

Israel News from David Dolan

Week of June 24, 2013

Shalom from Jerusalem,

Human rights groups now say that over 100,000 people have perished in the war that has been tearing apart Syria since March 2011. Intense battles also took place in neighboring Lebanon during the month between supporters and opponents of Syrian dictator Bashar Assad. Palestinian rockets have once again been fired at Israeli civilian areas near the Gaza Strip as internal strife gripped the Palestinian Authority government. Details are posted below in my monthly Israel news report.

I am scheduled to speak at an Israel conference in Monterrey Mexico in October and in the New York City area and central New Jersey early next year. Details will be posted on my web site in the coming weeks.

A happy Canada day to all who celebrate that holiday on the first of July, and a happy fourth of July to all my American readers.

MIDEAST BOILS AS SYRIAN WAR INTENSIFIES

By David Dolan

Israeli officials generally welcomed the American announcement during June that the superpower has begun sending light weapons to rebel fighters battling to topple the Syrian Assad regime. This came after the Obama administration finally confirmed earlier reports from London, Paris and elsewhere that the embattled regime has used deadly chemical nerve agents against its own people on several occasions.

However concerns were expressed once again by politicians and pundits in Jerusalem, as they were in Washington and elsewhere, that some of the American weapons might end up in the hands of Muslim terrorist groups linked to Al Qaida who are fighting alongside more moderate Sunni Muslim Syrian forces and Muslim fighters who have come from all over the world to join the battle. The Kremlin condemned the US decision while beefing up Russian naval forces patrolling in the region. Russian officials joined Syrian dictator Bashar Assad in warning that some of the new weapons may eventually be used to attack targets in Europe and elsewhere.

Israeli military and political leaders continue to keep a close eye on the warfare raging in neighboring Syria, mainly via pilotless drone surveillance aircraft monitoring the situation on the ground. This comes as regional and international news reports said the Assad regime has been turning the tide of battle in its favor in recent months, mainly due to the substantial military support it is receiving from heavily armed Shiite fighters streaming in from Iran and Lebanon. Reports said some 4,000 Iranian Revolutionary Guards are on their way to Syria to buttress others already operating in the divided Arab country.

Thousands of Hizbullah militiamen are also known to be fighting alongside Assad's troops in the blood-soaked country. Growing participation in the conflict by the Shiite Lebanese force was highlighted during the month as a major battle near the Lebanese border was won by regime forces with the active support of Hizbullah fighters. This prompted the Palestinian Hamas movement to issue a statement demanding that Hizbullah leaders immediately pull their combatants out of Syria to focus instead on the decades-old jihad war of annihilation against Israel. The Arab League also called upon Hizbullah to cease its operations inside Syria. As the carnage continued in the torn Arab country, fierce clashes erupted once again in neighboring Lebanon between supporters and opponents of Bashar Assad and his mainly Alowite regime.

In Jordan, American military forces were significantly strengthened during June in a show of support for the pro-Western Hashemite government. News reports said many thousands of US soldiers are now positioned in the small Arab country that shares a long border with Israel. This comes in the face of a growing flood of refugees fleeing the conflict, with the number of dead now put by the United Nations at over 93,000. Some human rights groups believe the actual number is much higher than that.

Despite the mid June election of a relatively moderate candidate to become Iran's next president, Israeli officials warned that the Islamic state's nuclear development program and policies are mainly determined by Iran's overall clerical leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. While speaking at the Auschwitz death camp site in Poland during the month, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu once again pledged to do everything in his power to prevent another holocaust from slaughtering the Jewish people living in Israel.

Israeli leaders kept a close watch on dramatic developments in Turkey during June, as anti-government protests spread to many parts of the Muslim country. Protestors are demanding social changes from the hardline Islamic government led by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Heavy police action to quell the disturbances was widely condemned by human rights groups around the world. Meanwhile in Muslim Brotherhood-ruled Egypt, reports said many Christians are dealing with increasing harassment from extremist Muslim groups seeking legal prosecution of Christians accused of blasphemy against the Islamic religion.

For the first time in two months, Palestinian rockets were fired several times at Israeli civilian centers during June, this time striking first near Ashkelon and later on in other areas around the Gaza Strip. Although no casualties were reported, IDF officials closed a crossing point into the Palestinian coastal zone as a result. This came as the Palestinian Authority, governing Arab population centers north and south of Jerusalem, signed a new economic agreement with Israel. At the same time, officials announced that Israeli-collected PA tax revenues, which have been withheld from the PA ever since Mahmoud Abbas declared unilateral Palestinian statehood at UN headquarters in New York in September, 2011, will now be released to the PA.

OBAMA ARMS SYRIAN REBELS

It is rare for this monthly Israel news summary report to begin with developments emanating from outside of the explosive Middle East. However over the past few months, Israeli government officials and the local media have spent much time discussing US President Barack Obama's dilemma over whether or not to arm Syrian rebel forces to aid their over two year struggle to oust the Syrian Assad regime from power. However it has now been revealed that the American leader had already decided two months ago to send "light" weapons to selected opposition fighters. Senior administration officials told media outlets that following a year of internal debate inside his government, Obama decided in late April to arm the rebels, although to what extent is still not clear. Some Arab media reports said in late June that anti-aircraft and anti-tank portable rockets have already reached rebel fighters battling in the strategic city of Aleppo in the north of the country.

The announcement of the potentially crucial policy change came in mid-June, made in a brief statement given by a junior White House official. He said the Obama administration had determined "with high certainty" that some of Assad's chemical weapons had been used on more than one occasion against rebel fighters and Syrian civilians in the vicinity of heavy battles taking place across the country. News reports said the latest known deployment occurred during the second half of May in the capital city of Damascus.

All regional Sunni Muslim Arab governments, including Egypt, warmly welcomed the US decision. Naturally enough, both Iran and its Lebanese surrogate Hizbullah militia force denounced the move, claiming it was taken at the behest of the "Zionist enemy." However the truth is that Israeli officials have very mixed feelings about the decision, even though they publicly endorsed it. While realizing that the downfall of the Assad regime would significantly weaken the dictator's main allies, Iran and Hizbullah, it could also easily leave an extremist Sunni Muslim fundamentalist government ruling in Damascus—not exactly a welcome prospect in Jerusalem.

WORLD REACTIONS

Israeli President Shimon Peres was assigned the task of taking the leading role in commenting on the American arms issue, indicating to some pundits that Prime Minister Netanyahu and his Likud party colleagues are less than enthused by it. As one Israeli commentator put it, most feel that it is "better to deal with the devil we know (Assad) than the devil rising up on the horizon."

Speaking at a special celebration in Jerusalem to mark his 90th birthday, Peres strongly endorsed Obama's decision to arm some of the Muslim rebel fighters. Echoing former US Republican presidential candidate Senator John McCain, the veteran Israeli politician and Nobel Peace Prize winner has long been pointing to the

immense suffering of the Syrian people as frequent armed clashes rattle the Arab country, saying the West must do much more to help halt it. However Israeli and other military analysts point out that arming the rebels will probably only intensify the battles, at least in the short term, which will probably in turn only add to the large civilian refugee exodus from Syria. Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey continue to be the main destinations for the war refugees, significantly adding to growing political and social unrest in all three countries.

Another serious concern in Israel is that the US and its NATO allies might get bogged down in yet another prolonged regional conflict, leaving the White House less time and energy to focus on the main regional threat to Israel's safety and even its very existence, Iran's nuclear program. Many Israeli analysts noted that opinion surveys in the United States show a majority of Americans are against direct involvement in the Syrian war, noting its outcome would probably be no more satisfactory to the US in the long run than is the case today in violence-plagued Iraq.

While endorsing the American decision at the annual G-8 summit meeting in Northern Ireland, British Prime Minister David Cameron cautioned that he is "as worried as anybody about elements of the Syrian opposition who are extremists, who support terrorism and who are a great danger to our world." However French President Francois Hollande countered that the West "cannot allow Russia to continue to deliver weapons to the Bashar Assad regime when the opposition receives very few and is being massacred."

ASSAD CONDEMNS REBEL ARMS DECISION

The embattled Syrian dictator himself quickly joined the fray over the White House announcement, telling a German newspaper that Obama and his NATO counterparts "will regret" arming rebel forces. He warned that "if the Europeans deliver weapons, the backyard of Europe will become terrorist targets and Europe will pay the price for it." Noting that Islamic Mujahadeen fighters had been armed and trained by the US and its allies when they were battling invading Soviet forces in Afghanistan during the late 1970s, including Osama Bin Laden, Assad added that foreign "terrorists will gain experience in combat and return (to their host countries) with extremist ideologies."

Similar warnings were issued by the Kremlin after Russian officials made clear they fully intend to fulfill their previous contracts to sell highly advanced S-300 anti-aircraft missile batteries to Damascus. Speaking to a Russian television network on June 19th, Foreign Minister Sergey Lasrov vowed the Kremlin will carry on with the delivery of the sophisticated weapons to Assad despite Western fears this may make it difficult, if not impossible, to enforce any no fly zone imposed upon Syria by the United States and other NATO member countries. He added that the NATO plan to send weapons to Syrian rebel groups would allow such weapons to fall into the hands of Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qaida affiliated group that military experts say has been the most effective of all opposition forces fighting to bring down the Assad regime. Israeli officials are especially concerned about Russia's delivery of S-300 missiles to Syria, noting they possess the ability to target IDF helicopters and warplanes flying inside Israeli airspace.

Syrian and Russian leaders also warned that actively arming Syrian Sunni Muslim forces risks further stoking the sectarian divide that continues to intensify in many parts of the Middle East. The Palestinian Hamas movement, partially armed by Iran, made a similar point during the month. It issued a statement in Gaza City asking its longtime ally, Hizbullah leader Sheik Hassan Nasrallah, to immediately withdraw his heavily armed fighters from Syria. The statement asked Hizbullah leaders "to keep your weapons pointed at the Zionist enemy, mainly because their involvement in Syria has contributed to an increase in sectarian polarization in the region." Lebanese Sunni Muslim and Maronite Catholic leaders made similar calls during June, with former Prime Minister Saad Hariri warning that Lebanon could soon be plunged into full-scale civil war if Hizbullah forces remain active in Syria. This came as fresh armed clashes broke out in Tripoli and other locations between Sunni Muslim supporters of the rebel fighters and their Shiite opponents.

Underling this point, sectarian violence between Shiites and Sunni Muslims in Iraq escalated during June, described as the most violent month in the country since US forces were withdrawn from the Arab country that also borders Syria. Hundreds of people were killed as each community launched violent attacks upon the other, including the bombings of mosques and other public buildings.

PEACE CONFERENCE ON THE CARDS?

American, European Union and Russian leaders all expressed verbal support for an international peace conference proposed by the United Nations to try to end the Syrian conflict, which the UN says has left at least 6,000 Syrian children dead since March 2011, along with over 85,000 adults, many of them Syrian soldiers and opposition forces. An unknown number of foreign fighters have also reportedly been killed since then. The conference is supposed to be held at the UN's European headquarters in Geneva sometime in July, although an exact date has not yet been worked out. After calls were again made at the G-8 summit for Bashar Assad to immediately leave his presidential post, Russian Foreign Minister Lavov said the Kremlin will block all demands at the projected peace conference for the Syrian dictator to step down.

Political analysts said it might prove difficult, if not impossible, for disparate rebel factions to unite enough to speak with one voice at such a conference. Criticism of the proposed UN parlay came from some American and other Western politicians, who noted it might end up giving legitimacy to both Assad and his Iranian and Hizbullah cronies, along with terrorist groups allied with Al Qaida. At any rate, with Russia pledging to continue its unwavering political and military support for Assad and his regime, a desirable outcome for the West seems nearly impossible to achieve. The chances that the significant roadblocks will be cleared away appeared to be slim to none after President Obama held frosty talks about Syria with Russian President Vladimir Putin during the G-8 summit. Analysts said US-Russian relations are at their lowest level since the Cold War ended in 1991.

As the UN tries to arrange a Syrian peace conference in Switzerland, the Kremlin continued to build up its military forces in the region. Saying it has a "strategic interest" in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, which is not far from Russia's southern border, Moscow announced it is sending additional warships to patrol off of the Syrian coast. Media reports said some 12 additional naval vessels were being rushed to the region. The American CNN news network reported in early June that the Kremlin is employing three amphibious ships to carry heavy weaponry to Syria. The report said the Pentagon had monitored the loading of the ships with weapons at an undisclosed Russian naval facility just before they set sail for the Syrian port of Latakia, which regularly hosts Russian naval vessels. The report said it is likely that S-300 anti-aircraft missile batteries have been included in the shipments.

PA IN CRISIS

The Palestinian Authority government was plunged into crisis in late June when newly appointed Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah (whose last name means "praise Allah" in Arabic) suddenly submitted his resignation to PA President Mahmoud Abbas. Until he was appointed Prime Minister late last month, Hamdallah has served as the president of An Najah University in Nablus. Israeli leaders had welcomed his appointment, saying he was relatively moderate in his political positions compared to some other men that Abbas was said to have been considering for the post.

Palestinian media reports said that Hamdallah had decided to call it quits after realizing that he was only a puppet official, with Abbas actually calling all of the shots. They said the real power in the PA Prime Minister's office was being wielded by two deputies who were also appointed by Abbas, Muhammad Mustafa and Zaid Abu Amr. The reports said the two men were bypassing Hamdallah after taking daily instructions directly from Abbas.

The resignation came just one week after Israeli Finance Yair Lapid met with his PA counterpart to sign a new economic cooperation agreement with the Palestinian Authority. Lapid said that it was very important for the two governments to work together to promote economic projects that can benefit both the Israeli and Palestinian people. As part of the pact, Israel agreed to release hundreds of millions of shekels that it has collected at border crossings for the PA. Many Palestinian goods arrive at Israel's Ashdod port not far from the Gaza Strip before being trucked to PA zones of control, with port tax revenue being divided between Israel and the PA. The Netanyahu government decided in 2011 to halt the flow of money after Mahmoud Abbas ignored Israeli pleas to desist from declaring unilateral Palestinian statehood at the United Nations in September of that year. Israeli

leaders pointed out at the time that the Oslo peace accords signed by the PA and Israel in 1993 preclude unilateral actions by either party to resolve the long-running conflict between them.

Just before American Secretary of State John Kerry returned to Israel in late June in order to pursue his attempts to get the moribund peace process off the ground once again, the PA issued a warning to Washington not to exert pressure to attend the proposed peace talks unconditionally. Abbas and his political cronies continue to insist that Israel halt all home building in the disputed territories before such talks can resume. They also want Netanyahu to outline what the final border with a Palestinian state would look like, something Israel says can only be determined via negotiation. PA leaders say they will not sit down with their Israeli counterparts unless Netanyahu agrees in advance to evacuate at least most of the Jewish communities located on land claimed by the PA. They also demand the release of all Palestinian prisoners serving time in Israeli jails before the proposed talks can take place.

Israel's new Economic and Trade Minister, Naftali Bennett, raised a firestorm when he stated mid month that "the idea of creating a Palestinian state has come to a dead end." Bennett heads the Jewish Home party, which received strong support in last January's Israeli elections from many Jewish voters living in the disputed communities. A few days before he spoke, Likud party member and Deputy Defense Minister Danny Danon told Israel Radio that the Netanyahu government will never agree to the creation of a Palestinian state based on the pre-1967 border, which he noted was merely the ceasefire line from the 1948 Arab-Israeli war that was initiated by several Arab countries with the support of local Palestinian leaders. Commenting on Danon's statement, Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon said during a speech in Washington that a plan put forward by the Arab League several years ago, which some want to see as the basis for renewed negotiations, was nothing more than "spin."

Soon after Bennett spoke, Palestinian Authority leaders issued a statement warning that his words may "completely close the door in the face of American efforts to resume peace talks." The statement then added a thinly veiled threat of resumed Palestinian violence if the talks do not get going once again. It said "The Palestinian people possess all legitimate options in the context of our right to resist the Israeli occupation and get rid of it forever." Some Israeli analysts said this may have also been a reference to support for Iran's declared goal, openly supported by Hamas, to destroy the Jewish state.

Three Palestinian rockets were fired at the Israeli coastal city of Ashkelon on June 19th from the Gaza Strip. Fortunately they all landed in open areas around the city, causing no significant damage or injuries. It was the first rocket assault since an informal ceasefire was brokered by Egypt between Israeli and Hamas leader in April following a spate of rocket firings and IDF retaliation that month. Military analysts said the latest firings were probably ordered by Iran and carried out by one of its surrogate forces, probably the extremist Islamic Jihad Palestinian group.

NOT IMPRESSED WITH ROHANI

Israeli leaders said they were not terribly impressed by the election victory in mid-June of Hassan Rohani as Iran's new president, replacing the notorious Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. One cabinet minister said that while Rohani would probably be better than his predecessor, almost anyone would have been. Prime Minister Netanyahu pointed out that all six of Iran's presidential candidates had been certified to join the electoral contest for the presidential office by supreme Iranian leader Ayatollah Khamenei, meaning Rohani's positions would not prove to be much different from the man who actually calls the shots in Iran.

Speaking to his cabinet just hours after Rohani was named as the winner, the PM warned the international community that it "must not become caught up in wishful thinking and be tempted to relax the pressure on Iran to stop its nuclear program. We are not deluding ourselves. We need to remember that overall Iranian ruler Ayatollah Khamenei disqualified all candidates who were not in line with his extreme worldview. From among those whom he did allow, the one seen as least identified with the regime was elected. But we are still speaking about someone who calls Israel the 'great Zionist Satan.'" Netanyahu was referring to a speech denouncing Israel given by Rohani during the election campaign.

During a press conference with visiting Canadian Foreign Minister John Baird later that same week, the Israeli leader noted that Rohani “has been very clear. He is the author of a doctrine. You could call it ‘talk and enrich,’ that is, ‘talk and continue to enrich uranium for nuclear weapons.’” Netanyahu was speaking about a book authored by Rohani in which he advocated continued negotiations with the international community over Iran’s nuclear program, designed mainly to give a cover to the Islamic country while it carries on with its uranium enrichment program—a key component in the production of nuclear weapons.

Despite all the turmoil in the region, the Sovereign Lord continues to fulfill His ancient promise to the Jewish people that in the last days of this era He would “*bring your offspring from the east, and gather you from the west. I will say to the north, ‘give them up!’ and to the south, ‘do not hold them back. Bring My sons from afar and your daughters from the ends of the earth’*” (Isaiah 43:5-6).

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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 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).

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