

Israel News from David Dolan

Week of 1 January, 2013

Shalom to all,

Below is my latest monthly look at the main news developments in Israel and the Middle East. I focus on the Israeli national elections coming up later this month, and also review several other major stories affecting the country during December. I am still in the USA, but plan to head back to Israel next month. May you enjoy many blessings during 2013, whatever it brings our way.

NATIONAL ELECTIONS LOOMING IN ISRAEL

By David Dolan

The Israeli government came under fresh international criticism in December after it was announced that hundreds of new Jewish homes would be built in the northeast perimeter of Jerusalem. The area, near the largest Jerusalem suburb, Ma'ale Adumim, is considered "occupied territory" by the Palestinians who hope to include it in any future state. Israeli leaders defended the intended new construction on land that they note has been a central part of the Jewish people's ancient biblical heartland for over three thousand years. They added that the area, like nearby Jerusalem, will remain under Israeli sovereignty in any final peace deal with the Palestinian Authority. The new construction announcement came just hours after the United Nations General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to recognize "Palestine" as a non-voting UN member "state"; a move that was strongly opposed by Israel and some of its allies, but endorsed by many others.

Meanwhile the political campaign heated up in Israel during the last month of 2012, with fresh Knesset national elections scheduled for January 22. The government was rocked when Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman suddenly resigned after fresh criminal charges were leveled against him. Earlier Lieberman, who heads the current Knesset's third largest political party, announced he was forming a political alliance with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's popular Likud party. Despite the unexpected resignation, opinion surveys continue to forecast that Netanyahu will easily retain his post, with his Likud party and its centrist and rightwing allies expected to receive ballots from a clear majority of Israeli voters. One small national religious party is projected to emerge as the third largest in the next Knesset under the charismatic leadership of a relatively young Israeli businessman whose parents immigrated to Israel from the United States.

In the wake of November's fierce eight-day conflict between Israeli forces and rocket-firing Palestinian militiamen in the Gaza Strip, the Hamas movement celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary during December with large support rallies held in Gaza City and north of Jerusalem. As they marked the founding of their violence-driven Islamic militia movement in December 1987, Hamas leaders reiterated the anti-peace positions spelled out in their founding charter. The seminal document declares that Hamas will never recognize Israel as a legitimate country, but will instead continue to work night and day for its total destruction. Palestinian Authority leaders attended the celebrations in an apparent bow to the growing street popularity of the radical movement that was founded with help from the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood movement, which now controls the largest regional Arab country, neighboring Egypt.

In Cairo, anti-government protests continued the first half of December as a final draft of the Arab country's new constitution was stitched together. The constitution upholds strict Islamic Sharia law as a moral basis for all Egyptian law. Non-Muslim fundamentalist delegates who had earlier walked out of the drafting sessions to protest a move by Egyptian President Muhammad Morsi to thwart judicial review of the official document stayed away as the final version was put together. Later in the month, a national referendum was held on the new constitution, which was not surprisingly supported by most of the same 70% of the public who had earlier chosen Islamist parliamentary candidates to represent them. A new round of parliamentary elections has now been scheduled for later this winter.

Israeli leaders held urgent talks with their Jordanian counterparts in December to discuss the ongoing fighting in nearby Syria, which the UN now says has left around 60,000 people dead since March 2011. Officials in Jerusalem reportedly want to cooperate with the Hashemite Kingdom in attempts to prevent Syria's massive chemical weapons arsenal from either falling into rebel Sunni Muslim hands or being transferred to Shiite Hizbullah forces in Lebanon. Meanwhile another senior Syrian military official defected to the opposition, which has been increasingly deploying sophisticated anti-aircraft missiles and other advanced weapons against

the Assad regime's embattled military forces. In an apparent acknowledgment that the tottering regime's days are probably numbered, the Russian government began to evacuate its citizens from Syria during December. Many Russians work in the country, mostly in the defense industry.

An American group released pictures during December showing that construction is continuing at an Iranian nuclear site where experts suspect nuclear weapons were tested over the past few years. Iranian leaders responded that they would allow United Nations Atomic Energy inspectors to examine the area if "international threats" to take military action against the Shiite regimes nuclear sites were "defused." Many Middle East analysts say they believe Israeli leaders are planning some sort of major military action against the Iranian nuclear program sometime before next summer, possibly with American and other Western support. Meanwhile Kuwaiti leaders warned that an Iranian nuclear reactor located just over 100 miles east of the small Arab country poses a threat to the region and should be immediately opened to UN inspection.

On a brighter note, Israel received large amounts of much needed precipitation during the last month of 2012, with higher than normal rates of rain and snow forecast for the rest of the winter. Water officials said the level of the Sea of Galilee recently reached a high December mark that has not been achieved even once over the past decade. They noted that Israel's main above ground fresh water reservoir already began to rise in late October, nearly one month before average. Israel normally receives virtually no precipitation between April and October, with almost all of its average 14 inches falling between December and March.

LIEBERMAN STEPS DOWN

Israeli voters will head to the polls on January 22 in a national Knesset election that is being held ten months earlier than formally scheduled. All opinion surveys continue to show that current Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will easily remain in power, but probably with a more rightwing coalition than is currently in place. The Likud party and its usual coalition allies are expected to win around 68 seats in the Knesset, which should leave the Premier with substantial majority backing in the next legislature. Such broad support may prove to be crucial if Netanyahu orders a military strike upon Iran's nuclear program facilities in the coming months.

However Netanyahu's Likud party's political merger in November with the current third largest Knesset party, Yisrael Beiteinu, is no longer expected to add any seats to the two party's current total of 42 (27 of those seats belonging to the Likud). In fact, polls taken in late December showed the conjoined parties would only secure around 35 seats, down from some 37 to 40 in earlier surveys. Analysts said one reason for the drop in support was the resignation mid-month of Yisrael Beiteinu leader Avigdor Lieberman from his post as Foreign Minister. The dramatic action came just hours after Israeli prosecutors said they had uncovered enough evidence to formally charge the Soviet-born politician with financial fraud and related charges. Lieberman, who has served in the Knesset since 1999, said he preferred to fight the charges out of office, but also announced that he was still heading up his joint party Knesset candidate list with the Likud party. Under Israeli law, legislators can remain in the Knesset while legal proceedings are underway against them, but cannot serve in any cabinet position.

After submitting his resignation letter to Prime Minister Netanyahu, Lieberman predicted that his departure from office would be very brief. "I am leaving temporarily," he told reporters in Jerusalem. He added he anticipates that the legal proceedings against him would be "speedy," saying he intended to personally argue his case in court. Israeli Attorney General Yehuda Weinstein announced in early December that he would indict Lieberman for promoting Israel's former ambassador to Belarus to a high foreign ministry position. This reportedly occurred soon after the envoy allegedly handed the Foreign Minister confidential information on moves by Israeli authorities to investigate Lieberman's questionable financial dealings in the former Soviet republic.

By late December, it became apparent that Avigdor Lieberman's time in government service may have come to a final end when a revised indictment was issued by the Attorney General's office. The amended indictment charges the former Foreign Minister with "moral turpitude," which would effectively prevent Lieberman from holding public office ever again if the allegations are proven to be true. Earlier in the month, it had appeared that Lieberman would work out a plea bargaining deal with the Attorney General. However new evidence emerged against the veteran politician when Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon startled the Israeli political world by becoming a witness for the prosecution. This unexpected development came soon after Lieberman removed his former deputy from his party's upcoming election list. Reports of bad blood between the two men had often surfaced over the past few years. The articulate Ayalon was often called upon to represent his country on the

world stage since he spoke much better English than Lieberman, which pundits said provoked jealousy from his boss.

NEW POLITICAL FORCE IN ISRAEL

The big political story in Israel in the run up to the January 22 elections is the emergence of a significant new political force, *The Jewish Home* party, known in Hebrew as *Ha Beit Ha Yehudi*. Strongly supported by many Jewish residents of contested communities located in territory that Israel captured from Jordan in 1967, the party is now expected to emerge as the third largest in the next Knesset, winning up to 15 seats. Jewish Home was created in 2008 when the National Religious Party merged with two smaller parties, winning three seats in the 2009 elections. Since then, two other rightwing Knesset members joined the party, giving it a current total of five seats in parliament.

The projected dramatic surge in support for the Jewish Home party is being attributed to its popular, charismatic new leader, 40 year old Naftali Bennett. Born in Haifa, the nascent politician is the son of American parents who immigrated to Israel from San Francisco soon after Israeli forces triumphed in the Six Day War. Bennett served in an elite Israeli army unit before earning a law degree from Hebrew University in Jerusalem. In 1999 he co-founded an Israeli anti-fraud software company called Cyota, selling it six years later for nearly 150 million dollars.

Living with his wife and four children in Ra'anna, a wealthy suburb of Tel Aviv, Bennett has been outspoken in his total opposition to the creation of a Palestinian state in disputed territory north and south of Jerusalem. Although he hardly fits the mold of the average Orthodox Jew, the highly successful entrepreneur turned politician is vocal about his deep personal Jewish faith, which he says forms the basis of his firm belief that the land in question was deeded by God to the Jewish people in perpetuity. Opinion surveys show that his notable military and business backgrounds are drawing support for his party from many voters all over Israel who normally choose more centrist parties, including some who voted for the Knesset's current largest party, Kadima. Opinion polls show that Kadima (with 28 seats and now under the leadership of former Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz) may not win even enough votes to make it into the next Knesset at all, leaving Mofaz and his remaining party colleagues in the political wilderness after a relatively short, but meteoric rise to the top of the ever-changing Israeli political scene. Under Israel's parliamentary political system, a party must win at least two and a half per cent of the overall national vote to make it into the Knesset.

NEW JEWISH HOMES NEAR JERUSALEM

Many Israeli pundits say that what is being called "the Bennett factor" was probably the main propeller behind the Netanyahu government's decision the end of November to order the construction of 3,000 more housing units, most of them apartments, in disputed territory due north of the biblical Mount of Olives. Technically known as E1, the contested area lies between northeast Jerusalem and Ma'aleh Adumim, located near the main road from Jerusalem to the Jordan Valley. The Palestinians charge that by strengthening Jewish communities in the area, Israeli officials are attempting to thwart Palestinian hopes to eventually gain control over the land. The PA wants to connect the nearby Arab city of Ramallah, and other Palestinian Authority-controlled cities and towns north of Jerusalem, to Arab population centers south of the Holy City like Hebron and Bethlehem.

A spokesman at the White House in Washington termed the Israeli building decision "counterproductive," adding "We reiterate our longstanding opposition to settlements and East Jerusalem construction and announcements." The European Union and the United Nations also issued strong denunciations of the move. The PA said any new Jewish home construction will make it that much harder for Palestinian negotiators to ever return to the peace table. They had earlier denounced a new housing project in the southwestern Jerusalem Gilo neighborhood. Israeli officials announced in late December that they were speeding up that building project, asking for contractors to rapidly send in their construction bids in the coming weeks. In an interview on Israel's Channel 2 just before Christmas, PM Netanyahu strongly defended his decision to build new homes in and around Jerusalem despite the harsh international criticism. "The capital of the Jewish people for the past 3,000 years is Jerusalem. So I will say in the clearest way possible, the Western Wall (of the Old City's Temple Mount) is not occupied territory and I don't care what the UN says about that."

Prime Minister Netanyahu announced in December that he has ordered a review of current restrictions that limit female prayer at the Western Wall. Three American Jewish groups, the Union for Reform Judaism, Hadassah and the Conservative movement's Rabbinical Assembly, have been working with other groups in Israel to get the government to loosen the restrictions, saying they discriminate against women. Netanyahu asked the

chairman of the Jewish Agency, Natan Sharansky, to put forward possible solutions that would ensure that all Jewish women who wish to pray at the Temple Mount's Western Wall may freely do so.

PA WINS NON-VOTING UN STATEHOOD STATUS

Prime Minister Netanyahu earlier stated that the Israeli government would have ordered the new home construction in and around Jerusalem even if the UN had not voted to upgrade the Palestinians' status at the world body to that of a "non-member observer state." Probably not an accident, the UN vote came on November 29 - the exact date in 1947 when the UN voted 33-13 to "partition" the Holy Land into separate Jewish and Arab states. At the time, all of the Arab countries and their allies joined the Palestinians in fiercely rejecting the UN move, launching their war against the emerging Jewish State the very next day. Obviously had they not done so, the Palestinians would have had a fully sovereign state right next door to a smaller Israel since May 1948. Only nine countries voted against the latest UN move, including Israel, the US and Canada. The 138 countries that supported the measure included some of Israel's closest allies, most notably France, Spain, Switzerland and Denmark. The world's two largest countries, China and India, also supported the Palestinian move. Among those that abstained in the vote were the UK, Australia, Germany and Colombia.

Just before the vote was held, PA President Mahmoud Abbas stood up at the UN rostrum in New York to plead for the world body to support his indirect new statehood bid. "Sixty-five years ago on this day, the United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution 181, which partitioned the land of historic Palestine into two states and became the birth certificate for Israel. The General Assembly is called upon today to issue a birth certificate of the reality of the State of Palestine." However PM Netanyahu called the vote "meaningless," adding that Abbas was not "speaking the words of a man who wants peace." Israeli leaders again pointed out that the PA attempts to set up a state by fiat instead of via the negotiating table are a serious violation of the 1993 Oslo peace accord under which the Palestinian Authority was established with Israeli and international assistance and approval. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, whose husband Bill helped negotiate the Oslo treaty, termed the UN vote "unfortunate and counter-productive," noting it only put additional obstacles on the already difficult path to peace.

A massive support rally was held in the Gaza Strip on December 8 to mark the 25th anniversary of the outbreak of the first Palestinian uprising soon after radical Palestinian Muslims announced they were forming an "Islamic Resistance Movement," (better known by its Arabic acronym, HAMAS, which ironically is also a Hebrew word meaning "violence"). For the first time ever, overall Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal, who was based in Damascus for many years before moving to Amman, visited the Gaza Strip for the occasion, basking in the bombastic support he received from the cheering crowd. He made clear his radical movement would never alter its founding charter's unambiguous call for Israel's total annihilation and replacement by a Muslim fundamentalist Arab state. "As long as Palestine is ours and Palestine is the land of Arabism and Islam, we can never recognize the legitimacy of the Zionist occupation of it. There is no legitimacy for occupation. Hence, there is no legitimacy for Israel, however long time lasts." Positioned on the stage right behind Mashaal and other Hamas officials was a huge replica of a type of advanced rockets that Hamas terrorists fired at Jerusalem and Tel Aviv in the short conflict with Israel in November. Although it had "Made in Gaza" written on it in Arabic, most Israeli experts believe the rockets were smuggled into Israel from Iran, probably via the troubled African nation of Sudan.

Israeli officials described the Hamas leader's fiery speech as "hateful and extremist." Government spokesman Mark Regev pointed out that "Mashaal says no to peace and no to reconciliation, a message that says every Israeli man, woman and child is a legitimate target. That sort of extremism won't help peace: the opposite is true." Mashaal later held "reconciliation talks" with the rival Palestinian Fatah movement, which rules the Palestinian Authority based in Ramallah. Hamas militia fighters pushed PA security forces and political leaders out of the Gaza Strip in a violently coup staged in the summer of 2007. Recognizing that the Hamas refusal to talk peace with Israel is increasingly popular on the Palestinian street, analysts say PA President Abbas has little choice but to try to reconcile with the radical Muslim movement.

ISRAEL TALKS ABOUT SYRIA TO JORDAN

Israeli media reports said that PM Netanyahu secretly flew to Amman Jordan during December to discuss possible joint Israeli-Jordanian military action to keep Syria's massive chemical weapons arsenal from falling into hostile Sunni or Shiite Muslim hands. Jordan was the staging ground for major military maneuvers by American and other international forces in 2012 designed to send a message to the besieged Assad regime in

Damascus that outside Western and Arab forces might feel obliged to intervene in the Syrian internal war if the death toll continues to mount. Most Sunni Arab countries actively support the armed rebellion against the Assad regime, calling upon the dictator to quickly leave office and halt the government's attempt to quash the so-called "Free Syrian Army" leading the revolt.

However in late December, Jordanian officials issued a public statement that was a seeming rebuff against Israel's attempts to establish a joint position against the Syrian regime. Issued in Amman, the statement made clear that while Jordan is prepared to deal with any potential chemical weapon threat posed by the ongoing violence in neighboring Syria, it will "not enter any alliance" to protect itself. The statement, released by Information Minister Sameeh Maaytah, did not provide any details on Jordan's potential capability to thwart a Syrian chemical attack. Maaytah added that the intense fighting in neighboring Syria has placed "enormous strains" on the country that is now home to some 275,000 Syrian refugees who have fled the fighting. During the last decade, the small country of Jordan found itself hosting hundreds of thousands of Iraqi citizens escaping fighting in that Arab country.

Meanwhile another high-ranking Syrian military officer defected to the opposition the end of November. Major General Abdul Aziz Jassem al-Shallal, the head of the country's military police forces, announced his decision in a video broadcast on the Al Arabiya satellite news network. "I declare my defection from the regime's army, since it has deviated from its fundamental mission to protect the nation, and instead has been transformed into gangs of killing and destruction." The video was reportedly recorded along Syria's northern border with Turkey, where tensions remain high as NATO forces continue to station anti-aircraft Patriot missile batteries in the area. Major General Shallal said he knows of many other high ranking military officers who are looking for the right opportunities to defect from the embattled regime, which fought many new battles during the month with opposition rebel forces.

Whatever happens in the volatile Middle East and all around this troubled world during 2013, let us emulate the ancient Hebrew prophet Zephaniah who wrote down these stirring words: *"Though the fig tree should not blossom, and there be no fruit on the vines. Though the yield of the olive should fail us, and the fields produce no food. Though the flocks should be cut off from the fold, and there be no cattle in the stalls. Yet I will exalt in the Lord, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength, and He has made my feet light hinds feet, and makes me walk on my high places"* (Zephaniah 3:17-19).

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. 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) 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), 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.

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