAN

Although it was barely reported by the world press, another serious Iranian threat was issued against Israel during May—a fresh vow that the world's only Jewish State will be totally erased from the Middle East map. More ominously, the vitriolic pledge came from the country's senior military leader, Armed Forces Chief of Staff Hassan Firouzabadi. According to the state-controlled Fars news agency, he told a "defense gathering" in Tehran on May 20 that "The Iranian nation is standing for its cause, which is the full annihilation of Israel." The top military commander added that "threats and pressures cannot deter Iran from its revolutionary causes and ideals," meaning international sanctions and warnings of possible military action against the Shiite regime's manifold nuclear sites will not alter its jihad war against Israel. He called upon the world "to wake up" to the supposed "threats and dangers posed by the Zionist regime," as if the Iranian regime's repeated vows to destroy Israel while pursuing a rogue nuclear development program were just plot lines in some science fiction film. The Major General was said by Fars to have "reiterated the Iranian nation and Supreme Leader's emphasis on the necessity of support for the oppressed Palestinian nation and its causes." He reminded his audience that Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said earlier this year that "defending Palestine is a full religious duty," adding

"he believes that any kind of governance and rule by anyone other than the Palestinians is an instance of usurpation."

The latest Iranian vow to annihilate Israel came just days before diplomats from the so-called P5+1 nations, the USA, UK, Russia, China, France, plus non-nuclear Germany, held crucial talks with their Iranian counterparts. After two days of discussions in Baghdad, European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton admitted that "significant differences" were evident at the talks. Speaking more bluntly, British Foreign Secretary William Hague told reporters only "limited progress" had been made. He also warned that the defiant Shiite regime would face intensifying economic sanctions and the growing prospect of military action unless Iranian leaders took what he termed "urgent, concrete steps" to scale back their uranium enrichment program. This came after chief Iranian negotiator Said Jalili insisted once again that Iran "has every right to enrich uranium" for supposedly peaceful purposes. Days later, Iran announced it would begin constructing a second nuclear power plant in the south of the country next year.

After hearing the unimpressive results of the latest talks with Iran, PM Netanyahu repeated his government's position that the belligerent Iranian regime was merely stalling for time as it proceeded full speed with its insidious nuclear weapons program. Earlier in the month, Brad Gordon, a former US government arms control official who now works for the AIPAC pro-Israel lobby in Washington DC, told a conference in New York that Iran has enough uranium already enriched to twenty per cent grade to produce several nuclear warheads in short order. He pointed out that although such uranium must be fortified to ninety per cent to reach weapons grade, the spinning process to reach that level is a rapid one.

Gordon's chilling assessment was echoed by the Iran Watch American group, which posted disturbing information on its website revealing that with existing uranium stockpiles, Iran could produce a bomb equivalent to the one which destroyed much of Hiroshima Japan in 1945 in less than two months time. Another American group, the Institute for Science and International Security think tank, said Iran has enriched enough uranium to build five nuclear warheads if refined to ninety per cent. The reports came just before the UN's Atomic Energy Agency issued its latest review of Iran's nuclear program on May 25, saying the Islamic state is pressing ahead with its uranium enrichment program. It said Iran has produced an additional 750 kilograms of enriched uranium since its last report was issued in February, with monthly production rising by around a third since then.

With this tumultuous region at the heart of planet earth now spinning around at a dizzying pace, it is wonderful to know and worship the One who holds the whole world in His unshakable hands: "For I know the plans that I have for you," declares the LORD, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity, to give you a future and a hope" Jeremiah 29:10:12.

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.

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

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