

Israel Update - September News Review

By David Dolan

September 24, 2007 3:58 AM

Shalom from Jerusalem,

Below is this month's Israel news and analysis report, focusing on the widely reported Israeli military operation in Syria early this month, and the aftermath of that dramatic action. Although the reported details have not been confirmed by either Israeli or Syrian officials for different reasons, extensive media reports about the apparently large-scale operation have been published abroad—some attributed to well-placed Israeli sources. I also briefly review the Israeli government's September declaration that the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip is an "enemy entity" and examine the possible consequences of that move.

Thankfully, the Yom Kippur weekend passed without any military action along the Syrian-Israel border, but IDF forces remain on heightened alert in case Syria launches its threatened "response" to the Israeli action in a military manner. Some analysts said any such reply, if it comes, would probably not occur while the political head of Syria's main regional ally, Iran, is visiting New York. In an interview just published today in an Arabic newspaper in London, the Syrian Information Minister has again repeated a previous vow he made right after the reported operation took place that the Assad regime in Damascus will respond to the apparent Israeli air attack at the time of and manner of its choosing.

I have included at the bottom a couple of corrections to my US speaking schedule that I sent out last Friday. Note that the time of the Charlotte meeting has changed, along with the phone number contact of a church in the greater Chicago area. As I wrote then, details of planned stops in Florida, and a few additional meetings elsewhere, will be sent out with next month's update and posted on my web site, www.ddolan.com

I have also been asked to mention that a small supply of my books are available for purchase in Australia—remnants of my wonderful visit there last May. To enquire about them, contact Pat in Melbourne by phoning (03) 98577216.

ISRAELI JETS STRIKE SYRIAN TARGET

By David Dolan

Tensions between Israel and Syria escalated sharply during September after the Assad regime in Damascus accused Israel of penetrating Syrian airspace early in the month to carry out an attack upon an unnamed target. As details subsequently leaked out in foreign media reports about the apparent Israeli Air Force strike—including the jarring information that North Korean-supplied nuclear material and/or structures were targeted—Syrian officials warned several times that they would respond to the daring action, possibly with military power. This sparked a full Israeli armed forces alert. Later reports spoke of a chemical weapons accident in Syria this past July that killed both Syrian and Iranian personnel, which analysts said was also an ominous development for the future.

While informal negotiations continued between Israeli and Palestinian leaders in the run-up to an

American-sponsored peace conference scheduled for Washington DC in November, tensions soared between Israel and the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip, which the Israeli government officially declared “an enemy entity” late in the month.

With far reaching implications for the coming months, the declaration followed a Palestinian Kassam rocket attack upon an Israeli army base which produced the largest number of Israeli casualties of any such strike until now. The government decision opens the way for further punitive actions against the Gaza Strip if the rocket attacks continue.

ISRAELI FACE-OFF WITH SYRIA

As I write, Israeli military censorship still forbids the publication of full or firsthand details of the internationally reportedly Israeli air, and possibly also ground forces operation aimed at an unnamed target somewhere in the eastern Syrian Desert before dawn on September 6. However multiple foreign media reports, which sometimes reveal details of sensitive IDF actions banned inside of the country, have painted a fairly comprehensive picture of just exactly what occurred in the remote Syrian Desert, reportedly near the town of Dayr-az-Zawr.

That some sort of strategic military operation took place was later inadvertently confirmed by Israeli Knesset opposition leader and Likud party head Binyamin Netanyahu, who revealed that he had “supported the action” carried out under orders and direction of his longtime political rivals, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Defense Minister Ehud Barak. “I was party to this matter, I must say, from the first minute, and I gave it my full backing, but it is still too early to discuss this subject,” he told Israeli state television on Sept 19.

The former premier’s comment drew fierce criticism from the Prime Minister’s office and other government leaders, who feared the apparent admission by a senior Israeli politician that some sort of major action against Syria had indeed been carried out might encourage the humiliated Assad regime to respond in a military manner.

However Olmert’s cronies were not complaining over the fact that the widely reported operation had boosted the Israeli leader’s popularity ratings in all opinion polls. Still Netanyahu remained far ahead when people were asked who they would vote for if elections were held today, with Barak just behind him.

SYRIAN OPTIONS

Initial reports of some sort of Israeli military action came from state-controlled media outlets in Damascus some 12 hours after the reported operation took place. They simply claimed that Syrian anti-aircraft missiles (probably Russian-supplied) had been fired overnight at Israeli Air Force (IAF) jets that had “provocatively penetrated” Syrian air space. The reports did not detail where the action took place, or whether any Israeli aircraft had been struck by Syrian missiles. They added that ejected fuel tanks from the “invading” warplanes had landed on both Syrian and Turkish territory, indicating that the alleged action had occurred in the north of the country near the shared border with Turkey, a Muslim NATO member loosely allied with Israel.

However, later that same day, the official Syrian government spokesman—interviewed on the popular Al Jazeera Arabic news satellite network—hinted at something beyond a mere air penetration by calling the action an “attack” against Syria. Information Minister Moshen Bilal said that “Syria retains the right to determine the quality, type and nature of our response to the Israeli attack.” He added

significant fuel to the growing fire by charging that Israel “cannot survive without aggression, treachery and military messages.”

Just one day after new Israeli President Shimon Peres announced on September 17 that the threat of a Syrian military response had passed; a senior cabinet minister in Damascus boisterously restated the threat of pending retaliation. Minister of Expatriates Butheina Shaban, one of Syrian dictator Bashar Assad’s closest advisors, said Syria would “respond to the aggressive Israeli attack at the time and place of our choosing.” She also maintained that most of the foreign media reports about the incident were “fictitious and full of lies.” Analysts said she was probably referring to American and British media reports that elite Israeli ground forces had participated in the seemingly elaborate and successful operation.

Israeli military analysts spelled out several ways that the Syrian regime could “respond” to the reported Israeli operation. The least damaging would be further diplomatic action designed to formally condemn Israel for the action. The Syrians immediately turned to the United Nations for a formal condemnation of the Israeli infiltration, but found a virtual wall of silence on the issue—strongly indicating they would not succeed in securing yet another UN resolution rebuking the world’s only majority Jewish country.

Among military options possibly open to Damascus is a pinpoint strike designed to kill or kidnap Israeli soldiers stationed on the disputed Golan Heights. This might include a limited land incursion meant to capture some frontline territory, or a fuller ground invasion. Equally worrisome is the possibility that Syria might order its surrogate Hizbullah militia force in Lebanon to launch hundreds of missiles once again at Israeli civilian targets, or that Syria will do so itself. Such military options obviously carry the danger of further escalation into a full-scale conflict, which could in turn ignite a larger regional war involving Iran, the Palestinians and possibly other actors.

THE NUCLEAR CONNECTION

Piecing the reports together, the following picture of an apparent Israeli military operation to prevent Syria from acquiring a nuclear weapons capability emerges. It must be stressed however that these are still unconfirmed details by either Israeli or Syrian officials, who both refuse to publicly spell out exactly what took place. Most of the information has come from unnamed senior American and Israeli officials, quoted in the US and British media.

Israeli intelligence operatives were said to have discovered around half a year ago that North Korean agents had traveled to Syria to help their longtime Arab ally develop a nuclear weapons program. The agents—representing a Communist country long known to be providing Syria with Scud missile components and other advanced weapons systems—were reportedly helping Syria build some sort of nuclear facility in the vast elevated eastern desert, which abuts northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey, gradually sloping downward toward the Euphrates River valley.

All this came after the rogue East Asian nation spectacularly confirmed its long suspected WMD capability last September by carrying out a nuclear weapons test. It has subsequently promised the United States and regional powers like China and Japan not to share its nuclear technology with any other nation; a pledge its dictatorial leaders have seemingly not kept.

Two main sources for Israel’s hard intelligence information about the reported program were detailed in the foreign media. A London Sunday Times report said nuclear material was actually picked up by elite Israeli commandos from the renowned Sayaret Matkal unit that was once commanded by Barak. They were said to have worked undercover inside of Syria for several months before successfully

smuggling the evidence back into Israel, where it was carefully tested and analyzed and determined to be of North Korean origin.

The second source of information was Israel's Ofek-7 spy satellite, launched by an Israeli rocket in early June. It was reportedly quickly positioned over eastern Syria to check out reports of suspicious building activity in the area. Despite the fact that it hovers some 370 miles (600 kilometers) above the earth's surface, the highly sensitive cameras on the latest version of the Israeli-produced intelligence satellite are said to be among the most advanced of any positioned in the skies above the planet.

The disturbing nuclear evidence and satellite photos were quickly shared with US leaders in Washington by senior Israeli officials—indeed probably by PM Olmert himself when he met with President George Bush at the White House just two weeks after the Ofek-7 was launched. After weighing the substantial evidence that North Korean nuclear assistance was being provided to Syria, Bush reportedly gave his blessing to the planned Israeli operation to destroy the ominous work and/or nuclear material, although he was said to have asked that it be staged a bit later so as not to interfere with sensitive nuclear negotiations then reaching a climax with Pyongyang.

IAF JETS OVER SYRIA

According to the foreign media reports, between six to eight IAF F-15-I jets took part in the operation. They penetrated Israeli airspace just north of the Syrian port of Latakia, where President Assad has a summer palace buzzed by IDF warplanes during the 2006 Second Lebanon War in a warning to stay out of the conflict. Syrian anti-aircraft radar quickly picked up the infiltration, and Russian-supplied missile batteries went into operation. However they apparently failed to hit any of their swift moving targets—which might explain why embarrassed Kremlin officials were amongst the first to denounce the reported Israeli operation, along with North Korea.

The Israeli warplanes apparently carried out a heavy bombing raid on the suspected nuclear facility, or possibly on a bunker containing nuclear material that had just arrived by ship from North Korea a few days before. Whatever the case, the action brought to mind the successful 1981 IAF destruction of Saddam's French-supplied nuclear reactor, then under construction in northern Iraq.

Media reports spoke of a "huge crater" formed by the IDF raid in the northeastern Syrian Desert. The jets then reportedly ejected some of their empty fuel tanks while rapidly exiting the area, with some landing on nearby Turkish territory—a fact confirmed by officials in Ankara, who complained to their Israeli counterparts about the incident, even if Turkey would also be loathe to see Syria go nuclear.

UNDERGROUND COMMANDOES

Possibly the most intriguing detail reported by international media outlets was that elite Israeli ground forces had taken part in the obviously well planned bombing operation some 300 miles northeast of Israel's Golan border with Syria. One report claimed they were positioned in trenches dug virtually under the noses of Syrian military guards stationed in the vicinity. How they might have fled the area after the air attack was completed has not been revealed.

The IDF commandoes were said to have directed the advancing American-built IAF warplanes, flying under the cover of darkness just before the waning moon had risen in the pre-dawn sky, to the exact spot of the suspicious storage and/or construction activity—by means of highly accurate laser beams! Whether or not these incredible accounts are true, all agree that the jets successfully destroyed their target, reportedly killing some Syrian and North Koreans in the process, and possibly even some

Russian personnel, said to have been slain when IAF air to ground missiles destroyed at least one of Syria's anti-aircraft batteries stationed in the area.

NO COMMENT

As noted above, Israeli officials have kept completely silent about this entire affair, even as more and more apparent details have been published and broadcast abroad. Experts say this is a clear attempt to not give Damascus a more powerful reason or excuse to launch any type of revenge assault. Still, many Middle East analysts note that when wounded Arab pride is at stake—as it definitely is in this case—the need to retaliate may prove irresistible, even if the Assad regime realizes it would probably suffer far more damage if it responds in a military manner. Some also believe Iran is pushing its ally to give a military reply in order to divert attention from its own nuclear program.

While admitting that some sort of hostile action took place, Syrian officials are especially vehement in denying that any Israeli ground forces took part in the reported operation. Of course, they would say this, given that any such participation would prove gravely embarrassing to the beleaguered Baathist regime, which is still under international condemnation for its widely suspected role in assassinating Lebanon's popular former prime minister, Rafik Hariri, on Valentine's Day two years ago, and for subsequent terrorist murders of seven other anti-Syrian Lebanese politicians, the last one in Beirut on September 19.

Adding further reasons for the Olmert government to launch such a daring raid in the midst of escalating tensions with Syria, Hizbullah and Iran over the past few months was a report in the respected British intelligence update, Jane's Defense Weekly. It revealed that a team of Iranian and Syrian chemical weapons experts were killed in a fiery explosion on July 23 inside of Syria. The report said dozens of Iranian engineers and around 15 Syrians were killed in the powerful blast that occurred as the men were attempting to fit a nerve gas warhead on a Syrian Scud D missile, which is capable of striking every part of Israel down to the southern port of Eilat. The fact that Syria has a large chemical weapons capability has been well known in Israel since the late 1970s, but its apparent willingness to use such weapons is believed to have grown substantially since last year's Lebanon war proved the effectiveness of heavy rocket and missile barrages upon Israeli population centers.

Meanwhile the deputy Iranian Air Force commander threatened mid month to unleash his warplanes against Israel if the detested Jewish State bombs Tehran's burgeoning nuclear facilities. Just one day before, an Iranian web site connected to the extremist Shiite regime claimed that 600 Iranian ballistic missiles are ready to be fired at Israeli targets at a moments notice if any IDF action is launched against Iran, either by Israel or its staunch American ally. This came as some military analysts speculated that Israel's reported bombing operation in Syria might have also served to test Israeli flight paths over northern Syria in the direction of Iran, as well as the country's newly acquired Russian anti-aircraft missile defense systems.

ENEMY ENTITY

The Israeli government's decision to brand the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip an "enemy entity" on September 16 followed a rocket attack on an army base just north of the coastal zone that left over 60 sleeping soldiers wounded, several critically. Officials said the action opens the door for Israel to cut off or severely restrict fuel and electricity supplies to Gaza, and possibly even food supplies if the frequent rocket attacks continue.

This came as several senior army leaders argued for completely sealing off the heavily populated

coastal zone, permanently closing all border crossing points, while turning responsibility for the area's administration over to Egypt, which controlled the Gaza Strip until Israeli forces captured it during the 1967 war. However others argued this would only increase arms smuggling into "Hamastan" and make it more difficult for Israel to respond to further rocket assaults or cross border raids.

All this came as efforts to forge the outlines of a final Israeli-Palestinian peace accord continued between PM Olmert and PA leader Mahmoud Abbas. Both said they hoped to achieve significant progress before the planned American-sponsored peace conference scheduled for Washington DC in November. Meanwhile the ruling Kadima party developed a deep split over a proposal by Deputy PM Haim Ramon to hand over all Arab neighborhoods in Jerusalem to PA control in any final peace deal, including large parts of the walled Old City. The religious Shas party threatened to quit the government coalition if the controversial plan was put forward.

Despite escalating tensions with the Syrians, Iranians and Palestinians, the saddest news of the month for many here was the tragic plane crash on the Thai resort island of Phuket, which took eight Israeli lives, all of them young adults. Included in the casualties was a couple celebrating their honeymoon in the Southeast Asian country—an immensely popular holiday destination for young Israeli travelers.

With violence and terror seemingly growing all around us in this troubled world, it is especially good to be able to celebrate God's eternal goodness and mercy during these high holy days. ***"For the ways of the Lord are right and the righteous will walk in them, but transgressors will stumble in them" (Hosea 14:9).***

DAVID DOLAN is a Jerusalem-based author and journalist who has lived and worked in Israel since 1980. You may order his 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 e mail at: resources@yourisraelconnection.org