

Israel News from David Dolan

Week of March 29, 2010

Shalom, and happy Passover and/ or Resurrection Day to all who celebrate one or the other, or both as some do in Israel!

Below is my latest news review covering the most important developments affecting Israel and the Middle East during March. As many of you would have anticipated, this month I focus on the escalating crisis in diplomatic relations between the American Obama administration and the Netanyahu coalition government. Probably not be coincidence, this was accompanied by the worst Palestinian violence in Jerusalem in several years, and the heaviest clashes in the Gaza Strip since the Cast Lead conflict in that area ended on January 18, 2009. Thankfully things have calmed down again in both locations, although security will remain tight during the Spring holidays.

It was good to see some of you when I spoke in the Portland Oregon area and then in Western Washington state and Spokane earlier this month. I will be sharing at Candlelight Church in Coeur d'Alene this Wednesday evening, so you are welcome to come along if you are in this area. As noted before, I will be speaking in the southeast and in Dallas in April and May before returning to Israel, and will soon be posting my schedule on my web site, www.ddolan.com , so hope to see some of you then.

CRISIS DEEPENS IN US-ISRAEL RELATIONS

By David Dolan

A new wave of Palestinian violence engulfed Jerusalem and surrounding areas during March, leaving several dead and many others wounded in its wake. Israeli officials and political analysts indicated that the American government was at least partly to blame for the renewed unrest, which broke out after US leaders issued harsh condemnations of Israeli home building in the small country's capital city.

During a late March visit to the United States, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu made clear that he will never order a halt to Jewish home construction in the holy city that has been the Jewish people's most sacred site on earth for over 3,000 years. He stated this one day before meeting several times with US President Barack Obama at the White House. Israeli media reports said the meetings were extremely tense, with the US leader himself insisting that Netanyahu must immediately halt all home construction in areas of Jerusalem captured from Jordanian forces in 1967, including the Jewish Quarter of the Old City.

Netanyahu consulted with six "inner security cabinet" ministers, including Defense Minister Ehud Barak who was accompanying him on his US trip, before reportedly telling the President that Israel's home building policy in Jerusalem will never be altered. The Israeli Premier noted that this has been the consistent policy of all Israeli governments over the past 43 years, and that fact didn't stop Yasser Arafat from signing the American-mediated Oslo peace accords in the 1990s, nor prevent peace agreements from being reached with Egypt and Jordan. He also pointed out that he has ordered many actions over the past year that have significantly eased living conditions in Palestinian cities and towns, including the tearing down of dozens of Israeli security roadblocks that has facilitated Palestinian economic activity. News reports said Netanyahu was considering a request from the American leader for additional concessions in order to get the Palestinians back to the negotiating table.

While security forces were focused on restoring calm in Arab populated portions of Jerusalem, fresh violence broke out in the Gaza Strip, leaving two Israeli soldiers dead. The clashes began when an army patrol unit came upon Palestinian infiltrators planting bombs next to the border fence. Israeli tank and artillery was then fired at known Hamas militia positions in the area. One week earlier, a Thai agricultural worker was killed when a rocket landed on the farm he was working on inside Israeli territory. Security officials warned that Israel will need to respond in a major way if the unprovoked assaults continue, noting that over 325 rockets have landed inside Israel since the Gaza conflict ended on January 18, 2009, most of them deliberately launched at civilian areas.

Vigilance was maintained along the northern borders with Lebanon and Syria. This came as Israel's armed forces chief told a Knesset committee that the Iranian-backed Hizbullah militia is deploying more men in southern Lebanon in apparent anticipation of a possible upcoming clash with IDF forces. Arab news reports revealed that hundreds of Sunni Palestinian men have arrived in Lebanon in recent months to fight alongside the radical Shiite Lebanese force. Iranian leaders issued more verbal blasts against Israel during the month, saying the Jewish state is in the process of being abandoned by its Western allies and will soon be destroyed.

AMERICAN SCORN TRIGGERS FRESH UNREST

Whenever political relations are strained between the United States and Israel, anti-American Arab Muslim groups like Hamas seem to see this as an opportunity to foment violent clashes with Israeli security forces. After fairly warm ties during the eight years that the Bush administration governed America, tensions between Washington and Jerusalem have been mushrooming over the past year, sparked off by Barack Obama's verbal pressure on the Netanyahu government to halt all construction in the disputed territories and eastern Jerusalem.

Relations deteriorated even further while Vice President Joe Biden was visiting Israel during the first week of March. The American official was in the country to inaugurate indirect US-mediated peace negotiations between the Netanyahu government and the Palestinian Authority.

The day after Biden arrived at Ben Gurion Airport, an announcement was released by the Israeli Interior Ministry stating that permits would be issued to build 1,600 new housing units, mainly apartments, in the northeast Jerusalem suburb of Ramat Shlomo, which translates into English as "The Heights of Solomon." Already home to hundreds of observant Jews, the suburb lies between the eastern slopes of the Mount of Olives and Mount Scopus and one of the largest Jewish communities in the disputed territories, Ma'ale Adumim.

Biden quickly echoed Palestinian leaders in strongly condemning the announced building project. In his remarks, he implied that he was personally insulted that such a declaration was made while he was in Israel, indicating he viewed it as a deliberate slap in the face by the Prime Minister.

NO SNUB INTENDED

PM Netanyahu and his top aides tried to explain to the offended American deputy leader and his entourage that they did not know in advance the Interior Ministry would make what officials in the ministry viewed as a routine announcement. They said American officials should understand that unlike the United States with its two party political system, Israel is a parliamentary democracy that is always ruled by coalition governments comprised of several different political parties with varying positions and opinions. Each party views the ministries they control as their own little "government" inside the larger coalition quilt.

One of Netanyahu's current partners, the Orthodox Shas party, runs the Interior Ministry, as they have done for most of the past 25 years under both Labor and Likud-led governments. The party always seeks control of the Interior Ministry primarily because it has direct authority over marriages (which by law must be carried out by an ordained rabbi if either the bride or groom are Jewish), along with funerals. The ministry also disperses tax revenues to cities and towns for local projects like synagogue building, and issues housing permits.

Netanyahu explained to Biden that a low level committee simply finished its routine review of the proposed Ramat Shlomo project, and simply by coincidence issued the building permits the day before the Vice President arrived in Israel. Netanyahu and other officials apologized to Biden for the bad timing of the announcement. Later the Premier ordered that all future Jerusalem building announcements be coordinated first with his office.

However Netanyahu also told the Vice President that he should be more mindful of the politically risky actions he has taken in response to the American demand that all settlement construction be halted. He noted that the Civil Administration which oversees Jewish affairs in Judea and Samaria has issued more than 400 stop-work orders and

confiscated over 40 pieces of heavy machinery used by contractors since the Israeli building ban went into effect the end of November. This occurred despite strong protests from many of Netanyahu's political backers. He also noted that 11 structures and building foundations have been demolished, despite furious protests from Jewish residents who see this as feeding Muslims hopes and expectations that over 350,000 Jews will be uprooted from their homes as part of any final peace settlement with Israel.

US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton added fuel to the fire by terming the Interior Ministry announcement "an insult" to America, adding that Israel needed to make the current building ban permanent and halt all construction in the eastern half of Jerusalem. This came as Michael Oren, the Israeli ambassador to America, sent out a memo saying diplomatic relations between the United States and Israel are more strained now than they have been since the mid 1970s, when the Israeli government resisted American pressure to evacuate IDF forces from the Sinai peninsula, captured during the 1973 Yom Kippur war that began when Egypt and Syria attacked Israel on its holiest day with full Soviet backing.

A LITTLE BACKTRACKING

As violent Palestinian protests spread to several portions of Jerusalem, Biden seemed to grasp that the American administration might be adding to the unrest by making a mountain out of a molehill. On his last full day in the country, he delivered a speech before students at Tel Aviv University that Israeli leaders characterized as quite friendly. He justified his anger over the home building announcement by stating "Quite frankly folks, only a friend can deliver the hardest truth." But then he added that "American support for Israel is not just an act of friendship; it's an act of fundamental national self-interest on the part of the United States, a key component to our broader efforts to secure this region and a wider world, as well as our own security."

The Vice President said he fully appreciates Israel's apprehension to take additional risks for peace after its military withdrawal from South Lebanon in May 2000 and Gaza Strip evacuation in August 2005 were met with "rockets as a reward." Biden also spoke of "the special connection to Israel" felt by American Jews, and said the Obama government expects indirect American mediated peace talks to begin soon, despite the Israeli Interior Ministry's ill-timed housing announcement.

President Obama himself seemed to realize that things were getting out of hand. He made a rare appearance on the *Fox News* network where he averred that "Israel is one of our closest allies on earth." He also noted that "the Israeli people have a special bond with us and it's not going to go away," although he added that "friends are going to disagree sometimes" and that the Israeli building announcement "was not helpful" to American efforts to re-start the stalled peace process.

Political analysts said the President was partly reacting to strong criticism of his approach to Israel over the past year which appeared mid month in both the normally left of center *Washington Post* and the more right wing *Wall Street Journal*. The *Post* editorial laid the blame for deteriorating US-Israeli relations squarely on the President's shoulders, saying "It has been startling, and a little puzzling, to see Mr. Obama deliberately plunge into another public brawl with the Jewish state." The paper added that this will hardly help persuade the Palestinian Authority to return to the negotiating table. The *Journal* editorial was even more pointed, maintaining that "If the Obama Administration opts to transform itself, as the Europeans have, into another set of lawyers for the Palestinians, it will find Israeli concessions increasingly hard to come by."

Several members of Obama's own Democratic Party also voiced criticism of his dealings with Israel. Representative Gary Peters from Michigan said, he hoped "the administration will end its unnecessary denunciations of Israel and will instead turn its focus to working with Congress to finally enact strong sanctions on Iran." Former Democratic Party vice presidential candidate Joe Lieberman, now a registered Independent, joined with Republican Senator John McCain to state on the Senate floor that "the American relationship with Israel is one of the strongest, most important, most steadfast bilateral alliances we have in the world."

PM Netanyahu met earlier the same day with Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Minority Leader John Boehner, thanking them for their “constant support and unflagging friendship.” He added that although “the challenges we face are immense, our will and our partnership is also immense.”

However a substantially different tone was adopted by a senior American military leader. Testifying before a Senate committee just days after the acrimonious Biden visit to Israel, General David Petraeus, the army’s Central Command chief, alleged that “Israeli government intransigence” was “harming US interests” in the Middle East. Adopting words that some in Israel saw as clearly anti-Semitic, he added that this supposed “intransigence” could contribute to future American military casualties in the region. Some analysts said this was yet another worrying sign that the Obama administration may be backing away from fully supporting Israel in its ongoing conflict with Iran, with the consent of at least some senior military leaders.

PEACE TALKS ON HOLD

Joe Biden asserted that the ill timed Israeli apartment building announcement might prevent the Palestinians from returning to the peace table. This came after Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said that the PA “can’t go to the talks while Israel is building settlements.” However Arab and Israeli media reports claimed that PA leader Abbas will order his negotiators to attend the indirect negotiations after a “suitable delay” designed to demonstrate their anger that more religious Israeli Jews will be living not far from the Temple Mount, Judaism’s holiest site on earth, which Palestinian Muslims claim as exclusively their own.

During a speech before the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee in New York, PM Netanyahu, countered that Jerusalem is Israel’s eternal capital city, not some “settlement” that might be torn down as a result of any final peace accord. In a passionate speech, he reviewed the deep, ancient and enduring Jewish connection to the holy city, gaining sustained applause from his mostly Jewish audience. The Premier later told his cabinet ministers that “establishing Jewish neighborhoods does not hurt Jerusalem’s Arab residents, and is not at their expense.” Israeli officials pointed out to their American colleagues that PA leader Mahmoud Abbas had sat down to discuss peace terms with the former Barak and Olmert governments while Jewish home building proceeded in the disputed territories and in all portions of Jerusalem, as was also the case when Yasser Arafat discussed the Oslo peace deal with the government led by Yitzhak Rabin.

It is precisely the Obama administration’s repeated demands last year that Netanyahu halt all construction that has caused the Palestinians to dig in their heels, they aver, despite the fact that last November, the Premier did order a ten month halt to all home construction in all contested communities north and south of Jerusalem’s municipal boundaries. They noted that Netanyahu’s decision caused a major commotion with some of his coalition partners and many members of his own Likud party, even if it at least partially pleased the White House.

Despite the escalating tensions in US-Israeli diplomatic relations, Benjamin Netanyahu requested a meeting with President Obama the day after his AIPAC speech. In the end, the Premier stayed an extra two days in Washington to meet several times with the American leader and to consult with his top aides on what actions he might take to ease tensions. The Israeli delegation remained tight lipped on how the meetings went, but the Israeli press portrayed them as extremely strained. They noted that Obama abruptly left one of the meetings mid way in order to eat supper with his wife and two daughters in his private White House quarters, suddenly leaving the Israeli leader alone with some of his aides. American officials also refused to allow the media to cover the meetings or take any pictures of the two leaders, despite the fact that photographers are normally allowed to snap shots of visiting foreign dignitaries meeting with the President.

DAYS OF RAGE

An attempt by the radical Palestinian Hamas movement to stage a massive “day of rage” last October failed to bring many people into the streets of Jerusalem and other areas to clash with Israeli security forces. However just one day after the American Vice President’s official visit ended, many Jerusalem streets were filled with violence once

again. As has been the case so many times over the past 80 years, the unrest began on the Temple Mount, which Muslim's call the Islamic "Noble Sanctuary."

Acting on security tips that violent actions were being planned on the Friday after Biden left the country, police forces were beefed up in and around Jerusalem. Palestinian Muslim males under the age of 50 were prevented from attending Friday prayers on the Temple Mount. This sparked off clashes at the holy site and in nearby neighborhoods, which spread over the weekend to other parts of the disputed territories. A closure was imposed on the areas, which was later extended over five days.

Meanwhile Hamas took advantage of the situation to call for a "Day of Rage" on Monday, March 15. This was timed to coincide with the official opening of the large Hurva synagogue in Jerusalem's Jewish Quarter which was first constructed in 1701, and served as the center of Jewish religious and cultural life until Jordanian troops deliberately blew it up after occupying the walled Old City in 1948. Several Israeli policemen were injured as Palestinian rioters took to the streets, with one officer shot in the process, suffering medium injuries. Over 100 Palestinians were treated for mostly minor injuries as the clashes spread to many Arab neighborhoods.

Speaking at the dedication ceremony, Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Yonah Metzger said Muslim claims that the restored synagogue will somehow harm their interests on the Temple Mount, located over two blocks east of the site, are entirely baseless. "All we are doing is resurrecting the Hurva, which was destroyed more than 60 years ago. We have no intention of rebuilding the Temple." He added that "rumors suggesting we will later march on the Temple Mount are just that, rumors; inspired by a media spin by anti-Semites who wish us harm."

Israeli officials expressed dismay that the PA leadership allowed a public square in Ramallah to be renamed in honor of Dalal Mughrabi, a Palestinian female terrorist who participated in a heinous PLO attack upon an Israeli civilian bus in 1978 that took the life of 13 Israeli children and 23 adults, along with a visiting American Jewish photographer. PA leaders had earlier said the planned ceremony would be indefinitely postponed at the request of US officials. They claimed that "local residents and Fatah supporters" had carried out the renaming ceremony without official PA government sanction, which Israeli analysts said was absurd given that PA security forces control the city and could have easily prevented the large public gathering from taking place.

The restored Hurva synagogue, with its white painted dome visible from my Jerusalem apartment window, is a reminder that the Jewish people continue to thrive in their capital city, despite how the nations, including Israel's closest allies, react to that fact. Israel's God warns that He will also react one day to world meddling in the status of Jerusalem: "*It will come about in that day that will make Jerusalem a heavy stone for all the peoples: all who lift it will be severely injured. And all the nations of the earth will be gathered against it. (Zechariah 12:3)*"

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

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