

Israel News From David Dolan

January 26, 2010

Shalom to all!

I am on my way from the United States to Australia this week, where I will begin speaking this Friday in Newcastle and in several other parts of New South Wales, including next week at the Parliament building in Sydney, then in the Brisbane area, and finally in Melbourne. I have posted my speaking schedule just below this month's Israel news update for those of you living in the lovely land Down Under. After experiencing a bit of the heavy rain that fell in California last week (as was also the case in Israel), it will be nice to head into summertime in Australia!

Many significant things occurred in Israel and the Middle East this month, which are highlighted below. The threat of renewed conflict between Israel and the Lebanese Shiite Hizbullah militia was high on the news agenda, along with the worrisome prospect that Syria would join such a war this time around. There was also renewed action in and around the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip, with rockets falling once again near the coastal city of Ashkelon and elsewhere, and a bombing attack in Jordan. The details are below.

I mentioned before that I carried out a series of television interviews in Jerusalem last October for the *Zola Levitt Presents* program based in Dallas. Eight of those interviews will be broadcast over the next two months, and also posted on their web site if you would like to view them.

Despite renewed talk of major conflict in the Middle East, I am still planning to host a tour to Israel this coming June. Tourism visits actually reached a near record level during 2009, as noted below, and I hope things will be calm enough for my tour to proceed as scheduled. The American-based tour company I am working with is headed by a former Israeli military commander, and I know from past experience that he and his Tel Aviv-based wife will watch the situation closely, with everyone's safety in mind. As I often tell audiences around the world, I have lived in *ha aretz* (the Land) for many years, covering several conflicts there as a journalist, and yet am still alive ☐! In fact, the only places on earth where I have been physically assaulted were in the United States and Australia (mugged in Los Angeles, caught in a gang war in south Florida, and had some fists directed at me by some hostile guys while speaking in Melbourne!). Lord willing, I will mark my 30th anniversary living in the Land of Promise later this year, and consequently know the layout of it very well, and also many of the people who live there. So if you have not been to Israel before or would like to go again, we would be glad to have you join the several dozen people already signed up for the tour. Details are on my website, www.ddolan.com

WAR ANNIVERSARY SPARKS FRESH VIOLENCE

Palestinians in the Gaza Strip marked the one year anniversary of Israel's "Cast Lead" military operation by renewing rocket attacks against nearby Jewish civilian centers. Israeli Air Force jets went into action to halt the assaults. This came after Egypt began a fresh crackdown designed to curb Palestinian weapons smuggling into the small coastal zone.

Meanwhile Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas indicated that he might soon be ready to return to the peace table, but again declared that Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu must halt all Jewish home building in the eastern half of Jerusalem before he will do so. American special envoy George Mitchell returned to the region in late January in yet another attempt to prod the stalled peace process into motion.

In the north, tensions escalated after Syrian and Hizbullah leaders alleged that Israel is preparing to attack the rogue Lebanese Shiite militia force. Syria also began mobilizing some reserve soldiers. At the same time, reports surfaced that the Assad regime is training Hizbullah fighters to use a sophisticated anti-aircraft missile system capable of shooting down Israeli fighter aircraft.

Israel's strained diplomatic relations with Turkey suffered another serious blow after the Turkish ambassador was recalled by his government following an embarrassing diplomatic incident in Jerusalem. President Shimon Peres then stepped in to try to rectify the situation.

Israel received rare praise by the international media for its swift and strong response to the devastating earthquake in Haiti, sending a mobile field hospital said to be the best equipped of several rushed to the Caribbean country by various countries in response to the disaster. At home, extremely heavy rains fell all over the country during the month as flooding left several dead in nearby Egypt. Despite some damage to Israeli homes and roadways in the north and along the coast, the abundant precipitation from heaven was welcomed by government officials trying to cope with increasing fresh water shortages in the Promised Land.

MORE ROCKETS FROM GAZA

After several months of relative calm, violence flared in the Gaza Strip the first week of January as Palestinians marked the one year anniversary of last winter's three week conflict with Israeli defense forces. The new unrest began when a Katyusha rocket was fired into Israeli territory, landing just outside the coastal city of Ashkelon which came under sustained attack during the war. This was quickly followed by the shooting of ten mortar shells at Israeli targets, while Hamas rifle fire was directed at an IDF border patrol unit.

The Israeli Air Force was then sent into action, striking four Hamas targets inside the Gaza Strip. One Palestinian was killed and two others wounded by the return Israeli fire. Three of the targets were smuggling tunnels, two under the southern border with Egypt and a third dug under the Israeli border fence. The fourth target was said to be a Hamas weapons factory located in heavily populated Gaza City.

The Israeli army also closed the Kerem Shalom border gate, preventing food and other supplies from entering the small Palestinian coastal zone. At the same time, thousands of Arabic leaflets were dispersed all over the Gaza Strip, warning residents to keep clear of the border crossing while also urging them not to cooperate with Hamas terror squads.

Despite the Air Force action, Hamas continued to fire rockets into Israeli territory for almost one week. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu told his cabinet that 20 rockets had struck over that period, prompting additional military retaliation. "The government's policy is clear: Any rocket attacks will be harshly responded to," he said." A village in central Gaza was bombed from the air, reportedly killing three Palestinians, including a Hamas militia field commander. Defense Minister Ehud Barak warned Hamas leaders that another massive Israeli military campaign could be quickly launched if they failed to halt the escalating rocket and mortar fire.

Military analysts said the renewed rocket attacks were closely linked to growing tensions between Hamas rulers and Egypt. The Mubarak government began constructing a new border barrier in January comprised of thick steel plates, while stepping up arrests of Palestinians caught smuggling goods and weapons via tunnels into the Gaza Strip. At the same time, digging began for a moat along the Egyptian Sinai border with Gaza, to be filled with salt water from the nearby Mediterranean Sea.

IRON DOME SUCCESSFULLY TESTED

The Gaza unrest came as Israel successfully conducted a series of tests on a Negev Air Force base of its newly developed anti-rocket system. Called Iron Dome, it features kinetic energy beams that can be quickly directed at incoming rockets, along with a sophisticated radar system that instantly plots the trajectories of the launched rockets and only strikes at those projected to land in built up areas.

Defense Minister Barak hailed the new system, but also warned that "We cannot create the illusion that tomorrow morning there will be full protection for the Gaza periphery or the north, or elsewhere." He bluntly added that "It will take years before we are fully equipped." The comments came just days before the largest ever chemical and biological weapons drill was held in the Tel Aviv area, testing the capabilities of government and municipal institutions, medical corps and security forces to respond to such an Iranian, Syrian and/or Hizbullah attack, or to a major industrial accident. This came as American army commander Gen. David

Petraeus said that a plan is in hand for a US military strike against Iran's nuclear production sites if President Barack Obama ever orders such action.

BACK TO THE TABLE?

While violence was flaring in Gaza, Israeli media reports claimed that Defense Minister Barak was holding two days of clandestine talks with Mahmoud Abbas in Amman Jordan. The PA leader was there before heading to Egypt to meet with President Mubarak. Later in the month, Abbas met with American envoy George Mitchell, as did Israeli leaders. However the discussion produced very little, said Israeli media reports. This came after PM Netanyahu angered Abbas by stating during a tree planting ceremony in the disputed territories that Israel will retain some of the land it captured in the 1967 Six Day War as part of any final peace deal.

President Obama expressed unhappiness with both Israeli and Palestinian leaders during an early January interview with *Time* magazine. He said Netanyahu "found it very hard to move with any bold gestures," adding that Abbas "has Hamas looking over his shoulder." Israeli analysts had warned early last year that the new American leader was making a serious mistake by raising the peace poll so high in the air, noting that neither Netanyahu nor Abbas could politically afford to move forward at this time.

CRISIS GROWING WITH TURKEY

Israel's flaying diplomatic relations with Turkey became further strained in January after Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon summoned Turkey's ambassador to complain over harsh anti-Israel comments made by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Erdogan, and to protest a television program broadcast in the Muslim nation in early January that portrayed Israeli security agents as evil baby stealers. Titled "Valley of the Wolves", the program was screened on state television with the apparent approval of government authorities. It depicted Israeli Mossad agents as murderous thugs who wantonly kill innocent children.

The offensive program was broadcast shortly after Erdogan—who strongly denounced Israeli leaders over their conduct of last year's Cast Lead military operation—issued a scathing assault on the Netanyahu government's ongoing campaign to prod world powers to enforce stronger economic sanctions against Iran, designed to force the Shiite regime to curb its ongoing nuclear program. The Turkish Premier said the United Nations should at least exert the same level of pressure upon Israel over its presumed nuclear weapons program as it has so far done with Tehran.

Erdogan further added to growing tensions by reportedly telling Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri and President Michel Suleiman during their January 11 visit to Ankara that Israel is preparing to attack Lebanon in the coming months.

The Turkish leader was echoing Syrian dictator Bashar Assad, who sent a similar message to Hizbullah leaders one week before. Assad averred that the IDF will launch a major assault upon Lebanon in May. Erdogan told the visiting Lebanese leaders that "Israel is compromising global peace by fighting the Palestinians, using Lebanon's air space and waters, and for not disclosing its nuclear capabilities," adding that "Israel has never denied it has nuclear weapons. In fact, it has admitted to such. Those who are cautioning Iran must also caution Israel."

When in office, former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert did indeed tell a German magazine that his country possesses nuclear weapons, which raised a firestorm at the time in Israel. However Israeli officials point out that the two programs are hardly equal, given that the Jewish state is a vibrant democracy allied with the West, and has never threatened any particular country with annihilation. On the other hand, Iranian leaders constantly proclaim that Israel will soon be completely wiped off of the Middle East map, clearly implying the use of such mass destruction weapons.

ON THE COUCH

The Turkish ambassador, Oguz Celikkol, was summoned to the Foreign Ministry on January 11 with the approval of Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman. However neither senior official apparently realized in advance that Ayalon planned to deliberately place the Turkish diplomat in a lower seat than his own during the terse meeting—considered an insult in many eastern cultures. On top of that, a miniature Turkish flag was not placed next to the Israeli flag on a table between the two diplomats. It is normal protocol for the visiting diplomat's flag to also be displayed at such meetings.

The moves might have gone fairly unnoticed, or at least not commented upon, had Ayalon not pointed out in Hebrew to Israeli journalists covering the meeting that Celikkol was seated lower than him. The remark was soon shared with the ambassador by other Turks in the room who understand Hebrew, prompting the diplomat to take umbrage. He was formally recalled to Ankara the next day by Erdogan, who was said to be incensed over the perceived diplomatic slight.

Turkish officials—who may still be smarting somewhat over the loss of their forebear's vast and powerful Ottoman Empire at the end of World War One, which included the Holy Land—demanded an immediate apology from Jerusalem for the “humiliating slight.” This prompted the Foreign Ministry to issue an unusually blunt statement saying that “Turkey is the last country that can preach morality to Israel.” Political analysts said the statement reflected real anger in Israeli government offices and in the country's security services over both the insulting television program, which many considered openly anti-Semitic, and the equation of Israel with Iran.

At the same time, Ayalon and Lieberman came under sharp criticism from opposition politicians and pundits for exacerbating the growing diplomatic rift with Turkey, which has been Israel's closest regional ally for many years. This prompted Ayalon to issue a written apology, at the request of both Netanyahu and President Shimon Peres, who stepped in to try and stop the latest diplomatic hemorrhaging. Ayalon replied that he had not intended to insult the Turkish ambassador, and also pointed out that he had often lobbied on Turkey's behalf when he served as Israel's ambassador to Washington.

Turkish officials initially rejected the apology, terming it insufficient. A second, stronger letter of contrition was then delivered to the Turkish embassy in Tel Aviv, which was accepted by Ankara. However Turkish media outlets continued to blast Israel in harsh terms, which analysts said reflected the growing anti-Israel attitude of the country's mostly Muslim citizens.

THREAT OF ARREST

Meanwhile a Turkish human rights organization filed a motion in the country's courts to have Ehud Barak arrested when he visited Ankara. The group wanted him detained and tried as a war criminal. Despite the threat, Barak carried on with plan to travel to Turkey, arriving there on January 17. Afterwards he said Turkish leaders do want to keep up their alliance with Israel. However he also admitted that relations are very strained and will probably never return to the high level of military and diplomatic cooperation that was present in previous years. Analysts noted that Erdogan was noticeably absent from any public appearance with the visiting Defense Minister.

The petition to have Barak arrested in Turkey came after similar threats arose during the past few months in Britain and a few other European countries against Barak and several other Israeli government and military leaders, including former Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni. The threats prompted Livni and several others to cancel planned visits to London and elsewhere.

As the diplomatic crisis was escalating with Ankara, tourism officials announced that Israelis were cutting back sharply on vacation visits to Turkey, which had been a very popular and inexpensive destination over the past 20

years. Statistics showed that visits were down by 44% in 2009. Officials said that while some of the falloff might have been due to the economic meltdown slowing tourism worldwide, it was mostly because of the anti-Israel statements coming on a regular basis from Ankara, and the country's budding ties with Iran.

In a related matter, the Tourism Ministry announced that 2.7 million foreigners visited Israel during 2009—the second highest total ever. This was despite the Gaza conflict which deflated tourism early in the year, and the worldwide economic crisis. Tourism Minister Stas Meseznikov said he hopes that around three million people will visit Israel this year. He added his ministry is preparing for an additional million extra tourists per year by 2012. He said this would boost Israel's economy, predicting that around 190,000 Israelis will be working in the tourism industry by that year.

IRAN BEHIND ATTACK IN JORDAN

A two car Israeli diplomatic convoy traveling on the main road from the Jordanian capital back toward the Allenby bridge which crosses the Jordan river into Israel was attacked by a concealed roadside bomb on January 15. The explosion did not wound any of the Israeli passengers, but did leave a three foot crater near the road. It was the first time a roadside device was ever deployed in Jordan. Such attacks became routine in Lebanon before the Israeli military pullout in May 2000, and more recently in Iraq.

Jordanian officials immediately stated that the bombing was a well planned assault carried out by highly trained terrorists. Later reports in the Jordanian press said Iran had ordered and funded the attack, working closely with local Al Qaeda operatives. They added that the explosives used in the bombing were probably smuggled into Jordan by Iranian diplomats who are not subject to the usual security inspections others go through. Jordanian security officers arrested several suspects in Amman, while vowing to do everything possible to prevent future attacks.

Israeli leaders said they would order stepped up security measures at their embassy in Amman, which is already among the most heavily guarded buildings in the world. They also ordered additional security measures for all other overseas missions. This came amid what were termed "firm intelligence reports" that Iran and its Lebanese Hezbollah puppet force are planning to launch attacks on Israeli targets abroad to mark the second anniversary of the assassination of Hezbollah military leader Imad Mughniyeh in February 2007. He was killed by a car bomb while visiting Damascus. Hezbollah leaders blamed the incident on Israel and vowed to avenge his death.

WAR COMING WITH LEBANON AND SYRIA?

Israeli military and political leaders expressed grave concern over Syrian media reports stating that officials in Damascus believe Israel is preparing for a springtime offensive against Hezbollah militia forces in Lebanon. According to the Syrian *Al Watan* newspaper, the Assad regime has hard intelligence indicating that a major IDF offensive is being planned for this coming May. The reports stated that Syrian leaders have vowed to enter any such conflict on Hezbollah's behalf. Reports said a call up of reserve Syrian soldiers began on January 23

Prime Minister Netanyahu forcefully denied that any military action was being planned. However other members of his cabinet said a major clash with the heavily re-armed Lebanese force is inevitable at some point.

Meanwhile Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah delivered yet another anti-Israel diatribe on January 16, vowing to "change the face of the region" if another war breaks out with Israel. He claimed Lebanon was "facing the threats that you hear about today, adding that "if another war breaks out with the Zionists, we will defeat the enemy and achieve a great victory." The Shiite clerical leader averred that "Israel is in real trouble," and repeated earlier assertions that "a handful of resistance fighters and jihadists" bested the more powerful IDF during the 2006 Second Lebanon War. "

The Kuwaiti newspaper, *Al Rai*, quoted an unnamed American government official who said that Syria is training Hizbullah militiamen in the use of sophisticated anti-aircraft missile batteries which could bring down Israeli fighter aircraft. The official reportedly added that Israeli leaders have passed on messages to Damascus through third parties warning that if Syria allows Hizbullah to deploy SA-2 anti-aircraft batteries inside Lebanon, Damascus itself will be bombed and another major Middle East war will begin. However the official said he did not see such a war as likely given the stern Israeli warning, which will hopefully cause Syria to prevent such SA-2 systems to be moved into Hizbullah-controlled Lebanese territory.

With war clouds apparently gathering in the region yet again, Israelis welcomed the many rain clouds which also appeared during January—even if that resulted in some flooding. May Israel's Eternal King, the One with "*the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day*" (*Ezekiel 1:28*) also visit the Promised Land very soon!

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, or by phoning toll free 888-890-6938. 888-890-6938 in North America, or by e mail at: resources@yourisraelconnection.org

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

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