

Israel News from David Dolan

Dubai Killing Sparks Regional Commotion

By David Dolan

The January 19 slaying in Dubai of a senior Palestinian Hamas figure dominated headlines throughout the Middle East during February, with charges growing that a network of Israeli Mossad agents carried out the killing. Reverberations increased after it was revealed that passports belonging to several European and Australian nationals, some living in Israel, had been used in the operation. While not yet formally blaming Jerusalem for the assassination, officials in Dubai said they were almost certain it was carried out by Israeli security agents.

On the diplomatic front, indirect peace negotiations are expected to begin soon between Israeli government officials and the Palestinian Authority after a break of over one year. The talks will be mediated by the United States, which has been pressing for a resumption of the stalled negotiations ever since Barack Obama assumed office in January 2009.

A new opinion survey was released indicating that current PA leaders belonging to the PLO Fatah party will trounce their Hamas rivals if Palestinian legislative and presidential elections are held as scheduled in July. Meanwhile skirmishes between Palestinians and Israeli police and army forces escalated in several places. Clashes began in Hebron when Palestinian youths attacked army forces after Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu declared the venerated Tomb of the Patriarchs to be a national heritage site. Violence later spread to Jerusalem, centered on the Temple Mount and other parts of the walled Old City.

Earlier in the month, Netanyahu visited Moscow, mainly to hold talks on the menacing Iranian nuclear threat and plans by Russia to supply advanced weapons to Iran's extremist Shiite regime. Iranian leaders issued new calls for Israel's destruction while significantly stepping up their nuclear uranium enrichment program. Coming as a welcome surprise to Israeli officials, the new Japanese head of the United Nations Atomic Energy Agency stated what his Egyptian predecessor had refused to admit: Growing evidence strongly suggests Iran is secretly working to produce death dealing nuclear weapons.

Iran's notorious president claimed during the month that Israel is preparing to launch a major military offensive in the region this coming spring or summer. This followed new war threats from senior Syrian officials, echoed later in the month by Hizbullah and Hamas leaders. Israel's Foreign Minister indicated massive retaliation would follow any Syrian missile blitz upon Israeli civilian centers, which sparked off more warlike words from Damascus and a political firestorm in Jerusalem.

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS

The January 19 assassination of Hamas arms dealer and terrorist plotter Mahmoud Al-Mabhouh in Dubai continued to feature prominently in both Israeli and Arab media reports throughout the region during February, and also in many countries abroad. Televised reports included hotel surveillance video showing a number of the 26 suspects fingered by Dubai authorities for carrying out the apparently elaborately planned killing. The video, released in late February by the government of Dubai, included several females. The alleged perpetrators were said to have entered the country using twelve forged British passports, six more from Ireland, four from France, three Australian passports, and one from Germany. Hit squad members were said to have used credit cards issued in the United States.

Dubai's police chief, Dahi Khalfam Tamim, announced on February 18 that he was "ninety nine per cent certain" that the Israeli Mossad intelligence agency was responsible for the dramatic killing. He said once this allegation was proven without any remaining doubt, he would ask Interpol to issue an international warrant for the arrest of Mossad chief Meir Dagan, along with a possible warrant for PM Netanyahu and for those suspects who can be identified.

This came as the London *Times* newspaper reported that Dagan—appointed by Ariel Sharon in 2002 to run the secretive Mossad agency—has been quietly overseeing a series of foreign hit operations against Hamas and Hizbullah agents, designed to neutralize some of Israel’s fiercest enemies. The paper said this was part of Israel’s growing regional struggle with shadowy Iranian security agents who have stepped up their own anti-Israel operations. The Mossad has been widely mentioned as the most likely candidate behind a 2008 car bombing in Damascus that killed Hizbullah’s militia commander, Imad Mugniyeh. The Lebanese Shiite group recently repeated its vow to avenge his death.

INSIDE JOB?

The Israeli Premier and other senior cabinet ministers had little comment on their government’s alleged involvement in the Dubai operation. However in remarks made at a conference of European Union officials in Brussels on February 23, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman did not deny outright that Israeli agents were behind the action. He instead told EU leaders that nothing concrete had yet come to light linking Israel with Al-Mabhouh’s killing.

Lieberman pointed to evidence which he said strongly suggests Arab parties were behind the slaying, especially the early February arrest in Amman Jordan of two Fatah party officials who were quickly extradited to Dubai on suspicion of being involved in the plot to kill the Hamas weapons dealer. One of the two men was said to be an active officer in the PA police force.

The Abu Dhabi newspaper *Al-Itihad* quoted Dubai’s police chief saying he suspected a Palestinian “mole” had someone managed to penetrate the ruling Hamas circle in the Gaza Strip. He averred that such a man was “the real killer” since he purportedly betrayed the dead victim to Israeli Mossad agents and probably passed on his exact travel plans to them.

Analysts said that if an inside Palestinian double agent was indeed cooperating with the Mossad (as has certainly occurred many times in the past), it would be another sign of the growing ties between Israeli security forces and their Palestinian Authority counterparts. Such cooperation was vividly illustrated during late February when the IDF announced that PA policemen had shared crucial information with Israeli military intelligence officers about a Palestinian Kassam rocket which had been secretly manufactured at an undisclosed location in an area under PA control. The rocket was said to have been discovered just minutes before being launched at a target somewhere in central Israel, which includes Ben Gurion airport and nearby Tel Aviv. The IDF statement said the Palestinian police interception was the result of increasingly close cooperation between PA and Israeli security forces.

INTERNATIONAL REPERCUSSIONS

The fact that the forged passports belonged to citizens of countries enjoying good diplomatic ties with Israel led to widespread concern in Jerusalem that relations with the allied nations might become strained over the alleged Israeli operation. Israeli diplomats were called in for urgent consultations in Canberra and in the four European countries whose passports were allegedly carried by the hit squad. But British Foreign Secretary David Miliband said his government mainly “wanted to give Israel every opportunity to share with us what it knows about this incident.” Press reports in London said most of the British passports belonged to UK citizens who visited Israel last year—with the passports said to have been copied surreptitiously by Mossad agents working at border control outposts at Ben Gurion airport.

The London *Daily Mail* maintained that Mossad leaders actually warned their British M16 counterparts they would be using forged UK passports in a pending “overseas operation.” The paper added that the reported action, which was naturally neither confirmed or denied by British and Israeli security officials, was merely a “courtesy call” designed to inform M16 leaders that forged UK passports would be involved.

The article noted that Israeli and British security agents normally cooperate quite closely in efforts to monitor and disrupt Islamic terror groups which have attacked both countries in recent years. This was later confirmed in a London speech delivered by retired British Colonel Richard Kemp, who commanded UK forces in Afghanistan

during 2003. He also noted that British military officers maintain a warm and mutually beneficial relationship with IDF commanders.

One Israeli leader did openly hail the Dubai Hamas killing—former foreign minister Tzipi Livni, who heads the opposition Kadima party. She said that whether or not Israeli Mossad agents actually carried out the elaborate operation, the mere contention that they probably did so acts to help deter Israel's many Muslim enemies from carrying out further terrorist operations. It later emerged that it is also helping the spy agency gain new recruits, with applications from young Israelis rising substantially during February.

INDIRECT PEACE TALKS SET TO RESUME

American President Barack Obama's year long push to get stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations going again seemed to finally bear fruit during the month. PA leader Mahmoud Abbas, who has been the main resistor to resuming the talks which have run hot and cold for nearly 20 years, finally gave in to the White House pressure. However he insisted his negotiators could not sit in the same room with Israelis representing the Netanyahu government, even though direct talks had taken place under all previous prime ministers going back to Yitzhak Rabin in the mid 1990s.

If they indeed get underway, the so-called "proximity talks" will be mediated by an American diplomatic team headed by Middle East envoy George Mitchell, of Lebanese extraction. The former US senator will convey messages between the two sides, positioned in different buildings. Israeli officials said they hope the circuitous negotiations can quickly be transformed into face to face talks once again, noting that much more can be accomplished when the opposing teams are actually working in the same room looking each other in the eye.

Just before the PA leader agreed to resume indirect peace negotiations with Israel, his office announced that Palestinian presidential and parliamentary elections will be held this coming July in all PA areas of control north and south of Jerusalem, and also in the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip. The statement said the elections would further the PA government's plan to "complete the building of the institutions of state." True to form, Hamas leaders denounced the move, claiming the "illegal decision" was mainly designed to weaken the Hamas chokehold on the small Palestinian coastal zone.

The latest Palestinian opinion poll, conducted during mid-February in the West Bank and Gaza Strip by the Ramallah-based Near East group, found that 44% of Palestinian voters plan to cast ballots for PLO Fatah party candidates despite continuing media reports of widespread corruption in the ruling party. Only 11% said they would choose Hamas candidates who oppose the peace process and want to establish an Islamic fundamentalist Palestinian state. However the poll also showed that 31% of voters remain undecided, meaning it is still too early to accurately project the final vote outcome.

The opinion survey of some 880 Palestinian voters revealed the deep internal split that still remains inside the Palestinian camp nearly three years after Hamas violently ousted the PA government from the Gaza Strip. A slight majority, 54%, say the Fatah-led PA administration headquartered in Ramallah is the "legitimate" Palestinian government. But nearly one in five Palestinians insists that distinction belongs to the Hamas administration which governs from Gaza City. Demonstrating how deep the internal divisions still are, along with skepticism that the rift can be healed, over a quarter of those surveyed said neither government is legitimate in their opinion.

Some analysts said support for Abbas may drop due to an embarrassing sex scandal that came to light in late February. Media reports said Rafik Hussein, who served as chief of staff in the PA leader's office, had used his powerful position to pressure a number of women into having sexual intercourse with him. The reports claimed Abbas knew of the matter for over one year, but had taken no action against his office chief until the immoral actions became public knowledge. The PA leader then suspended Hussein, who was caught naked on videotape with a Palestinian woman that he agreed to help in exchange for sex.

NO INDEPENDENT INQUIRY

The Israeli cabinet decided in mid February not to establish an independent inquiry commission to investigate the UN Goldstone report's charges that Israeli soldiers committed war crimes during the Cast Lead military operation against Hamas fighters in the Gaza Strip. The ministers instead determined that a recent official government letter sent to UN Secretary Ban Ki Moon sufficiently answered the main charges made by the UN Human Rights Commission headed by South African Supreme Court Judge Richard Goldstone. However the UN chief said he was "not sure" the letter contained enough "credible evidence" that a serious investigation had actually been conducted.

Officials had hoped the 46 page missive would be enough to convince the UN head that Israel took the UN allegations quite seriously. They noted the letter revealed that the IDF had conducted probes into over 150 reported human rights violations, of which 36 were actual criminal investigations. As part of that process, over 100 Palestinians were questioned, along with field IDF officers and many others. Some soldiers have already been prosecuted or otherwise disciplined for verified conduct violations, they noted.

In stark contrast to this, Hamas leaders went back on a public indication last year that that they were "sorry" Israeli civilians had been hit by Hamas rocket fire during the conflict. Israeli officials had earlier scoffed at the half hearted apology, delivered by a Hamas spokesman, noting that thousands of Palestinian Kassam rockets have been deliberately aimed at civilian communities for many years, especially at the besieged Israeli town of Sderot.

Israeli leaders were not over thrilled when the Kremlin extended an official invitation in February to overall Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal to visit Moscow. Few details were released about his discussions mid month with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. Unlike Russia, Israeli and American leaders believe Hamas is a major obstacle to ongoing peace moves in the region, not a potential peace partner.

Mashaal later told the London-based *Al Hayat* newspaper that if conflict breaks out again between his extremist group and Israel, it "will not be limited this time to the Gaza Strip, but will engulf the entire region." A similar statement was made during February by Lebanese Hizbullah militia leader Sheik Hassan Nasrallah, who said any action between his group and Israel will spark off a greater Middle East war.

It sounded a bit like war in the center of Jerusalem in late February after Palestinian Muslims threw stones at Jewish worshipers at the Western Wall just below the Temple Mount. Israeli police then stormed the sacred site, sparking off fierce clashes in many parts of the Old City.

The violence began earlier in the week in Hebron after PA leader Abbas claimed the Israeli government's designation of the Tomb of the Patriarchs in the city as a "national heritage site" was an attempt to take it over and push Muslim worshipers out the door. PA leaders also protested a similar designation for Rachel's Tomb in Bethlehem. PM Netanyahu said the designation would herald no actual changes on the ground. But analysts said it was a clear indication he has no intention of abandoning the widely revered ancient Jewish holy sites as part of any final peace deal with the Palestinians.

FRONT AND CENTER

The Israeli Premier visited the Kremlin mid month, meeting with senior Russian officials including Vladimir Putin. Coming in the wake of Iran's announcement that it had begun enriching its uranium stockpile up to 20%--bringing it much closer to weapons grade material—it was no surprise that the main topic of discussion was the growing nuclear threat Iran poses to Israel, and the role Russia is playing in that unnerving reality.

During a post-meeting news conference with Putin, the Israel leader stated rather cryptically that "Russia understands the Iranian problem." He added that tougher economic sanctions must be enacted against the rogue Shiite Iranian regime, specifically targeting Iran's vital energy sector. This came after Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Prince Al Faisal indicated that the United States might need to take imminent military action to halt Iran's outlawed nuclear program. He told a news conference in the presence of visiting American Secretary of State Hillary Clinton that "sanctions are a long-term solution, but we see the issue in the shorter term because we are closer to the threat," adding that "We need immediate resolution rather than gradual resolution."

Soon after Netanyahu returned from Moscow, Russian officials announced that delivery of the advanced S-300 anti missile system, purchased several years ago by Iran, would be further delayed due to unspecified “technical problems.” Israeli officials have long argued that the sophisticated system should never be handed over to the Shiite clerical regime. Meanwhile a German newspaper quoted an internal Atomic Energy Agency memo stating that an unnamed Russian nuclear scientist is secretly helping Iranian engineers develop nuclear warheads.

WAR OF WORDS

PM Netanyahu also used his Moscow visit to denounce recent Iranian claims that Israel is preparing for an imminent military offensive in the region. He said no such assault is on the table. His comment came just days after Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad claimed to possess information that “Israel is seeking to start a war next spring or summer,” boasting that “the resistance and regional states will finish them off if this fake regime does anything again.”

The notorious Iranian leader—miraculously re-elected as president last June when he somehow captured more votes than there are registered voters in his country—did not specify who Israel would purportedly attack during such an offensive. The Reuters news agency reported that he told Syrian dictator Bashar Assad by telephone that Israel would be “finished off once and for all” if it launches any military assault. Assad himself earlier joined Hizbullah leader Nasrallah and Turkish Premier Recep Erdogan in contending that Israel is planning to attack Shiite forces in Lebanon this coming May. The Syrian leader said his substantial armed forces would actively defend Iranian-commanded Hizbullah militiamen in any such operation. The Lebanese government echoed this ominous statement. The hostile words were repeated during a summit meeting that Assad hosted in Damascus late in the month with Ahmadinejad and Nasrallah.

Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak sparked off an earlier exchange or verbal blasts when he stated that “all out war” could break out unless negotiations with Syria were seriously pursued by Israel. Apparently misinterpreting this as a military threat, President Assad charged that Israel was “leading the region to war.” Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Al Moallem then ominously stated that “the next war will be waged inside your cities.” Foreign Minister Lieberman reacted by strongly hinting at massive Israeli retaliation following any Syrian missile blitz on Israeli civilian areas, telling Assad that “not only will you lose the war, you and your family will no longer be in power.” Opposition politicians claimed Lieberman spoke too strongly, with some demanding he be sacked.

As Israel’s enemies rant and rave, and with a looming nuclear threat hanging over their heads, the Israeli people need to call upon their Sovereign Lord like never before—the One who promises that during the biblically prophesied end of days, “*Man will have regard for his Maker, and his eyes will look to the Holy One of Israel*” (Isaiah 17:7).

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).

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