

# Israel Update - June News Review

by David Dolan

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Shalom!

Here is my news and analysis report for June, mostly covering the dramatic events in the Gaza Strip during the month. The significance of the Hamas takeover there is just beginning to sink in as regional and world leaders deal with the fallout from the virtual coup Hamas staged against the Palestinian Authority. I also examine developments concerning Syria and Lebanon, and how the takeover is affecting Gaza's small Christian community.

## Gaza Falls To Hamas

Nearly three decades after a major Middle East country, Iran, fell under the chilling control of radical Islamic fundamentalists, another piece of regional territory has been seized by Muslim extremists. Given that one of the main goals of America's post 9-11 military and political strategy was to topple the terror-supporting Taliban regime in Afghanistan and prevent the spread of Al Qaida-style rule to other lands, the fall of the Gaza Strip to complete Hamas control during June was a shocking bit of evidence that Islamic militants remain as powerful as ever in this troubled region nearly six years after New York's Twin Towers came crashing down to the ground.

Many Israeli military commentators noted that the Palestinian Islamic group, an offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood Movement that has long been banned by Arab regimes ruling from Cairo, could not have possibly taken complete control over the strategically-situated piece of real estate if Israeli soldiers and civilians were still present in the Gaza Strip. The fact that Washington, London and other Western capitals urged Ariel Sharon-now in a deep coma for over 17 months-to uproot all 21 Jewish communities with over 8,000 residents from the coastal zone has come back to haunt them, as it does every day the thousands of Israeli civilians forced to endure intensified Hamas rocket fire ever since the pullout was completed in September 2005.

The latest Hamas triumph produced a new humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip, with hundreds dead or wounded, buildings looted, food and fuel in short supply, and thousands attempting to flee the sealed off zone. Israeli political analysts say it also dealt another major political blow to Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. After all, he was the principal Likud party promoter for the unilateral withdrawal scheme that was long advocated by the opposition Labour party, but strongly opposed by most Likud leaders and the rank and file.

Despite Olmert's immediate contention during a June visit to Washington that the conquest might actually revive the dormant "land for peace" process, most analysts pointed out that this proposition was extremely unlikely-given that the Hamas victory can only further embolden the Islamic clerics who run Iran and their Syrian and Hizbullah allies, not to mention Al Qaida activists: reenergizing all of them to pursue Iran's declared goal of annihilating the world's only Jewish State.

## Islamic Resistance Seizes The Day

Just as Lebanese Shiite Hizbullah leaders could reasonably claim that their jihad fighters had "liberated" the Land of the Cedars from detested "Israeli occupation" when IDF forces evacuated the country in May 2000, so the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement-widely known by its Arabic acronym, HAMAS-was successfully able to claim that its violent "resistance" to Israeli rule had driven the hated Jews from the Gaza Strip five years later. This claim, widely accepted on the Gaza Strip's troubled streets, and also in Palestinian-controlled areas in Samaria and Judea, led in turn to the group's triumph in Palestinian Legislative Council elections just four months after the Gaza Strip evacuation was completed. That in turn allowed the radical group significant political cover to openly organize and arm a 3,000 man Gaza militia force, buttressed by hundreds of local armed Hamas cells.

When the corruption-ridden PLO-dominated PA security force resisted this bold Hamas gambit, the stage was set for internal armed clashes, which began in earnest just over one year ago. Battles also occasionally broke out in PA zones north and south of Jerusalem. But very few expected the official PA security contingent in Gaza-numbering some 40,000 men-to crumble so quickly, as they did in fighting that raged for five days beginning on June 10th. Many analysts said the ominous truth was that when push came to shove, many of the armed PA policemen saw the Islamic writing on the wall and stayed out of the fray, given the heavily outnumbered Hamas forces the critical advantage they needed.

The implications of the unprecedented Hamas military takeover-which overall PA leader Mahmoud Abbas termed a coup against his rule-are unsettling to both Israeli and PLO leaders, to say the least. The immediate question that both are faced with is a very troubling one: Could the frightening Fatah collapse that unfolded like lightning in the Gaza Strip be repeated in Judea and Samaria? Even more ominously, could clashes then spread to nearby Palestinian-dominated Jordan, possibly threatening the Hashemite monarchy that has ruled the country since its founding in the 1920s? And what about the several hundred thousand Palestinians living in Lebanon-will clashes break out there as well?

## Short Term Sight

Faced with the worst humiliation so far in his troubled time in power, Abbas wasted no time in dissolving the Hamas-dominated Palestinian Unity Government that was formed only two months before. The PA leader replaced it on June 15 with an "emergency government" of mostly technocrats led by former Finance Minister Salam Fayad, who was elected to the Palestinian Legislative Council in 2006 as head of the new "Third Way" political party, along with long time Palestinian activist Hannan Ashrawi.

Born in Jordan and a graduate of the University of Texas Austin campus, Fayad spent two decades living in the United States-part of that time working at the World Bank. The former economist has strong ties to the Bush Administration. This well known fact naturally makes him an American lackey in the eyes of many Palestinians, and a probable target of Hamas attack.

Seemingly confirming Fayad's "collaborator" status in many Arab eyes, Western leaders flocked to endorse the new cabinet, followed later on by China and other world powers. However, despite the quick international support, the new PA government will only effectively hold sway in portions of Judea and Samaria, where about 2.5 million Palestinians live (as compared to an estimated 1.5 now under

Hamas control in Gaza).

The emergency government will at least apparently have lots of money to play with-both the United States and the European Union rushed to lift economic sanctions imposed on the former Hamas-led government in 2006. But some Israeli analysts questioned the wisdom of this move, noting that Fatah economic corruption was a major factor in the Hamas electoral victory in the first place. They argued that opening the financial faucet once again will only breed the same results as last time-widespread Palestinian public revulsion against Fatah elites perceived to be living the high life due to generous international largess, while the masses virtually starve.

## Positive Spin

Facing continuing calls for his resignation in the wake of the Winograd Commission interim report concerning last year's Lebanon War (with the full report due out in July), Ehud Olmert tried to put the best possible light on the portentous disaster that had engulfed Israel's Gaza neighbor. While holding previously scheduled talks in Washington DC with President George W. Bush and other senior American officials, Olmert told reporters that the Hamas triumph and PA-Gaza collapse might somehow energize the brain-dead PLO-Israeli Oslo peace process. According to his thesis, the fact that Abbas had effectively cut to pieces the February Mecca accord that joined his Fatah party with Hamas in a so-called unity government might just open the way for a separate peace deal with Abbas in his only remaining base of power, PA-dominated areas of Jordan's former West Bank.

However dozens of Israeli Knesset members, including increasingly popular opposition leader Binyamin Netanyahu, joined many media analysts in terming this extreme wishful thinking. They noted that Hamas had won an overwhelming majority of votes in the West Bank, as well as in Gaza, during the January 2005 Palestinian elections. Despite the imposition of international economic sanctions against the Hamas-dominated cabinet that was sworn in two months later, widespread support for the radical group did not wane, as proved by the group's subsequent triumph in municipal elections in several Palestinian towns later in 2006, including in the former Christian stronghold of Bethlehem.

On top of this, the main reason many Palestinians gave for supporting Hamas in the first place-rampant corruption in the PA and Fatah-has not changed. In fact, various attempts to implement real reforms in both bodies since then have largely failed, as has been widely reported in the Palestinian press. Why Israel would suddenly be able to negotiate a final peace deal with Abbas that would actually stick in the face of overwhelming Islamic opposition-when it could not do that with the late Yasser Arafat, who was known as the 'founding father of the Palestinian nation'-was hardly evident to Olmert's many critics.

## Iranian Hand

Yasser Abed Rabbo, a longtime PLO official and chief aid to Abbas, blamed Iran for being behind the violent Hamas Gaza Strip takeover. Speaking to reporters on June 19, he said that "Iran supports non-democratic groups in Palestine, Lebanon and in Iraq, and we hold Iran responsible for encouraging Hamas to carry out its coup in Gaza." His comments came after Iranian Foreign Minister Mottaki condemned the formation of a new PA government that excluded Iran's terrorist Hamas ally. Rabbo replied that Iran "has no right to give us lessons in democracy."

Israeli Mideast experts were almost unanimous in seeing the veiled hand of Iran behind the latest regional upheaval. Some said that nearly 30 years after Ayatollah Khomeini marched into Tehran to the adulation of millions of Iranians, the Shiite regime believes it is now on the verge of establishing a new Persian empire that will eventually have ascendancy over regional Sunni Muslims. Waking up to the harrowing possibility that a nuclear armed Iran just might succeed in reaching that vaulted goal, Arab League ministers held an emergency meeting in Cairo in mid-June to discuss the Gaza crisis. Predictably, Iran's only Arab ally, Syria, resisted attempts to issue a unanimous condemnation of the horrendously brutal Hamas takeover and a statement of support for Abbas.

Meanwhile in Lebanon, Iran's puppet Hizbullah militia force naturally sided with its Hamas ally. This came as several Katyusha rockets landed in the border town of Kiryat Shmona, hit hard during last summer's Hizbullah blitz upon northern Israel. But the militant Lebanese Shiite group, busy trying to topple the duly elected government in Beirut, immediately disavowed responsibility for the one-off attack, which damaged a car but thankfully left no one injured. Israeli officials accepted the statement, saying that the rockets were probably fired by Al Qaida-linked Palestinian cells known to be operating in south Lebanon. Osama Bin Laden's Palestinian surrogates took responsibility for firing several rockets into Israel just months before Hizbullah launched its cross-border raid last July, sparking off the Second Lebanon War.

## Syria In Focus

The Israeli inner security cabinet held a special session in early June to discuss the possibility of war in the coming months with Syria. This came as a Syrian parliament member confirmed in an Al Jazeera interview that his government is currently making active war preparations, and as several military analysts predicted that a conflict could break out as early as August. The Israeli ministers reportedly agreed that PM Olmert had acted correctly in sending recent messages to Damascus meant to assure Baathist regime officials that Israel is not planning a pre-emptive strike against Syria.

The security cabinet also discussed the Premier's public offer to open peace negotiation with the Assad regime even if Israel would have to pay what Olmert termed "a very high price for peace"-which all commentators agreed meant the total uprooting of the estimated 30,000 Israelis living on the strategic heights that rise above the lush Galilee panhandle. However knowing that the Israeli public is hardly in the mood to hand over more territory to Arabs who might then use it to launch further attacks upon the country-opinion polls in June showed over 90% of the public against such a Golan Heights pullout-many analysts said Olmert's statement amounted to mere words meant for international consumption, not a serious indication that peace talks might soon begin with Syria.

Syria's puppet militia force in Lebanon is also said to be feverishly preparing for another round of conflict with Israel. That at least is according to Transport Minister Shaul Mofaz, a former military chief of staff and defense minister. He said in early June that Hizbullah now has around 20,000 rockets in its growing arsenal, most of them surreptitiously smuggled in from Syria over the past year in violation of last summer's UN ceasefire accord. More ominously, he claimed that some of the missiles are of a longer range than the group possessed last year, saying they could now potentially strike all of Israel, including the southern port city of Eilat. However, the head of the United Nations peacekeeping force in Lebanon, Italian General Claudio Graziano, claimed that Hizbullah had not returned to its former

strength in south Lebanon, saying evidence of the group is practically nonexistent along the border. However he would not comment on Mofaz's statement that Hizbullah had rebuilt its rocket arsenal, and then some.

## THE BOYS ARE BACK

The internal Labour primary produced a new party leader in June-former prime minister Ehud Barak. However his triumph was thin, beating former Shin Bet internal security chief Ami Ayalon by just 51% to 48%. The campaign was marred by charges of vote buying, especially by Barak whose people reportedly had signed up whole Galilee Druze villages in recent months-securing support by promising financial benefits after Barak joined the government-all the while knowing that most of his "supporters" were not really Labour party voters at all.

Barak wasted no time in replacing the vanquished Amir Peretz as Defense Minister. The process was actually sped up by the Gaza crisis, with PM Olmert requesting that Barak join the government as Defense Minister just days after his victory in order to deal with the potential military fallout from the crisis. However he also made clear that he planned to replace Olmert as premier in the next year or so, presumably by winning new national elections. However opinion surveys taken after the Labour primary was held showed that Likud leader Netanyahu-who accurately predicted that Hamas would seize control over the Gaza Strip if Israel pulled out of the territory-is supported by at least 35% of the public for Israel's top government job, with only some 20% picking Barak and just 8-10% for Olmert.

Meanwhile the Knesset elected Israel's ninth president in June, and the victor was veteran statesman Shimon Peres. His main rival, the Likud's Ruby Rivlin, received only 38 votes in the first round, with 21 votes going to Labour's candidate, former diplomat Collette Avital. Since it was clear that neither would beat Peres in the second round, both candidates pulled out and asked for a unanimous endorsement for the 83 year old veteran politician. However almost one third of the Knesset members did not take up the suggestion, with some saying they feared the aged firebrand politician would use his new platform to further his left-wing agenda, including a Golan Heights pullout and the uprooting of most Jews currently living in Judea and Samaria.

## Gaza's Christians in Peril

Various Israeli and international media outlets reported that the small Gaza Strip Christian community, numbering around 2,000, is in imminent danger following the Hamas conquest. As PA forces squared off with Hamas fighters, attacks were launched on several churches and a Christian school in Gaza City, where most live, leading to an appeal from church leaders for international intervention. Many said they planned to flee the Gaza Strip as soon as possible.

One news report quoted a senior Hamas official warning that Christian women from now on must cover their heads in public, as Muslim women are required to do, adding that all alcoholic beverages, including ceremonial wine, will be banned from Gaza. He also threatened that any Christian caught carrying out any missionary activity would be "harshly dealt with."

Gaza's tiny Christian community is obviously in dire need of prayer in the wake of the Hamas takeover, along with moderate Muslims. May the God of all comfort watch over His people in Gaza, the God who ***"sets the needy securely on high away from affliction, and makes His families like a flock"*** (Psalm 108:41).

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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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