

Israel Update From David

Dolan

December News Review

Tuesday, December 26, 2006 12:14 PM

Shalom!

New Year's greetings from sunny Florida, where I continue a speaking tour this week with stops in Tampa and Port St. Lucie before heading on to Alabama and Texas. My schedule is posted on my web site, www.ddolan.com

Below is this month's Israel news and analysis report, covering major developments during the month. As usual, there is lots of news to convey. The threat of a full civil war between rival Palestinian groups keeps growing as the ceasefire with Israel further frays. All this as Iran continues to breathe out threats of annihilation against Israel—indicating a very interesting year ahead! I hope to be back in Jerusalem to report the news from there in February. In the meantime, I wish for a peaceful and productive 2007 for all of you!

PALESTINIANS MOVE TOWARD CIVIL WAR

By David Dolan

The shaky ceasefire between Israeli and Palestinian forces in the Gaza Strip held more or less during December, due mainly to Israeli restraint in the face of dozens of unprovoked Kassam rocket attacks upon Israeli civilian communities. At the same time, violent clashes escalated between supporters of the PLO Fatah party and the militant Hamas movement. This came as international pressure grew upon Israel to hand over more land to the Palestinians—despite the fact that they are obviously engaged in a substantial domestic struggle for power, and therefore can hardly be trusted as reliable peace partners under such tumultuous circumstances. All this was played out against the intensifying Iranian nuclear program that threatens to engulf the entire Middle East in a major war in 2007.

Tensions between rival Palestinian factions exploded into full-scale street fighting mid-month after an assassination attempt was launched against Palestinian Authority (PA) Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh on December 14. Although the senior Hamas official was not wounded in the attack, at least one other member of his traveling entourage was slain—Haniyeh's personal bodyguard. Many were wounded, including the Prime Minister's son. Reports said scores more were injured in fierce firefights that followed the assault. Hamas leaders immediately blamed Fatah gunmen for the assassination attempt, although Fatah officials denied any involvement.

The armed attack, at the Gaza Strip Rafah border crossing into Egypt, sparked widespread street clashes that went on for several days, leaving dozens more Palestinian gunmen and innocent bystanders dead or wounded. Palestinian and

international media outlets said the fighting grew so intense, it appeared that the long-anticipated civil war showdown had begun between Islamic militants—feeling quite powerful in the wake of the Hizbullah-Israeli battle last July and August—and more moderate Fatah supporters. While things appeared to have calmed down a bit by Christmas, that seemed to be mainly because the rival Palestinian factions were once again more focused on attacking their common Israeli adversaries instead of attempting to settle any of the significant issues dividing them.

DIRTY MONEY AND WORLD WAR THREE

PM Haniyeh's convoy was attacked while the Hamas official was waiting to enter the congested Gaza Strip from Egypt after a foreign trip that he claimed raised some 35 million U.S. dollars for the Palestinian people. In fact, some reports said Israeli leaders feared that Haniyeh was actually attempting to smuggle in some \$200 million, most of it from Iran. They took the unusual step of closing the border crossing—which is supposed to be manned by European monitors who abandoned the outpost after earlier armed clashes broke out there—so that the PA Prime Minister could not enter with the money. Vice Premier Shimon Peres said the action was taken because Israeli officials knew that the donor funds would “not actually aid the hungry Gaza residents,” but would instead be used to finance Hamas “tunnel diggers and weapons smugglers.”

Peres had earlier informed visiting British government official Hilary Benn that Israel would only transfer collected tax revenues to the PA once it became clear that the money would not be used to fund additional Hamas terror and rocket attacks upon the Jewish-run state. This came as various media reports revealed that the European Union had provided over 600 million Euros to support the Palestinians during 2006, despite earlier pledges to withhold most financial aid after the Hamas triumph in PA elections held last January 25.

In a related development, the Haaretz newspaper reported that Haniyeh's recent visit to Iran had sealed a significant strategic relationship between the Sunni Palestinian group and the Shiite theocratic dictatorship ruling from Tehran. Citing unnamed senior security sources, the report said that Hamas has now joined the radical Hizbullah militia in Lebanon as a virtual extension of the Iranian regime, receiving most of its operational orders and funding from Iran. Senior Israeli military officials later confirmed the report, adding that hundreds of Hamas activists had recently been flown to Iran to receive military and terrorist training from Iranian Revolutionary Guards, who also oversee Hizbullah fighters operating in Lebanon.

Several Israeli military analysts said the growing Shiite Persian-Sunni-Palestinian alliance was another ominous sign of Iran's apparent intention to launch a major regional war against Israel in the coming months, involving Syria, Hizbullah and Hamas to supplement its own powerful military arsenal. They say such a conflict would be mainly designed to counter growing international pressure against Iran's illegal uranium enrichment program, which is likely to end with the extremist rogue state possessing scores of nuclear weapons in the not too distant future if not halted by either U.N. sanctions or Western or Israeli military action.

Iranian officials again demonstrated their contempt for world opinion by totally rejecting the unanimous approval of U.N. sanctions by the 15-nation Security Council on Christmas Eve. The vote came after the scope of penalties proposed by the UK, France and the U.S. was significantly watered down by Russia, backed by China and Qatar. Analysts noted that the Kremlin continues to build a nuclear reactor for Iran in the south of the country, and therefore has a vested interest in Iran's nuclear program, while China purchases most of its oil supplies at favorable

prices from Iran. Like other small Arab Gulf states, Qatar is simply intimidated by its powerful Persian neighbor, and therefore attempts at all times to avoid upsetting the radical Shiite clerics ruling Iran.

NEW PALESTINIAN ELECTIONS

Tensions between rival Palestinian factions peaked soon after overall PA and PLO Fatah party leader Mahmoud Abbas announced in mid-December that in the wake of fruitless unity talks with Hamas officials, he would dissolve the Palestinian legislature and hold new national elections. Hamas leaders bitterly rejected the plan, with PM Haniyeh calling it “a coup attempt” against the current Hamas-dominated PA government.

Abbas replied to the uproar by saying he saw no other way to both avoid an all out Palestinian civil war, and to reopen the foreign aid spigot to the level that flowed into PA coffers before the Hamas victory. The senior PA leader did not say whether his own position would be up for grabs during the proposed elections. Until now, the ballot for PA president has been held separately from the one for the legislative body from which a prime minister is chosen to lead the PA cabinet.

Even if fresh Palestinian elections are held in the coming months as Abbas intends, Israeli officials are warning that Hamas is likely to come out on top once again. Briefing the Israeli cabinet on December 24, Shin Bet security chief Yuval Diskin said that the once dominant Fatah movement “is in terrible shape” and therefore not prepared to overcome the radical Islamic challenge to its previously unquestioned governmental authority. He added that “another sweeping Hamas victory” was likely to occur whenever PA legislative elections are next held, despite the economic hardships imposed upon the Palestinian population as a result of their landslide choice to empower the extremist group to rule the PA nearly one year ago.

Another senior Israeli security official, Brigadier General Sami Turjeman, told the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee on December 25 that IDF forces will soon have to grapple with improved fighting capabilities on the Palestinian side. “In another few months in the Gaza Strip, we will have to deal with military capabilities of the terror organizations that we have not been familiar with up until now, especially in the area of anti-tank missiles,” he warned. He added that Hamas capabilities in particular are reaching “a semi-military level.” Russian-made anti-tank missiles caused a majority of the 117 casualties that the IDF suffered in the mid-summer war against Hizbullah—a fact apparently not lost on Palestinian militants and their regional backers. Military sources say similar death-dealing weapons, although usually not Russian-manufactured, are being smuggled into the Gaza Strip all the time via dozens of illegal tunnels linking the area to Egypt.

CEASEFIRE ON SHAKY GROUND

The ceasefire declared between Israeli and Palestinian factions in late November continued to partially hold in late December, but just. Israeli government officials said nearly 60 Palestinian Kassam rockets had been fired into Israel in the four weeks since the truce went into effect, some of them striking homes and schools in besieged Sderot, Ashkelon, and other Israeli civilian communities. A Sderot kindergarten took a direct hit on December 24, but thankfully only after the youngsters had gone home for the day. But two children were wounded in a separate attack upon the town later that week. A series of rockets were fired two days later at Israel’s sprawling electrical power plant just south of Ashkelon, threatening to spark off a major disaster since the plant contains 17 huge oil

storage tanks. The attempts to strike the plant prompted the Foreign Ministry to file an urgent protest against the provocative ceasefire violations at the United Nations in New York.

Military analysts said the rocket fire was coming mostly from the Iranian-backed Islamic Jihad terrorist group, without Hamas participation. However Yuval Diskin noted that Hamas could put a “full stop to the attacks if it truly wanted to.” He added that the ruling group has no interest in causing division with other Islamic factions, and therefore chooses to look the other way while the rocket assaults continue, even if at a reduced overall level from pre-ceasefire days. He also noted that the missiles fired by Islamic Jihad are generally less powerful than those earlier deployed by Hamas, but can still cause significant damage and casualties, as the U.N. protest indicated.

Despite the daily truce violations, Israeli Defense Forces held their return fire during December, upon orders from the government. Facing growing calls from some military officials and various politicians for a return to “targeted killings” of selected terrorist activists, especially the men actually shooting the rockets into Israel, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert argued that restraint was still the best policy, at least for now. However he also made clear that his patience was wearing thin.

Israeli media outlets reported late in the month that Defense Minister Amir Peretz supported a growing call from the top military brass for an easing of severe restrictions imposed upon the IDF as part of the ceasefire, particularly against rocket launchers. However Olmert stuck with his guns, arguing that the lack of an IDF armed response to ongoing rocket attacks was earning Israel valuable political points in the United States and Europe. Shin Bet chief Diskin seemed to support this position, telling cabinet ministers that a political solution would be more effective than a military one, which he noted has been tried and largely failed on a repeated basis.

During a December 23 meeting between Olmert and PA leader Abbas—their first since the Kadima party leader took the reigns of power last January—the Israeli Premier did warn that targeted killings at least might be resumed if the Palestinian ceasefire violations were not quickly halted. Abbas reportedly claimed that thousands of PA security forces under his control were not strong enough to take on the militant groups in the Gaza Strip without risking a full civil war. In response, Olmert reminded the Fatah leader that the Oslo peace accords, which established the PA in the 1990s, outlined quite clearly that it was the duty of such security forces to maintain law and order in all areas evacuated by Israel. He warned again that if the PA cannot do the job, Israel would be forced to do so.

ISRAEL BALKS AT IRAQ REPORT

Israeli officials were not terribly surprised when a special American panel set up to examine the controversial war in Iraq put forward several proposals considered harmful to Israel. That was because the Iraq Study Group was co-chaired by James Baker, the senior George Bush’s Secretary of State who is considered by many in Israel as a borderline anti-Semite.

The report hinted that Washington’s image has been seriously eroded in the Muslim world due to its strong backing for Israel, and this contributes to the anti-American violence raging in Iraq. Therefore, reducing U.S. support for the Jewish-run state will presumably decrease attacks upon beleaguered U.S. forces. Israeli officials decried this as skewed logic, noting that the Iraqi situation has little if anything to do with Israel, and much to do with ancient Shiite-Sunni rivalries, regional oil

supplies, Kurdish, Syrian and Iranian regional ambitions, and Al Qaida's wish to ultimately destroy western powers and help usher in worldwide Muslim rule.

As part of a "new way forward," the Iraq panel recommended that the White House co-sponsor a new Middle East peace conference patterned on the one convened by the first President Bush in Madrid in October 1991 (the very weekend the so-called "perfect storm" churned up the entire northern Atlantic Ocean). That conference led to the Oslo peace accords two years later, which were quickly crushed by resurgent Palestinian terrorism supported by Syria, Iran and Iraq. Despite that fact, the proposed new Mideast peace conference should include Syria and Iran, said the Study Group, and aim to get Israel to abandon more land—especially the vital Golan Heights and at least most of Judea and Samaria—in exchange for additional written promises of lasting peace from the Palestinians, the Syrians and others.

British Premier Tony Blair enthusiastically endorsed the new peace conference proposal while meeting with the current President Bush at the White House in early December. This came the same day as an unusual tornado touched down in London, causing severe damage to some residences in the British capital. However, the American leader sounded more guarded about the Study Group proposal, saying he would welcome Syrian peace conference participation "if the Assad government takes its hands off of Lebanon and stops supporting Hizbullah." He likewise endorsed Iranian involvement if the ruling mullahs "halt their illegal nuclear program." Israeli officials were encouraged by Bush's sane conditions, saying off the record it signaled that the current U.S. administration would not simply rush into a potentially fruitless new peace conference for the sake of "forward momentum," at least without insuring first that the conditions for potential success are actually in place.

The Study Group report was released just after U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited Jerusalem to help unthaw the frozen Israeli-Palestinian peace process. She urged further Israeli land evacuations from Judea and Samaria in compliance with the international Road Map peace plan. This prompted Ehud Olmert to announce his willingness in principal to carry out further territorial withdrawals (after dropping the idea in the wake of the controversial war against Hizbullah forces in Lebanon). This resurrected the pledge he made when running for Premier in early 2006 to carry out further unilateral evacuations of up to 60,000 Jews from their homes in Israel's biblical heartland. However Olmert also made clear that such evacuated land could not be transferred to a Hamas-dominated PA government, given that the radical group continues to officially call for Israel's total destruction and replacement with an Islamic extremist Palestinian state.

HIZBULLAH PREPARES FOR WAR

As Kassam rockets continued to pour into Israel during December, people living in the north of the country were still working to repair damage caused by the intense Hizbullah missile attacks in July and August. A senior military officer told the Jerusalem Post in late December that Hizbullah is "approaching the strength" it possessed before the summer conflict, due mainly to daily rearmament from Syria, financed by Iran. He said the Assad regime is no longer even trying to conceal the illegal weapons transfers, despite it being a severe violation of the August U.N. ceasefire agreement. He added it was simply "a matter of time" before fresh hostilities break out with the radical Shiite militia group that is also trying to overthrow the Lebanese government.

With Iran again declaring during December the Israel must quickly be wiped off the

world map, even as it hosted yet another conference denying that the last worldwide attempt to achieve that nefarious goal—Hitler’s holocaust—did not even take place, it seems that 2007 is likely to be an extremely stormy year in the perpetually troubled Middle East. May it also be a year when many troubled souls come to realize that “*There is a river whose streams make glad the City of God, the holy dwelling places of the Most High*” (*Psalm 46:4*)

DAVID DOLAN is a Jerusalem-based author and journalist who has lived and worked in Israel since 1980.

TO SUBSCRIBE TO HIS ISRAEL UPDATES, go to: <http://www.ddolan.com/subscribe.asp>