

# Israel News From David Dolan

Week of December 28, 2009

## HAPPY NEW YEAR!

Below is the latest news summary report covering important developments in Israel and the region during December. I focus this month on efforts to secure the release of kidnapped Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. I also examine the government's settlement home building freeze and take a look at several other news items.

I hope and pray that 2010 will be your best year yet! I'm looking forward to seeing some of you when I visit Australia for several weeks beginning in late January, and others during the tour I am hosting to Israel in early June...we have a good group already signed up for it, and you are welcome to join in as well. Full details of that tour are on my web site, [www.ddolan.com](http://www.ddolan.com) where I will also be posting the schedule for Australia very soon. I also plan to speak in several places in the States later next spring, so will let you know about that as well. A series of interviews that I did in Israel for the *Zola Levitt Presents* TV program will begin airing this coming month, so look for those if you are interested. I understand they will also be posted on their web site after that.

I'm pleased to be with my parents and extensive family today...mom's 85<sup>th</sup> birthday! She is thankfully in good health and we are taking her out for a meal! I trust that those of you who celebrate the Lord's birth on Dec 25<sup>th</sup> had a good time doing that last week...I spoke with friends who were in Bethlehem where I have also been many times for the holiday, and it was packed with visitors this year. We will drop by there during the tour next June...a warmer time to visit for sure!

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## ISRAEL AWAITS FREEDOM FOR SHALIT

By David Dolan

As Israeli government leaders worked tirelessly during the last month of 2009 to free kidnapped IDF soldier Gilad Shalit, the general public waited and prayed that the young prisoner would soon be released. However many politicians and media commentators questioned the high ransom being demanded by the Palestinian Hamas movement in exchange for Shalit, who was abducted in June 2006 by Hamas fighters during a cross border raid into Israeli territory.

Israeli intelligence officers confirmed media reports in early December that Hamas now possesses Iranian-built longer range rockets that can strike Tel Aviv, some 30 miles north of the Palestinian Gaza Strip. Meanwhile Iran announced it would step up financial aid to several of its regional allies, including Hamas and the Lebanese Hizbullah militia force. This came as Iranian leaders continued to verbally defy international calls to cease enriching uranium and come clean on all aspects of the country's alarming nuclear development program.

In Judea, Samaria and Jerusalem, clashes erupted between Israeli settlers and security forces several times during the month as protests took place against the Netanyahu government's late November freeze of all Jewish homebuilding projects in the disputed territories. This came as government agents fanned out to enforce the building ban, to the chagrin of many local residents.

Cracks appeared in the government coalition after the left of center Labor party vigorously endorsed the construction halt while the Russian immigrant-based Yisrael Beiteinu party strongly questioned the action, along with several lawmakers inside the Prime Minister's own Likud party. Cheered on by

the Israeli business community, Netanyahu defended the building ban as unavoidable if Israel is to nurture and guard its vital relationship with the United States. At the same time, he renewed efforts to woo the rival Kadima party to join his government coalition, hinting he might work for Kadima's dissolution if party leaders do not jump on board.

## **OFF AND ON DEAL**

A deluge of media reports in late November and December claimed that a final deal to free Gilad Shalit was imminent. Still, details of the seemingly pending agreement, mediated by German diplomats with the help of Egyptian officials, were few and far between, with conflicting reports published and broadcast by Israeli and Arab media outlets.

The constant stream of information, or disinformation, only heightened the Israeli public's desire to see the incarcerated young man released from over 42 months of captivity, although many also expressed concern that the government would hand over some hardened Palestinian terrorists who would soon return to their murderous ways.

By early December, the picture became even murkier when Hamas leaders maintained that Israel was wrecking the deal by withholding the final list of Palestinian convicts to be released in exchange for Shalit. As in previous prisoner swaps, the Palestinians were demanding freedom for dozens of men "with blood on their hands," in other words, those who had directly participated in or led terror assaults that resulted in Israeli casualties.

Exactly to where the freed prisoners would be released was also in dispute, with several Israeli cabinet ministers insisting that some be sent to Arab countries away from Israel's immediate vicinity. Others with homes in Judea or Samaria would be effectively exiled to the nearby Gaza Strip. Hamas leaders maintained that all the prisoners must be allowed back to their family homes, including those who resided in and around Jerusalem.

Not a few government ministers echoed opposition criticism of the proposed deal. Many worried that additional IDF kidnappings will follow if Hamas is able to boast that the large prisoner exchange was totally lopsided in its favor. Still, the desire to see Gilad Shalit finally set free after over three years of fruitless efforts to secure that goal seemed strong enough to overcome all political obstacles on the Israeli side.

Concerns escalated after the government revealed that it was preparing to release nearly 1,000 Arab prisoners in exchange for Shalit. Hundreds of others are due to be handed over to the Palestinian Authority in an effort to blunt the political victory that Hamas will claim when it dramatically gets back many of its most infamous terrorist henchmen.

The information that 980 Palestinian prisoners were to be set free was published as part of the government's legal response to a lawsuit filed by an Israeli group that supports Jewish victims of Arab terror. The group, Alm Agor, reported that around 180 Israelis have been killed by terrorists who walked out of prison in previous lopsided swaps, arguing that further releases would soon come back to haunt the nation.

As the German-mediated negotiations dragged on during December, Hamas officials said disputes remained over some 50 names out of 980 prisoners expected to be set free as part of a final deal. Unconfirmed media reports indicated that the list includes some of the most notorious terrorist murderers incarcerated in Israeli prisons.

## **DELAYED HOPE**

Reports peaked in early December that a prisoner swap was imminent. The likelihood that a deal was about to be announced seemed to be enhanced when Hamas leader and former PA Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh suddenly cancelled a planned visit to Mecca to mark the annual Haj pilgrimage to the Islamic holy city. Yet continuing disputes about the makeup of the Palestinian prisoner list and internal Israeli struggles over that issue and others connected to it kept the emerging deal under wraps as Christmas came and went.

German mediators ran into a major roadblock mid month centered on Hamas demands that three well known terrorists be included in the prisoner exchange. Two of the men, Abdullah Barghouti and Ibrahim Hamed, were behind the deadly 2003 attack upon the Moment restaurant, located just one block from the Prime Minister's official residence in central Jerusalem. Barghouti was also involved in the terrorist assault on the Sbarro pizza parlor that left scores dead and wounded next to the bustling central Jerusalem intersection of King George Street and Jaffa Road. The third convict, Abbas Sayid, helped plan one of the worst terrorist atrocities ever launched in Israel—the 2002 Passover bombing at a hotel in the coastal city of Netanya. That heinous assault left the restaurant partly destroyed and 30 Jewish Seder guests' dead, including children, with many others wounded.

Calls for the release of former Fatah militia leader Marwan Barghouti were sounded by many Palestinian legislators and pundits, and by not a few Israelis who believe he might emerge as the new PA leader. Barghouti, who was jailed earlier this decade for life, was convicted of being directly responsible for the deaths of five Israelis as head of the Fatah Tanzim militia. He is widely perceived to be tough enough to negotiate a final peace accord with Israel, announcing that he will be a parliamentary candidate if freed before Palestinian legislative elections are held sometime next year. Barghouti pledged to focus his political energy on efforts to bring lasting reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas.

In mid-December, Palestinian Authority leaders convened a special session of the PLO Central Committee in Ramallah north of Jerusalem. The announced purpose of the gathering was to discuss ongoing political attempts, led by Egypt, to reconcile the PLO's Fatah party with the rival Hamas movement.

However, PA president Mahmoud Abbas used the special session to unveil yet another pre-condition for resuming stalled peace negotiations with Israel. International efforts led by Barrack Obama to get the talks rolling again in 2009 came to nothing.

Abbas said Israeli leaders must agree in advance that the final borders of a future Palestinian state will be established along the ceasefire lines that existed at the end of Israel's Independence war in 1948-49. A total Jewish settlement freeze, including in every portion of the eastern half of Jerusalem, must also be enacted, Abbas repeated. Israeli officials insist that adjustments must be made to the 1949 truce borders to reflect the many significant changes that have occurred on the ground since Israeli forces captured the area in 1967, particularly the fact that nearly 300,000 Israelis now reside in the contested zone.

## **FREEZE WELCOMED AND REBUKED**

Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's late November announcement that he would enforce a ten month residence building ban in all Jewish communities located in Judea and Samaria was quickly condemned by most leaders of the settlement movement, even as it was welcomed and praised by the Obama administration and many governments in Europe and elsewhere.

The Palestinian Authority rapidly condemned the move, terming it totally insufficient to lure them back to the peace table. PA leaders decried that fact that the building ban is only designed to last a pre-set limited time and does not include construction of new Jewish homes inside Jerusalem's sprawling municipal boundaries. Netanyahu has made clear that he will never take any action that might call into question his long held commitment to guard Jerusalem's current status as Israel's undivided capital city.

Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip showed their contempt for the Prime Minister's building freeze by lobbing five mortar shells into Israeli territory the day after the housing ban was announced. Hamas claimed it was not behind the barrage, which caused no injuries, attributing the firings to Islamic fringe groups not under its direct control. On the same day near Hebron, an Arab assailant stabbed and wounded a Jewish man and woman at a convenience store before being shot by nearby soldiers as he fled the crime scene.

American Secretary of State Hillary Clinton issued an official statement that lauded the Israeli building freeze while hinting that the Obama administration supports Israel's oft stated position that negotiations alone must determine the final borders of any Palestinian state, which will not be identical to the ceasefire lines that existed up until the 1967 Six Day war.

"Today's announcement by the Government of Israel helps move forward toward resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We believe that through good-faith negotiations the parties can mutually agree on an outcome which ends the conflict and reconciles the Palestinian goal of an independent and viable state based on the 1967 lines, with agreed swaps, and the Israeli goal of a Jewish state with secure and recognized borders that reflect subsequent developments and meet Israeli security requirements."

The Israeli *Yediot Ahronot* newspaper reported that the American administration actually followed up Netanyahu's welcomed announcement by requesting additional Israeli concessions. In particular, the White House team pushing with the State Department for renewed Palestinian-Israeli peace negotiations wants Netanyahu to unilaterally transfer further sections of Israeli-controlled land to the Palestinian Authority, especially in the strategic Jordan Valley and areas north of Jerusalem.

Under the Oslo peace accords, the land in question is listed as Areas B and C. Area C was mostly comprised of territory that Israel hopes to keep control over as part of any final peace accord, while Area B was meant to be temporarily patrolled by Israeli security forces while quickly coming under overall PA political control. The Oslo plan basically collapsed when the Palestinians began their violent Al Aksa attrition war in September 2,000.

## **PLEASING UNCLE SAM**

During a speech broadcast live to the nation, the Likud leader explained the rationale behind the decision to ask his cabinet to approve a construction freeze. Netanyahu stressed that he was only proposing "a temporary halt" to construction, pointing out that work would continue unabated on public buildings like schools, medical clinics and synagogues. Construction would also progress on 3,000 apartment units currently nearing completion.

Calling it "a far reaching and painful step," the PM averred that the building moratorium would demonstrate that he and his government are "serious about peace with the Palestinians." He repeated his readiness to negotiate "an historic peace agreement" anytime the Palestinian leadership is finally ready to do so.

Defense Minister Ehud Barak enthusiastically endorsed the housing freeze, which he helped craft. The veteran Labor party leader acknowledged that it was arrived at in close coordination with the United States government, with whom he acted as an interlocutor on behalf of the Likud Premier.

Analysts said Barak was basically repeating what Netanyahu essentially said: Israel has no practical choice other than giving in to the strong White House-led pressure for a settlement freeze. The small Jewish state, especially its core business and security sectors, are loathe to do anything to irritate the elected leaders of America, let alone outright offending Israel's most important strategic and economic ally. Analysts add that this is particularly the case in these tempestuous days when Israel is preparing for a possible nuclear showdown with Iran.

Meanwhile PM Netanyahu was busy during December trying to persuade the main opposition political party, Kadima, to join his colorful coalition quilt. He met with party leader and former foreign minister Tzipi Livni to make his case that Kadima—comprised mainly of former Likud members who followed Ariel Sharon into the new centrist grouping in 2005—should join his broad coalition, if not be folded back into the party's natural Likud home.

Netanyahu noted that Kadima has fewer political differences with the Likud party than does the Labor party that currently sits around the cabinet table. Analysts say the personal animosity Livni feels for the charismatic Likud leader is behind the continuing rift, which might prod some Kadima Knesset members to simply return on their own to their Likud roots.

## **ENFORCING THE BAN**

Settlement leaders reacted with anger when Defense Minister Barak announced he would hire some 40 new inspectors to enforce the building ban. This came as two dozen local Jewish council heads were served legal injunctions removing their normal authority to issue construction permits until the ten month freeze is rescinded.

Many of the disgruntled leaders and their followers then decided to physically block the inspectors from entering their communities, prompting clashes with Israeli police and paramilitary forces. Netanyahu subsequently met with many of the upset settlement leaders, telling them that while the building ban was "painful," it was also "temporary," and would definitely be lifted late next year.

Thousands of Jewish demonstrators protested the construction freeze in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and elsewhere. Hundreds gathered just outside Jerusalem on December 7 where they succeeded in temporarily shutting down the main highway linking the two large cities. Police forces worked to reopen the road amid scuffles with many of the irate protestors.

As the Knesset met in special session to discuss the building ban, the financial cost of the move was also under scrutiny. Likud legislator Ze'ev Elkin said research conducted in his office showed that the freeze would cost the government around 500 million shekels (over 100 million US dollars) in lost tax revenues and higher unemployment payments. The government will also need to cover compensation costs for homeowners who are struggling to pay back bank loans on their suddenly frozen property projects.

## **WAR GAMES AMID FIGHTING WORDS**

The Iranian military staged massive war games in early December aimed at testing the country's ability to protect its far flung nuclear facilities from foreign attack. This came amid continuing defiance expressed by Iran's rogue Shiite leaders in the face of growing international pressure to halt their uranium enrichment program and come clean on all nuclear dealings.

Meanwhile Iran's powerful Revolutionary Guards announced that it would funnel an additional 20 million dollars in aid to various regional allies that are "committed to resistance against the Zionist entity and its allies," including the Hizbullah militia force in Lebanon, and Hamas and Islamic Jihad forces that mainly operate out of the Gaza Strip. The financial dispersion was endorsed by the Iranian parliament mid month.

This came as the Lebanese government announced that no moves will be taken to try to disarm Shiite Hizbullah forces despite a commitment to do so issued at the end of the 2006 war with Israel. Maronite Catholic government ministers had demanded that the illegal militia be disarmed: "We cannot accept that there will be another authority that has the power or competence to use coercion in Lebanon other than the state," Social Affairs Minister Salim Sayeh told reporters after the controversial decision was announced.

Meanwhile a report released by the US Office of Naval Intelligence revealed that the Revolutionary Guards have increased spending on Iran's increasingly menacing naval forces stationed in the Gulf. The new assets include anti-ship cruise missile batteries, torpedoes, air defense systems, fast moving small patrol boats, and sea mines designed to blow up commercial oil tankers in time of war. The report notes that Iran can easily shut down the Strait of Hormuz at the mouth of the Gulf, through which over 30% of the world's oil supplies pass every month.

As the first decade of the new millennium enters its last year, Israelis can be thankful that a year which began with warfare in and around the Gaza Strip amid a worldwide financial crisis ended in a relatively peaceful manner. Of course, many challenges lay ahead, especially the threat of war with Iran and its proxy forces. But whatever occurs, the God of Israel reigns supreme, and His will *will* be done on earth as it is in heaven! *"There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of Hosts will accomplish this"* (Isaiah 9:7).

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

- [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).

You may order these books at a special discount price by visiting his web site at [www.ddolan.com](http://www.ddolan.com), or by phoning toll free 888-890-6938 in North America, or by e mail at: [resources@yourisraelconnection.org](mailto:resources@yourisraelconnection.org)

**DOLAN'S DVD, "FOR ZION'S SAKE" is available for purchase. Click the title under "BOOKSTORE" for more details.**

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