

Israel News from David Dolan

Week of October 24, 2011

Shalom from the UK!

Below is this month's Israel news and analysis report, centered on the dramatic release of kidnapped IDF soldier Gilad Shalit after over five years in Hamas captivity and its implications for Israel, Hamas, and the stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace process. I also look at the pending UN Security Council vote on the Palestinian Authority statehood bid, expected to take place in a couple weeks time, along with unsettling developments in Lebanon, Syria and Iran in light of the killing of Libyan despot Col. Qaddafi.

I am happy to announce that my new novel, **MILLENNIUM: THE LORD REIGNS**, is now available to download in electronic form for both Kindle and Nook readers. The cost is just \$9.95. You may purchase and download it via my web site, www.ddolan.com I was sorry to learn from my publisher that there was a slight delay in shipping out the initial large number of printed copy orders, due to a technical problem in the printing process, but I am told all have now gone out. I hope all will enjoy and be blessed by my new novel, a great gift for the holidays ahead! The promised YouTube video posting about my new novel, set in the millennial reign of the Lord from His throne in Jerusalem, which was filmed on my roof in the center of the city in September, has also been delayed due to technical reasons. However I am told it should be uploaded soon.

I am currently on a speaking tour in the UK, appearing this evening near the city of Birmingham, then moving further north in the British Midlands, then to northern Wales, then further north into England and Scotland, finishing up in Northern Ireland early next month. The details are also posted on my web site. I will be speaking in the Seattle and Vancouver areas of Washington State later in November, along with venues in Oregon and Idaho... details are also on my web site. My new novel will be available at all of my meetings. It is selling well here in the UK along with its older companion novel, **THE END OF DAYS**. Both are available in printed form in a special reduced price via my web site.

GILAD SHALIT COMES HOME

By David Dolan

For a good part of this year, many people in Israel worried that the month of October might be marked by violent Palestinian protests in the wake of an expected United Nations Security Council rejection of the unilateral statehood bid made in late September by the Palestinian Authority. As reported earlier, Israeli security forces were preparing for this distinct possibility, which could obviously still occur in the coming weeks as the Quartet partners attempt to restart peace negotiations between Israel and the PA, along with the pending Security Council vote expected to finally take place around mid-November.

Instead of renewed violence on the streets, the Israeli public and media were suddenly gripped by a story that had been in and out of the headlines for over five years—the ongoing captivity of kidnapped IDF soldier Gilad Shalit, abducted by Muslim terrorists along the Israeli border fence with the Gaza Strip in June, 2006. The Israeli government unexpectedly announced on Tuesday, October 11th that the now 26 year old Israeli-soldier would be handed over by Hamas in one week's time in a deal involving the release of over one thousand Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails, many for terrorist attacks which left scores of Israeli civilians and soldiers dead or wounded.

While Israeli Jews were naturally jubilant over the pending release of the young soldier held captive for nearly 2,000 days and nights by his Palestinian kidnappers, there were very mixed feelings over the high price demanded by Hamas for Shalit's freedom. The Iranian-backed militant Muslim group, which violently seized control over the Palestinian coastal zone in 2007, insisted that the Netanyahu government hand over some of the most notorious terrorists held in Israeli jails, many with "blood on their hands," meaning they had directly participated in the killing and maiming of Israeli citizens.

With many bereaved families speaking out against the lopsided swap, it became painfully evident that general Israeli joy over Shalit's overdue freedom was blended with deep pain and remorse over what many termed an extortionist cost.

Coming during the annual Succot Feast of Tabernacles celebration, the Shalit deal almost eclipsed news that the Palestinian Authority had rejected an offer by the Quartet powers—the United States, the European Union, the United Nations and Russia—to meet with their Israeli counterparts on October 23rd in Amman to begin face to face peace talks, with the goal being to reach a final status accord by the end of 2012. Indirect talks are still expected to begin on October 26th, but expectations remain low they will actually carry the peace process forward. The Israeli government offered to freeze some public building in the disputed territories in order help get frozen negotiations rolling again.

High tensions continued to plague the disputed territories north and south of Jerusalem for other reasons beyond the release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners into the areas. Following the controversial dismantling of Jewish homes in an officially unauthorized settlement community in the Binyamin area north of Israel's capital city, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu announced the establishment of a panel to examine the legality of other homes on contested territory. Right wing politicians questioned the move, while left wing opposition groups and the PA charged the panel was designed to eventually legalize "land theft" by settler groups.

Most Israelis welcomed the dramatic news of Libyan strongman Muammar Gaddafi's sudden demise on October 20th. However, as violence continued to grip neighboring Syria during the month, many feared the dictator's bloody end could serve to stiffen the Assad regime's apparent resolve to do anything necessary to cling to power, including authorizing a possible military attack upon Israel. This came as Syrian Sunni Muslim opposition groups announced they were forming an umbrella organization to fight for the ouster of the Assad regime, which has governed the Arab country for almost four decades. The Cairo-based Arab League said it was giving Syrian leaders 15 days to end their brutal suppression of anti-government demonstrations or face possible sanctions from the 22 country body. Elsewhere in the Egyptian capital, over two dozen young Coptic Christian protestors were killed in clashes with security forces in central Cairo, the center of anti-Mubarak demonstrations last February. They were attacked by security forces while demonstrating against growing street violence upon members of their minority community by Islamic Egyptians linked to the Muslim Brotherhood movement.

DIFFICULT DEAL TO FREE KIDNAPPED SOLDIER

Numerous times over the past five years, these monthly Israel news updates have reported that a prisoner exchange was in the works to release the now world famous Israeli soldier kidnapped by Islamic infiltrators along the Gaza Strip border fence on June 25, 2006. That quiet Saturday morning, terrorists linked to the so-called 'Popular Resistance Committees,' dominated by the Hamas movement, employed a secretly dug tunnel under the border fence to enter Israeli territory, where they quickly surrounded and attacked an Israeli army squad patrolling in tanks along the border near the Kerem Shalom crossing gate.

Two IDF soldiers who popped out of a tank to engage the armed attackers were killed in an exchange of fire with the terrorists. Five other soldiers were wounded. The Palestinian gunmen then seized Gilad Shalit, a tank gunner, who was among the wounded, and dragged him across the border into the then PA-ruled zone. Israeli army reinforcements quickly arrived at the scene, but not in time to rescue the kidnapped soldier. The Popular Resistance Committees (which took responsibility for last August's cross border terrorist assaults into southern Israel from Egypt, which left eight Israelis dead), said they were behind the infiltration assault and immediately demanded the release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners in exchange for the abducted Shalit.

In September of that year, Hamas took full control of the kidnapped soldier, releasing its first list of prisoners they demanded be set free in exchange for the lone IDF soldier. To the astonishment of many Israelis, the Iranian-backed group insisted that no less than 1,000 Palestinian criminals and terrorists be released from Israeli jails in exchange for the lone soldier's freedom. Later the list was

further inflated to 1,500 prisoners, prompting then Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to state in January 2007 that Israel could not agree to such an extremely lopsided deal. In June of that year, soon after Hamas seized full control over the entire Gaza Strip after winning a short but deadly battle with PA security forces, a videotape was released with Shalit stating that his health was deteriorating under Hamas detention, adding further pressure on the Olmert government to arrange a quick deal to secure his release.

Media reports swirled the following February that a swap deal was imminent, but they proved to be premature. In June 2008, French President Nicolas Sarkozy asked Hamas to free the soldier who holds duo French-Israeli citizenship. After that, nothing was heard from Gilad Shalit for more than one year despite the fact that under international law, he should have at least been visited by the Red Cross. However Hamas—among the most notorious terrorist organizations on earth—would not allow this humanitarian gesture to take place. A second video recording was finally released in September 2009 in exchange for Israel's freeing of 19 female Palestinian prisoners. The captive soldier appeared to be in fair condition, but most analysts said his halting words had apparently been coached by his Hamas handlers.

The various reports of Shalit's imminent release had been based on factual information. Still, the previous Israeli government headed by Kadima leader Ehud Olmert and the current Likud-led Netanyahu administration simply could not meet the extremely stiff demands made by Hamas leaders for his long sought freedom, especially the release of hundreds of convicted Palestinian terrorist prisoners with "blood on their hands." However the pressure on the current government to do almost anything demanded of it was constant. It gained significant steam after his determined parents, Noam and Aviva Shalit, set up a reception tent near the Prime Minister's official Jerusalem residence (Netanyahu and his family actually reside most of the time several blocks away in their private home on a street ironically named Azza Road, or Gaza Road in English). Thousands of Israelis and many foreign visitors in the capital city would stop by every month to talk with the struggling couple and to show their support for their unjustly imprisoned son, adding pressure on the government to secure a deal for his release.

In the end, the cabinet-approved exchange agreement was enormously tough for many Israelis to swallow. In fact, three right wing ministers voted to nix the deal, all of them arguing that the release of so many Palestinian prisoners in exchange for one man was simply too high a price to pay, even though all felt the pain of the Shalit family and of course, wanted to see Gilad come home. One of those who strongly opposed the swap was veteran Likud party leader and cabinet minister Uzi Landau, who has served under several Likud party premiers. He termed the agreement "a victory for terror" that would harm Israel's ability to deter additional terrorist kidnappings in the future and strengthen the hand of the radical Hamas group, which opposes all efforts to make peace with Israel. A similar position was taken by former Mossad chief Meir Dagan who termed the deal "a grave mistake" that will come back to haunt Israel. He revealed that he opposed an almost identical pact when he served as head of the foreign intelligence spy agency in 2009. Public opinion surveys taken in the wake of the prisoner exchange showed around half of the Israelis surveyed expressed fears that many of the freed prisoners would become active terrorists once again. This came as several of the released Palestinian prisoners told reporters they intend to participate in future armed attacks upon Jewish Israeli citizens.

HOW IT WAS CARRIED OUT

The details of the Shalit deal were released by the government several days after it was first announced. The plan featured the freeing of 1,027 Palestinian prisoners in several stages. One third of them had been serving life sentences, most with "blood on their hands." In the initial stage, carried out on October 18th, Gilad Shalit was driven to the Gaza Strip border with Egypt and handed over to Egyptian intelligence officials, who had participated for several years in the German-mediated negotiations to secure his repatriation. After his safe transfer to Egyptian control and following an initial medical check to make sure he was in relatively good health, 477 Palestinian prisoners were set free from Israeli prisons. Another 550 prisoners will gradually be sent back to their family homes before the end of December.

Of the 477 Palestinians freed from jail in the initial stage, 131 were returned to their homes in the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip. In addition to this, another 17 prisoners from Israel, Judea and Samaria were sent to the Hamas-ruled coastal zone for a period of at least three years since they were deemed very likely to return to the terrorist path given their past actions and pronouncements. Another 144 prisoners not originally from the Gaza Strip were sent to the fenced off Palestinian zone for an indefinite period of time. Five Arab-Israeli prisoners were set free to return to their towns and villages, mostly in the Galilee region.

A total of 54 male prisoners were released to Judea, Samaria or the eastern half of Jerusalem with various “legal restrictions” placed on their future movements within those areas. Thirty nine prisoners deemed by Israeli security officials as too dangerous to remain in the region were transferred to several countries abroad. Many Israeli commentators touted this as a major concession on the part of reluctant Hamas leaders. Twenty six female prisoners, some directly involved in terrorist actions that took Israeli civilians lives, were sent to their home areas in Judea, Samaria and several Jerusalem Arab neighborhoods. One woman deemed too dangerous to remain anywhere near Israeli citizens was sent away to nearby Jordan, with orders that she can never cross back over into Israeli-controlled territory.

DANCING IN THE STREETS

After being reunited with his grateful parents in the presence of PM Netanyahu and other senior Israeli officials, Gilad Shalit was taken to his family home in northern Israel. Several senior army officers and Christopher Bigot, the French ambassador to Israel, visited the home in the following days, the latter to convey a message from Nicolas Sarkozy. An Israeli medical examination determined that the freed soldier was suffering from general weakness and a lack of sunshine, but was otherwise in fair condition.

Scenes of jubilation greeted the hundreds of Palestinian prisoners reunited with their families and friends. In a televised speech from his headquarters in Damascus, overall Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal hailed the lopsided exchange deal as a “historic victory” for his extremist group and “for all of the Palestinian people.” However he admitted his “happiness was mixed with sorrow because we were not able to gain the freedom of all the prisoners” originally demanded by the Muslim terrorist group.

Israeli political commentators all agreed that the swap deal boosted the radical Hamas movement while concurrently weakening the more moderate Palestinian Authority headed by Mahmoud Abbas, therefore also harming the already dim prospects that peace talks will resume anytime soon with the reluctant PA. Writing in the *Jerusalem Post* newspaper one day after the prisoner exchange was announced, analyst Yaakov Lappin stated that “The Hamas regime in Gaza will be significantly fortified by the Shalit deal, and see its standing in the Palestinian street, and the wider Arab-Muslim world, boosted.” He added the deal “lessened the prospects” that Palestinians living under Hamas’ harsh rule in the Gaza Strip would rise up and demand greater political and cultural freedoms, as has occurred in many Arab countries this year. Although Iran’s anti-Semitic leaders indicated they opposed the prisoner exchange, since it involved indirect Palestinian negotiations with the hated “Zionist entity,” they were nevertheless said to be glad to see the fundamentalist Muslim movement strengthened against the less religious PA.

Opinions varied in Israel as to whether Gilad Shalit’s freedom would help or harm PM Netanyahu’s chances of winning the next Israeli elections, currently scheduled for early 2013. Many analysts opined if a major terrorist assault were launched by any of the freed Palestinian prisoners, this would undoubtedly hurt his electoral prospects. The prediction came as many families of murdered terrorist victims decried the uneven deal as “dancing on the blood” of their slain relatives. Netanyahu had earlier told his cabinet that “the Jewish people is a special people, responsible for one another” in justifying the lopsided swap. This did not stop many from pointing out that he himself had warned against exchanging convicted terrorists for kidnapped IDF soldiers in his best-selling 1995 book, *Fighting Terrorism: How Democracies Can Defeat Domestic and International Terrorism*. In the book, Netanyahu wrote that releasing scores of terrorists in exchange for Israeli citizens was “a mistake that Israel made over and over again.”

BUILDING AND VOTING

Soon after the Shalit agreement was finalized, PM Netanyahu offered to freeze all government public construction in dozens of Jewish communities located in Judea and Samaria (most home construction there is privately funded). His office said the move was designed to encourage the Palestinian Authority to return to the negotiating table. This came as Quartet peace envoy Tony Blair and other western officials continued their intensive efforts to get the two sides to resume face to face peace talks, which were broken off by the PA in 2008. The background to this effort is the pending UN Security Council vote to approve or reject the PA's unilateral statehood bid, made by Mahmoud Abbas at UN headquarters in New York City in September. Media reports said a vote on the controversial issue is now expected to take place on or around November 11th.

Meanwhile one of the 15 Security Council member countries, Columbia, has launched its own bid to get the opposing sides to negotiate peace terms once again. In fact, the Netanyahu government's public building freeze proposal, which was quickly rejected as inadequate by PA leaders, was delivered to Abbas by Columbia's visiting Foreign Minister. This came as a group of French and Italian lawmakers announced they opposed upgrading the PA's official status in any EU body, saying the Abbas autonomy government does not enforce child labor laws, represses the Palestinian media and engages in other egregious human rights abuses.

A spokesman for Mahmoud Abbas, Nabil Abu Rudeina, announced that the PA leader wishes to hold long overdue Palestinian elections this coming January, which would be the first time they took place since February 2006. The spokesman said the presidential and parliamentary ballots would be held in coordination with the opposition Hamas movement which won the 2006 round even though it strongly opposed the 1990s Oslo peace accords that the Palestinian electoral process was based upon. Some Israeli analysts said the move indicated Abbas expects to win statehood endorsement by the UN General Assembly before then, if not in the Security Council. The Obama administration continues to work feverishly to secure the opposition or neutrality of at least nine nations currently sitting on the 15 member Security Council in order to avoid vetoing the statehood bid, which Iranian leader Ahmad Ahmadinejad insisted would unleash a "new wave of hatred" for the "detested" United States in the Muslim world.

WAR ON TEL AVIV

Diplomatic sources told international journalists in October that Iran will soon begin moving its outlawed uranium enrichment program to an underground facility in Fordow, near to the Iranian Shiite Muslim holy city of Qom. Built inside of a mountain, the facility would be extremely difficult for Israeli or other bombs to destroy in any attack upon Iran's rogue nuclear development program. Currently the regime's main enrichment facility is located near the central town of Natanz.

Meanwhile Ahmadinejad told CNN his country had not deliberately misled the UN's Atomic Energy Agency about the scope and aims of its nuclear program, calling such UN charges "lies." He also condemned the violent killing of Libyan strongman Muammar Qaddafi in late October, implying it was part of a Western plot to dominate the Arab world. This came as Israeli leaders continued to express serious concerns that Syrian dictator Bashar Assad and his repressive regime might lash out at the Jewish state militarily as the internal Sunni Muslim Arab revolt against his minority Alawite regime gains further steam. Assad told reporters in early October that he would attack Israel if NATO forces took any action to halt his brutal crackdown against mostly peaceful protestors in his fractured country, where human rights groups say over 3,000 protestors have been killed since the mass revolt began last March.

Sheik Hassan Nasrallah, the notorious Shiite Lebanese Hizbullah militia leader, threatened to "smash the bones of Israeli soldiers" if war breaks out in the near future, as many analysts warn is a distinct possibility given the fierce upheaval raging in nearby Syria and other parts of the turbulent Middle East. Speaking to supporters in Beirut, the clerical leader warned the next war "will begin in Tel Aviv" adding that his Syrian and Iranian-backed forces "will cross all red lines" and have "many surprises that will change the face of the region" if a new Israel-Hizbullah conflict rocks the area. Israeli

officials admit they are worried that Hizbullah might have acquired chemical weapons, or possibly even nuclear warheads, to launch at Israeli population centers like Tel Aviv. Just before the Hizbullah leader uttered his latest war threats, Israeli Home Front Minister Matan Vilna'i warned that production of gas masks will soon be suspended if the Finance Ministry does not allocate an additional one billion shekels to keep the production lines working. He added that currently there are only enough gas masks available to protect half of the Israeli civilian population.

In these tumultuous days of regional violence, chaos and wars and rumors of wars, it is most reassuring to recall that the Hebrew Prophet Daniel, exiled to Babylon with his Jewish brethren, wrote of a future time when *“One like a Son of Man was coming with the clouds of heaven, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom; that all peoples, nations and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away, and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed (Daniel 7:13-14).*

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

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- **David Dolan's new novel, MILLENNIUM: THE LORD REIGNS is now available for purchase in both printed and electronic forms. Purchase details are posted on his web site, www.ddolan.com His companion first novel THE END OF DAYS is also available for half price if purchased with the new novel.**
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