

# Israel News from David Dolan

Week of February 25, 2013

## SHALOM FROM JERUSALEM,

Below is this month's Israel news and analysis report, focusing on attempts by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to form a new coalition government, a task he is finding quite daunting. I also report on a recent surge of violence in the disputed territories connected to a continuing hunger strike by Palestinian prisoners being held in Israeli jails, the escalating warfare in Syria and developments in Iran.

Indeed, I returned to Jerusalem last week from a trip to the United States where I visited family and spoke at meetings and conferences in several states, only to hear the all too familiar sound of security clashes taking place last Friday on and near the Temple Mount. Israeli police entered the sacred compound and quelled the rioting with tear gas and other non-lethal methods. More violence is taking place today in several places.

Still it is the final day of Purim here in Jerusalem (it is a two day festival in all walled cities), and a visit earlier today to the Old City revealed thousands of people enjoying the holiday wearing costumes and parading about the area. The weather is unusually warm for this time of year, up to nearly 70 F today (21 C), and the warmth is expected to continue all week. The abundant rains that the region enjoyed this winter are evident in the lush green grasses on the hills and in the valleys. As the Jewish people celebrate their ancient triumph over Haman's decree to wipe them off the face of the earth, they wonder if this year will bring a showdown with Persia's modern incarnation, Iran. Interesting days apparently lie ahead, and your prayers are very much appreciated.

## PM STRUGGLES TO FORM NEW GOVERNMENT

By David Dolan

After coming out on top in last month's Knesset elections, but by a much smaller margin than opinion polls had originally predicted, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu struggled during February to form a viable coalition government. His first, and so far only, confirmed coalition partner was not from his natural rightwing base, but was instead a holdover from the decimated Kadima party, founded by Ariel Sharon. Netanyahu was only able to persuade former Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni to include her small six-seat party on the coalition train after promising her control over a coveted ministry and a major role in any future peace talks with the Palestinians. This came despite the fact that she had vowed during the election campaign not to participate in any government led by her longtime political rival. Earlier in the month, the leader of another, larger center-left party said he would not join the coalition if the religious Shas party is included.

The announcement that Livni would join the new government created fresh problems for the Premier. Since like other centrist political parties, she is demanding that all Orthodox Jews be required to do some form of national service, both Shas and a new party supported by many Israeli residents of the disputed territories said they might sit in the opposition. However many analysts predicted in the end, both parties would most likely sign up with Netanyahu since they would have far less power and influence, and government funding, if they stayed away from the cabinet table. They are also fully aware that most of their voters want Netanyahu to remain at the government helm.

By the end of the month, it became clear that the Premier might not succeed in forming a new government by the mid-March final deadline. If so, this would probably spark off fresh elections, despite the high cost of holding them. One opinion survey predicted that if another vote were held, the new center-left *Yesh Atid* party would trounce the Likud-Yisrael Beiteinu joint party. This outcome would probably make its populist leader, Yair Lapid, the likely new Israeli leader. Further complicating coalition negotiations for Netanyahu, the White House announced that President Barack Obama will make his first state visit to the small country just four days after the coalition formation deadline is reached.

Tensions remained very high in the region during the month as more unrest swept through Egypt and the internal war wracking Syria continued to produce a heavy death toll, now averaging 100 per day. Thousands of demonstrators gathered in Cairo and other Egyptian cities to protest various anti-democratic actions taken by the new regime headed by the increasingly controversial Muslim Brotherhood-backed President, Muhammad Morsi. In an apparent effort to help defuse the growing concerns expressed by many world leaders over Morsi's moves, Egyptian officials held several high level meetings with their Israeli counterparts during the month despite harsh anti-Jewish statements made by Morsi and other Muslim Brotherhood leaders during the past few years.

In Syria, fighting continued to rage on many fronts as more citizens fled the intense warfare tearing apart their country. For the first time, the embattled regime deployed powerful SCUD missiles on its own people in several places during the month. Analysts said this indicated that the desperate regime is losing the war. Meanwhile the mostly Sunni Syrian opposition released a statement threatening to respond to ongoing shelling of Sunni towns near the Lebanese border. They said the attacks were carried out by the Shiite Hizbullah militia. This came as media reports said more Hizbullah militiamen were pouring into Syria to support the embattled Assad regime. Other reports said Palestinian fighters from the Gaza Strip were heading to the Arab country to buttress rebel forces trying to topple Syrian dictator Bashar Assad.

British leaders failed in their attempts to get the European Union to allow EU weapons to flow to the rebel forces. However, EU leaders did approve other measures during the month designed to back the opposition fighters. Reports said Britain and the United States have drawn up plans to seize Syrian chemical weapons if and when the regime appears to be near imminent collapse.

Meanwhile Iranian leaders vowed revenge against Israel after a senior Iranian Revolutionary Guard commander was killed in an Israeli air strike upon a Syrian convoy carrying heavy weapons to Hizbullah forces in Lebanon. Earlier regional media reports said that many Iranian Shiite Muslim fighters had perished when Israeli warplanes bombed a chemical weapons site outside of Damascus. The United Nations reported in late February that Iran is installing advanced uranium enrichment centrifuges at the Natanz nuclear production site, which was termed a "very grave" development by PM Netanyahu.

Violent clashes broke out between Israeli security forces and Palestinian demonstrators during the month, centered on the continuing hunger strikes by dozens of Palestinian prisoners being detained in Israeli jails. This came after PA leader Mahmoud Abbas indicated he would cancel planned parliamentary elections scheduled for later this year. The decision was due to strong opposition by the Muslim fundamentalist Hamas movement to the vote, which the radical group said would not be allowed to take place in the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip. The tussle over the planned elections added new fuel to the bitter rivalry between the two Palestinian factions, with reconciliation talks making little progress during February.

## **LIVNI JUMPS ON BOARD**

Opinion surveys in Israel had forecast last Autumn that Benjamin Netanyahu, dubbed "King of Israel" by Time magazine last year because of his apparently strong grip over the Israeli political scene, would capture at least one-third of the 120 Knesset seats in elections scheduled for January of this year. This would have been greater than the combined total of seats that he and his new political partner, then Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman and his Yisrael Beiteinu party, held in the last Knesset. However in the end, the Premier and his new partner won only one-fourth of the Knesset seats, significantly less than their combined sum in the last Knesset. Analysts said this outcome was due to several important factors. Chief among them was Lieberman's sudden resignation from the government after he was indicted on criminal charges last December. Another factor was the unexpected popularity of Yair Lapid's new "There is a Future" party, which captured 19 seats in the national ballot.

As a result of the near stalemate between right and left-leaning parties in the January election, the veteran Premier has been finding it very difficult to knit together a viable coalition government, which by law must have the support of at least 61 Knesset members. As of this writing over one month after the final election results were announced, Netanyahu only has his own joint party and one other small party committed to his continuing rule, giving him a meager total so far of just 37 seats.

Ironically, it was one of the least expected coalition partners that signed the first agreement to participate in a Likud-led government, Tzipi Livni. She had vowed during the campaign never to join such a coalition, although she claimed after doing so on February 18 that she had not made such a pledge. "I did not say I would not be there, but I promised voters one thing; that I would never betray their trust." However many of her supporters immediately cried foul, even though Livni was promised control over the prestigious Justice Ministry and a major role in any future peace talks with the Palestinians. Indeed, Netanyahu reportedly promised her that she would be *the* leading government player in the struggling peace process, holding more sway than the new Foreign Minister. Analysts said this was another indication that the PM seriously intends to promote the peace process if he is able to form a broad coalition government, as he has vowed to do.

The announcement of the first coalition accord created immediate tremors in both the Likud-Yisrael Beiteinu party and Livni's *Hatnuah* party. Many Likud politicians protested the fact that the Premier chose to reach out to Livni before holding coalition talks with his current political partners like Shas and other rightwing and religious parties. Many said this revealed that Netanyahu intends to build a centrist government that would leave many of his "natural allies" in the dust. However several Likud Knesset members said the PM had demonstrated great political skill in reaching out to his most unlikely partner first before turning to his rightwing partners, who basically have nowhere else to go if they want to participate in the next government.

Livni unveiled her pact with Netanyahu at a tense Hatnuah party meeting on February 19. Former Haifa mayor and Labor party member Amram Mitzna refused to even shake hands with his new party colleague, former Labor leader Amir Peretz. This came after press reports surfaced that Livni had promised Peretz that he would be appointed her party's second cabinet minister instead of Mitzna. Speaking to reporters just before she convened her five Knesset members to present her coalition pact with the Premier, Livni maintained that, "All the conditions (to enter the new coalition) were not only fully met, but even more. We received management of the peace talks. The Justice Ministry will help us promote our worldview and prevent the radicalism we saw in the previous Knesset." On the burning question of who should be her number two minister, she stated it was "not a matter of a portfolio or position, but rather about our ability to fulfill our philosophy."

## **WHY SO TOUGH?**

Another statement that Tzipi Livni made to reporters was deeply related to one of the main headaches facing Benjamin Netanyahu as he attempts to hobble a new coalition government together. "The test before us concerns equality in bearing the national service burden." Like Yair Lapid and new Labor party leader Shelly Yachimovich, Livni had made the inclusion of Orthodox Israeli Jews in some form of mandatory national service a major plank in her election campaign. All three party leaders vowed they would never join any government that did not share this long sought after goal. Netanyahu himself has stated several times that he is not opposed in principal to such a controversial, but widely popular move, as long as it does not in any way denigrate religious Jews in Israeli society.

Before the election, it had been widely reported in the Israeli media that the rising star of the campaign was the highly successful businessman turned rightwing politician, Natafali Bennett, who heads the *Beit Yehudi* (Jewish Home) party, which won 12 seats in the new Knesset. Of course in the end, it was former television star Yair Lapid who rocked the country's political world, not the anglophile Bennett whose parents hail from San Francisco.

After Livni's inclusion in the government was announced, Bennett indicated it was "less likely" that his party would join any coalition with the former Kadima party leader participating in it. Having been backed by a large majority of Jewish voters living in the disputed territories north and south of Jerusalem, many of them observant Jews, analysts say Bennett would find it very hard to support a government that was actively promoting a final peace deal with the Palestinian Authority. However they added that Bennett realizes the chances any real peace negotiations will get off the ground anytime soon are near zero, given that the PA constantly demands that before peace talks can resume, there must be a total Israeli building freeze in the contested areas, including in many parts of Jerusalem. The latter is on land that Netanyahu has often made clear will never be open to discussion, meaning a construction freeze will never occur in the holy city under his watch. On top of that, Netanyahu has frequently stated that his top priority is halting Iran's threatening nuclear development program,

not a final peace deal with the Palestinians, who anyway remain deeply divided between PLO Fatah and Hamas supporters.

## **A STRONGER FUTURE?**

Probably the main reason why PM Netanyahu is finding it so difficult to form a viable coalition government is the fact that Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid party captured 19 Knesset seats, which was considerably more than opinion polls had predicted. Indeed, many pundits are calling the handsome and charismatic 49-year-old former television news anchorman and talk show host the new kingmaker of Israel, if not yet its actual new monarch. Two opinion surveys released in late February agreed that if fresh elections were held in the coming months, Lapid's party would become the dominant one in the Knesset. According to the polls, conducted by the Knesset television channel and the *Jerusalem Post* newspaper, Yesh Atid would end up with 30 seats, just one less than the current total held by the joint Likud-Yisrael Beiteinu party. Both surveys also forecast that the Premier's party would slip from 31 seats to just 22, meaning Lapid would probably be asked by President Shimon Peres to attempt to form the next government.

However many political analysts said the survey results will probably serve to strengthen Netanyahu's hand as he negotiates with his current rightwing and religious allies to join his coalition alliance, given that none of them wants to see Lapid seated in the Prime Minister's chair. The polls also showed that Tzipi Livni would lose two of her new seats, meaning she has even more reason to adhere to her recent coalition accord with Netanyahu. Another loser would be Labor, also slipping back two seats to a total of 13.

According to the law, Benjamin Netanyahu has only until the first of March to form a government. However, a two-week extension period is also allowed, and usually utilized, by the man or woman attempting to stitch a coalition quilt together. It is widely anticipated in Israel that the sitting Premier will indeed succeed in meeting the mid-March final deadline, but will not have the "broad coalition" that he pledged to build in the wake of the January 22 election. Instead, it will contain his own 31 Knesset member party, along with the fourth largest party in the new Knesset, Jewish Home, the religious Shas party which ranks number five in the new Knesset with 11 seats, the seven-seat United Torah Judaism party, and Livni's six-seat party. This would give the Premier a fairly comfortable Knesset base of 67 seats, meaning that even if Livni were to later pull out of the government, it would still have a majority in parliament, but of only one seat.

Analysts point out the coalition spelled out above would grant the rightwing and religious parties a major say in Netanyahu's new government, meaning that an IDF military strike upon Iran's nuclear production sites would become more likely in the coming months. They add that peace talks with the Palestinians would definitely be off the table, along with the various proposals to induct all Orthodox Jews into some form of national service.

## **CLASHES ERUPT NEAR JERUSALEM**

As PM Netanyahu was busy trying to form a new government while also making preparations for President Obama's state visit in March, violent clashes broke out in several parts of the disputed territories before also spreading to Jerusalem. The fresh unrest is linked to an ongoing hunger strike by a number of Palestinian prisoners who are demanding better living conditions in Israeli jails. Most of the prisoners were incarcerated for security offenses, including carrying out terrorist attacks upon Israeli civilians and soldiers. One prisoner has refused to eat any solid food for over 200 days. Palestinian officials have been warning that widespread violence could break out if any of the prisoners die.

Israeli security forces were placed on high alert on February 24 after one prisoner perished in an Israeli jail. However the 30-year-old Arab detainee had not been on a hunger strike, but reportedly died of a heart attack. The Palestinian Authority Minister of Prisoner Affairs immediately charged that the inmate had not actually lost his life due to cardiac arrest, but was killed by his Israeli interrogators. He had entered the Israeli security prison just a few days before after being apprehended for throwing rocks at Israeli civilians.

Just a few days before his death, heavy clashes erupted at another prison near the unofficial Palestinian capital city of Ramallah, north of Jerusalem. Hundreds of Palestinian protestors had gathered there to support the

hunger strikers. Three well-known Israeli television journalists were wounded by Palestinian stone-throwers while covering the clashes. Pictures of one of them, Yoram Cohen of Channel One, were shown on the evening news, with blood covering his wounded face. Israeli security forces used tear gas and stun grenades to disperse the rioters, wounding several dozen Palestinians. The following day, clashes broke out on the Temple Mount and other places in and around Jerusalem. An Israeli police spokesman denied Palestinian claims that live bullets had been used to quell the demonstrations. Clashes later also spread to Hebron, south of Jerusalem.

The violence came amid calls by Hamas and other Palestinian groups for a new *intifada* uprising. Overall Hamas leader Khalad Maashal and other radical leaders proclaimed during February that the peace process was dead and buried, urging the Palestinian Authority to join them in a new round of widespread violence against "the Zionist enemy." Israeli analysts warned the calls might be heeded if PM Netanyahu can only form a narrow rightwing coalition, as now seems almost inevitable. However an opinion poll carried out by the Arab World for Research and Development group mid-month found that 65% of the Palestinian public do not support a new uprising. It also showed that 42% back the Fatah party, which runs the Palestinian Authority, with only 18% saying they support Hamas. This was a sharp drop for the extremist Iranian-backed Islamic group, which surged in popularity after hundreds of Hamas rockets were fired at Israeli cities in November.

In the race for Palestinian President, the survey revealed that 58% back the current PA leader, Mahmoud Abbas. However that support may not matter since Hamas has announced that it will not allow Palestinian elections to take place in the Gaza Strip, meaning around one-third of all voters would not participate in the vote. That prompted Abbas to counter that he will not allow any elections at all if Gaza residents are not permitted to cast their ballots. The opinion poll revealed that 95% of Gaza residents want to partake in the proposed elections, indicating many might vote for Fatah over Hamas.

## **CRUMBLING SYRIA**

Israel became directly involved in the escalating conflict in neighboring Syria for the first time when Israeli Air Force jets bombed a chemical weapons development complex on the outskirts of Damascus then end of January. The complex is located just eight miles from the main presidential palace where the besieged dictator Bashar Assad and many of his cronies are holed up. Syrian officials claimed that only two people were killed in the air strike. However several Arab media outlets reported that many more perished in the bombing, including members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards who are in the country to support the crumbling regime.

On the same day that the Israeli air strike took place, IAF jets also hit a Syrian weapons convoy that was transporting Russian-made SA-17 anti-aircraft rockets and other heavy weapons to Hizbullah militia forces in nearby Lebanon. PM Netanyahu had earlier joined American Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and other international officials in warning the Syrian regime not to attempt to smuggle such weapons out of the war-torn country. However it later emerged that the real target of the operation may have been an Iranian Revolutionary Guard General who was reportedly killed in the attack. Iranian leaders subsequently issued a threatening statement warning that Israel would "pay a heavy price" for his demise. Hizbullah's leader, Sheik Hassan Nasrallah, echoed this warning soon after Bulgarian leaders announced that the radical Lebanese Shiite group had been behind last July's terrorist bus bombing in the country, which left the Bulgarian bus driver and five Israeli tourists dead. The revelation prompted renewed calls for the European Union to place Hizbullah on its list of terrorist groups, a move Germany and France have been resisting in apparent concern it would only spark further Hizbullah attacks in EU countries. This came as Nigerian officials announced they had uncovered a Hizbullah cell in their West African country that was plotting attacks upon Israeli and American targets.

The fighting in Syria intensified in and around the capital city, Damascus, with rebel forces even striking one of President Assad's personal homes. A massive car bomb killed over 50 people near the ruling Baath party headquarters, shattering windows in the nearby Russian embassy. The attack, which some Syrian officials blamed on Israeli agents, came as the Kremlin stepped up evacuation of its citizens living in Syria. This was seen as an apparent sign that Russia believes Assad may soon be ousted from power. The dictator has vowed he will not go down without a final blow to his enemies, including Israel.

Meanwhile a classified UN Atomic Energy Agency report was leaked to the media in late February, saying Assad's main ally, Iran, has stepped up its uranium enrichment program, adding 180 highly advanced centrifuges to its existing stockpile. PM Netanyahu called the report "very grave," adding that Iran must be stopped before it reaches a "red line" he had earlier said could be achieved by sometime this coming Spring.

Many other very important developments took place in Israel and the region during February, far too many to report here. Many indicate that the prospects for a major Middle East war breaking out sometime this year are quite high, higher than this reporter has ever seen in nearly 33 years covering the region. Indeed, it appears we may be on the verge of the fulfillment of an ancient biblical prophecy noted below. If so, intensified prayer for Israel's leaders and people has never been more needed. *"The oracle concerning Damascus. Behold, Damascus is about to be removed from being a city, and it will become a fallen ruin, The fortified city will disappear from Ephraim, and sovereignty from Damascus. And the remnant of Aram; they will be like the glory of the sons of Israel of Israel" (Isaiah 17, 1,3).*

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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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