

Israel News from David Dolan

May 30, 2013

This month's Israel news review looks in particular at the seemingly growing prospect of major warfare breaking out between Israel and its troubled neighbor to the north, Syria. A brief clash took place during May on the tense Golan Heights, captured by IDF forces from Syria during the Six Day War which began 46 years ago on June 5. Earlier in the month, Israeli aircraft attacked a Syrian arms convoy apparently heading toward Lebanon, and a chemical weapons facility near Damascus. Details of the crisis with Syria and this month's other major developments in the region are posted below.

An interview that CBN's Chris Mitchell conducted with me on my roof in Jerusalem several weeks ago is now posted on the CBN web site. Chris, who I have known for many years, asked me about the situation in Syria and other topics. The interview, on the *Dateline Jerusalem* program, can be viewed at this link:

<http://www.cbn.com/tv/2390352590001>

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ISRAEL AND SYRIA SLIDE CLOSER TO CONFLICT

By David Dolan

Israel and Syria inched closer to all out war during May as Israeli air force jets attacked two separate targets inside of Syria. This was followed two weeks later by the first direct clash between Israeli and Syrian soldiers in many years, as Syrian troops fired at IDF forces on the contested Golan Heights. The embattled Syrian regime expressed "outrage" over the air strikes, vowing revenge and saying it was asking Palestinian groups to attack Israel with rockets from southern Syria and Lebanon. The Syrian regime then announced that it is planning to take back the Golan Heights in a coming war. The Golan was originally intended to be part of a Jewish state when the League of Nations granted France and Britain mandates to establish countries in the region in the early 1920s.

Arab and Israeli media reports said Israeli bombs were dropped on a convoy carrying advanced Syrian missiles on their way to Shiite Hizbullah militia forces based in Lebanon. The other target was a Syrian chemical weapons research facility on the outskirts of the Syrian capital city, Damascus. The attacks were similar to previous ones that occurred in late January and early February when another Syrian weapons convoy was struck near the Lebanese border. It was reportedly carrying sophisticated anti-aircraft missile systems to the Iranian-backed Lebanese militia. The same chemical weapons facility, thought to be the center of Syria's chemical weapons program, was attacked once again. Soon after the latest IDF operations took place, Hizbullah leaders repeated their earlier pledge to "defend" the Assad regime with all of their military might, which Israeli leaders have warned has become quite significant, with the Muslim militia possessing more weapons than most sovereign countries have in today's world.

A Syrian-based Palestinian group calling itself the "Battalions of the Abed al Qadar Martyrs" claimed mid-month that it had fired several rockets at IDF positions near the summit of Mount Hermon, the tallest mountain in the region at nearly 10,000 feet. The outpost is known to house an advanced electronic listening facility that keeps tabs on Syria, along with a reported capability to monitor rocket firings as far away as Iran. Israeli officials had no comment on the report, which came on the 65th anniversary of Israel's modern creation in May 1948. The Palestinian group said the attack was meant to commemorate *Al Nakba*, the Arab moniker for Israel's Independence Day meaning "the catastrophe."

Russia stepped up its overt support for the Syrian Assad regime during May by sending up to a dozen warships to patrol off of the Syrian eastern Mediterranean coast. The move was thought to be mainly designed to warn the United States and its NATO allies, along with Israel, to stay out of the deadly Syrian conflict. However it was also meant to add protection to Russia's strategic naval port in the Syrian coastal city of Latakia, which the Kremlin is apparently loath to lose if the Assad regime should fall.

Russian officials also confirmed that they are continuing to supply the struggling regime with highly advanced anti-aircraft weapons systems that were purchased by Damascus several years ago. Defense analysts say the rockets would pose a serious threat to Western aircraft if military action was taken against the besieged regime. This came as the United States announced it was stepping up its non-military support for Sunni Muslim rebel groups trying to oust the Assad government. President Barack Obama indicated that he might declare a "no-fly zone" over Syria, which analysts note could well be a prelude to further US military action.

Evidence mounted during May that the Assad regime had indeed used the deadly chemical Sarin nerve agent against insurgent forces and civilians in northern Syria earlier this year. This news came as Israeli officials reiterated that they will not allow such weapons to be transferred to Hizbullah forces in Lebanon or to any other location. American and European leaders also repeated that such weapons transfers would cross a "red line" that would probably trigger military action against Bashar Assad and his embattled government. Meanwhile the United Nations reported that around 1.5 million Syrian civilians have now fled the intense fighting tearing apart their country, which is some half a million more than it numbered just a few months ago. The escalating Arab refugee flight continues to put increasing strains upon neighboring countries housing the fleeing Syrians, especially Jordan and Lebanon.

American government officials continued their attempts during May to get frozen peace talks moving once again between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. US Secretary of State John Kerry visited the land once again to meet with officials from both sides of the conflict. This came as Israel announced it would construct more homes in the disputed territories north and south of Jerusalem claimed by the Palestinians as their hoped-for future state. The announcement produced the usual denunciations from many world capitals.

With one eye on the tense situation in the north, most Israelis were equally focused on the new Netanyahu government's attempts to slash spending as the local economy slows down in response to continuing financial woes in Europe and elsewhere. New Finance Minister Yair Lapid made headlines when he vowed to carry out his campaign pledge to seriously cut welfare spending and other national entitlement programs, which is seen by ultra-Orthodox leaders as a blow directed mainly at their fast-growing community. Proposed cuts in education spending were also denounced by many Jewish religious leaders. Young members of an ultra Orthodox sect rioted in Jerusalem to protest government plans to draft currently exempt Haredi Jews into either the armed forces or some other form of national service.

While military rumblings rocked the Golan Heights, the biblical Sea of Galilee below the strategic plateau continued to be replenished after a near record fall of precipitation over the winter and spring months. For the first time in many years, the Israeli government's Water Authority announced it will begin releasing 1,000 cubic meters of water per hour into the shrinking Jordan River in early June. The Authority said its goal is to allow up to 30 million cubic meters of water to flow into the depleted river over the next year, with the annual release hopefully continuing over the coming years if precipitation levels remain high.

IDF STRIKES AGAIN IN SYRIA

Israeli government and military leaders have been repeatedly stating over the past year or so that they will not allow the Syrian Assad regime to transfer its massive chemical weapons arsenal—one of the largest on earth—to any third party, especial to the radical Hizbullah militia. They have also made clear that the same rule will apply to the transfer of other heavy weapons systems, such as surface to surface rockets and anti-aircraft missiles. Therefore it was not a big surprise when IDF forces struck another Syrian weapons convoy apparently on its way to Lebanon in early May, along with what is reportedly the Assad regime's main chemical weapons development facility situated on the southwest outskirts of Damascus. The earlier attack on the same site reportedly produced some Iranian casualties.

Syrian government officials reacted angrily to the latest IDF action. Foreign Minister Walid Al Muallem sent a letter of protest to the United Nations, saying that “the blatant Israeli aggression has the aim to provide direct military support to the terrorist groups after they failed to control territory.” The Assad regime and its allies regularly refer to the government’s Sunni Muslim Syrian opponents as terrorists. Muslim insurgent leaders actually joined the Assad regime in condemning the Israeli air strikes, which is understandable given that the Islamic fighters have no more love for the Jewish State than they do for Assad.

Although Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu did not respond to the Syrian condemnations directly, he did send out a close ally, Likud party Knesset Member Tzachi Hanegbi, to issue a statement. In an interview with Israel Radio. Hanegbi said the Netanyahu government “wants to avoid an increase in tension with Syria by making it clear that if there is activity, it is only against Hizbullah, not against the Syrian regime.” Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Ya’alon told reporters that his country “is not interfering in the Syrian civil war, but we have warned what our interests are, and we have called it ‘red lines’ whether it is the transfer of quality weapons to a terrorist organization or violating our sovereignty along the border.”

Apparently demonstrating that the government means business, a snap military call up of reserve army forces took place in early May. Without any previous warning, some 2,000 men received notices, mostly via mobile cellphones, to report immediately for duty in their units stationed on the Golan Heights. Although some analysts believe that the possibility of imminent conflict with Syria was behind the sudden deployment, the defense ministry issued a statement saying the call up was “a routine test” of the army’s ability to quickly gather its large reserve forces, which have played a vital role in all of Israel’s major wars.

ASSAD TO ATTACK ISRAEL?

Syrian dictator Bashar Assad reacted to the Israeli air strikes during a meeting in Damascus with visiting Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi. He boasted that his military forces are “capable of confronting Israel’s ventures that represent one of the many faces of terrorism targeting Syria today.” Later it was reported in the Syrian media that Assad had given armed Palestinian militants living in Syria “permission” to launch rocket attacks upon Israeli soldiers and civilians on the Golan Heights in retaliation for the IDF operations. Analysts said the fact that Assad did not threaten to attack Israel directly was another signal of his growing weakness in the face of the 26 month insurgency against his iron-fisted rule.

The Palestinian Authority based in Ramallah did not express enthusiasm over the prospect that Palestinians living in Syria would open a warfront on the tense Golan Heights against what many term “the Zionist enemy.” PA spokesman Ahmad Assaf issued a statement saying that Palestinian factions “are not in the habit” of taking orders from the Syrian regime. He added that “the Palestinian people will respond to Israeli attacks when and how they wish.”

For their part, Hizbullah leaders stepped up their usual Israel-bashing in the wake of the IDF operations. A senior Hizbullah leader, Nabil Qaouk, said that his movement’s heavily armed militia force “is ready today to inflict on Israel a great defeat.” He alleged that the Netanyahu government “wants to take advantage of the crisis in Syria to change the regional equation as it seeks to drag the region into a war on its own terms on future war fronts.” He denied Lebanese press reports that the extremist Shiite militia has been weakened by its boots on the ground involvement inside Syria in support of the beleaguered Assad regime, terming the reports “nonsense.”

Joining in the fray several days later, overall Hizbullah leader Sheik Hassan Nasrallah, said during a televised speech that his militia forces are ready to join the Assad regime in “liberating” the Golan Heights from Israeli control. “We announce that we stand with the Syrian popular resistance and offer material and spiritual support as well as coordination in order to liberate the Syrian Golan,” he said. This came soon after the Shiite clerical regime ruling Iran also pledged its full support for Assad in his struggle to stay in power. An Iranian government statement said Tehran would continue to offer “full and unlimited support from Iran, politically, militarily and economically” against what it termed “the terrorists, Israel, the United States and all who dare attack this country.” Analysts noted that thousands of Iranian Revolutionary Guards have been openly operating in Syria to support the regime since the middle of 2011.

Syrian insurgent leaders issued a statement during May condemning Hizbullah's active support for the Assad regime. Israeli defense analysts say the Shiite militia force has many thousands of fighters inside Syria, working closely with Iranian forces to support the Syrian government. Meanwhile former Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, whose father was killed by Hizbullah terrorists in Beirut in 2005, denounced the Shiite Muslim group for "leading Lebanon to ruin."

NO FLY ZONE?

Many years before the United States and its allies entered Iraq on the ground, a no fly zone was established over the Arab country's skies. A number of Iraqi air force jets were shot down by US warplanes in the region as they attempted to fly despite the air blockade. In comments to reporters mid-month, American President Barack Obama said the US might once again declare a no fly zone in the Middle East, but this time over Syria. Analysts warned that the establishment of such a zone would probably lead to direct dogfights between US and Syrian warplanes. Obama said he is ready to deploy more lethal means in response to the Assad regime's despicable actions, especially the killing of thousands of its own civilians in its intense struggle to cling to power.

The President stated once again that American military forces are "capable of intervening" inside of Syria if it becomes necessary, although he added this is not his preferred option. He said a "humanitarian corridor," apparently guarded by US forces, may soon be opened from Syria into NATO member Turkey to the north. This would allow refugees to flee in relative safety. Today, many people are reportedly killed by Assad regime forces as they attempt to cross the borders into Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan.

Israeli leaders declared they are ready to support the United States if it declares a no fly zone in Syria. Some analysts say that Israel's air force base near the ancient town of Megiddo in the Jezreel Valley may be used by US aircraft if they enforce a no fly zone over the skies of southern Syria, where Damascus is located. However most American air force jets would probably operate out of Turkey since significant US forces are already stationed in the large Muslim country. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan told the American NBC network that he would also support a US-enforced no-fly zone in Syria. He added he was convinced that the Assad regime had used chemical weapons several times in the ongoing conflict.

The prospect of full scale war between Israel and Syria seemed to grow on another front during the month. Four more members of the United Nations peacekeeping force stationed on the Golan Heights were detained by rebel Muslim forces. As was the case earlier this year, the kidnapped soldiers were from the Philippines. They were taken captive by a group calling itself the *Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade*, which is named in reference to a battle that took place near the Yarmouk River south of the Golan Heights.

KERRY RETURNS

American Secretary of State John Kerry returned to Israel in late May to add to his earlier attempts to get the stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace process moving again. Israeli political analysts say the diplomat has been finding it rough going, especially since both parties have other more pressing agendas to pursue. For the Netanyahu government, it is obviously the growing Syrian crisis and Iran's threatening nuclear production program. On the Palestinian side, efforts to restore ties between the Fatah-ruled Palestinian Authority and the rival Muslim fundamentalist Hamas movement is a higher priority for PA leaders at present than a final peace deal with Israel.

Kerry earlier gave his backing for plans to modify the Arab Peace Initiative that was unveiled by Arab League leaders in 2002. The plan endorses a two state solution, but also demands that Israel evacuate every portion of eastern Jerusalem, including the walled Old City which contains Judaism's holiest site on earth, the Temple Mount. Israeli leaders reacted coolly when the plan was announced over ten years ago, and the current government shows no signs of wishing to see it fully implemented. Still, Israeli officials told Kerry they are willing to consider any proposal that the Americans endorse. Leaders of the militant Hamas movement said again that they would never agree to peace negotiations with Israel under any circumstances, calling instead once more for Israel's total destruction.

As he promised when he stitched together his coalition pact with his political partners earlier this year, the Israeli Premier left most of the government's official interaction with Kerry to Justice Minister Tzipi Livni. The former Likud party politician seemed happy enough to be in the media spotlight, telling Army Radio that her "encounters with Kerry show that he has an honest belief that it is possible to solve the conflict, and that a solution is in the interest of Israelis and Palestinians." One of Israel's closest international allies, Germany, also endorsed Kerry's efforts during May.

After Kerry met with Israeli leaders in Jerusalem, including President Shimon Peres, and later with Palestinian Authority leaders in nearby Ramallah, the Secretary of State said, "Our hope is that the leaders in both Israel and the Palestinian Authority will find a way to compromise. It's really a question of whether Israel and the Palestinians make the choices. This moment is a really critical one for the region and particularly for Israel, for Palestine and for Jordan. I think there is an opportunity, but for many reasons it is not on the tip of everyone's tongue."

Palestinian Authority Foreign Minister Riyad Malki announced that the PA has promised the Obama administration that it will no longer actively pursue efforts to become a member state at the United Nations. He added the PA will not implement its earlier threats to open legal cases against Israeli government and military leaders at the International Criminal Court in the Netherlands. He averred this "proves our true intentions to give a bigger chance for the peace process" to succeed.

Before he met with John Kerry, PM Netanyahu traveled to China, where he had a very successful visit with government and business leaders. Diplomatic ties between the two ancient cultures did not even exist until the late 1990s. Today, China has become a major trading partner with Israel, and Chinese tourists are increasingly flocking to visit the Holy Land, many of them Chinese Christians. President Shimon Peres was also out of the country during the month, visiting the Vatican in Rome among other places. The new pontiff accepted the president's invitation to visit the land, although a date for such a trip was not announced.

MONEY WOES

Israeli Finance Minister Yair Lapid found himself in hot water on more than one occasion during May as he detailed the government's new state budget. It included major cuts to the socialist-style welfare system that has been operating in the Jewish State for many decades. Lapid pointed out that tax revenues have shrunk in recent years, mainly as a result of the international economic crisis that has led to a drop in Israeli exports to Europe and other regions of the world. After the spending cuts were announced, Lapid came under fresh scathing criticism from ultra-Orthodox Jewish leaders for supposedly targeting their communities. The popular Finance Minister replied that he was "sad" that a majority of Haredi Jews fall under the government's official poverty line. However he also pointed out that this is mainly due to the fact that most adult male members of the community do not work, but instead study the Bible and the Talmud every day in one of the countries many yeshiva seminaries.

The comments came soon after the Israeli public was disturbed to hear about the latest financial report from the international Organization for Economic Development group. It rated Israel's poverty level as the highest of any fully developed county in the organization. Lapid pointed out that this is a distorted picture, since the high amount of ultra-Orthodox Jewish men and Arab Muslim women who do not work is the main reason why the official poverty rate is so high. The choice to stay away from the job market is willingly made by many members of both groups, Lapid noted, and they tend to have broad family and religious support networks that makes their apparent "poverty" less stinging in reality. Still, he admitted that the government needs to do more to help the truly impoverished, of whom there are many in Israel.

The Israeli Attorney General acted in May to curb Finance Minister Lapid's plan to slash state taxpayer aid to the country's many ultra-Orthodox schools. In the original proposal, the government would have trimmed funding for any school that does not teach "core curriculum subjects" like the history of modern Zionism. Many religious Jews believe that a Jewish state can only be established when the Messiah appears in Jerusalem, which has obviously become a rather quirky belief given the actual existence in the Middle East of the vibrant state of Israel for over six decades now.

The good news is that despite the upheaval gripping many portions of the Middle East in these dramatic days, the Messiah will indeed reign in splendor one day soon from His prophesied millennial throne in Jerusalem. In that day, *"Many peoples and mighty nations will come to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem, and to entreat the favor of the Lord"* (Zechariah 8:22).

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 authors 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 email at: resources@yourisraelconnection.org

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