

Light Brings Salt

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Iron Range Bible Church

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HAMAS ESCALATES ATTACKS AS ISRAEL TURNS 60

By David Dolan

May was an extra special month in the Promised Land as dignitaries from around the world gathered to celebrate Israel's 60 year anniversary as a modern country. Tens of thousand of visiting Jewish and Christian tourists joined international leaders and local citizens in marking the remarkable re-creation of the world's only Jewish state on May 14, 1948—following a nearly two thousand year absence from the regional map.

However the festivities took place amid stepped up Palestinian rocket attacks from the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip, striking nearby Israeli cities and towns and leaving several civilians dead and others severely wounded. The attacks prompted officials to warn that a major military operation could soon be imminent to uproot Hamas from the volcanic coastal zone. At the same time, indirect ceasefire negotiations in Egypt stalled as both sides rejected the other's demands.

As Hamas-allied Shiite Hizbullah forces brought Lebanon to the brink of civil war during May, Ehud Olmert publicly confirmed that Turkey is mediating peace talks between Israel and Hizbullah's main puppet masters, Syria. However many Israeli pundits and politicians expressed deep skepticism over the Prime Minister's motives in announcing he is indirectly talking with the Iranian-backed regime in Damascus, given he may be facing indictment over fresh criminal bribery

allegations. Olmert promised to resign if formal charges are filed against him, prompting several of his cabinet subordinates to prepare for a sudden Kadima party vote to succeed him.

Although Hizbullah handed back portions of Beirut captured in street battles with anti-Syrian Lebanese Sunni Muslim and Druze forces in early May, a subsequent truce accord mediated by the Arab League gave the radical group unprecedented political power in the fractured country—an ominous indication of further anti-Israel attacks to come.

ISLAMIC TERRORISTS PUSH TO THE LIMIT

The weeklong Passover holiday ended in late April with more unprovoked Palestinian terror attacks upon Israeli civilians, this time next to the northern Samaria Arab town of Tulkarm. Two Israeli security guards working inside an industrial zone there were shot dead by Palestinian terrorists who successfully penetrated the zone's security fence. The industrial complex, which brings together Arab and Jewish businesses and workers, was established as a "peace dividend" of the failed Oslo peace accords. Both of the male Jewish victims, in their early 50s, left behind wives and children. The Iranian-backed Islamic Jihad group took initial responsibility for the unprovoked twin murders.

On May 9, a Hamas mortar shell struck a kibbutz near the Gaza Strip, instantly killing 48 year old Jimmy Kedoshim while he was peacefully tending his garden. The father of three was deeply mourned by Kibbutz Kfar Aza residents, and also by many other Israelis

who knew him as an engine powered paragliding champion, having won several national competitions. Kedoshim's wife Anna had been gardening at her husband's side until just minutes before the attack, when she entered their nearby home to escape the afternoon heat.

The following day, more than 20 rockets and mortar shells were fired into areas around the Gaza Strip, causing structural damage but thankfully no additional casualties. Palestinian groups said the barrage was meant to avenge ongoing Israeli army operations against Hamas and Islamic Jihad activists in the Gaza Strip.

Four days later, a 75 year old Israeli woman was instantly killed when a Palestinian Kassam rocket crashed into a house in another Israeli community ten miles east of the Gaza Strip. Shlomit Katz had decided to visit friends living in the western Negev community of Yesha, where the rocket struck.

The untimely deaths of two Israeli civilians, slaughtered when terror suddenly reigned down from the skies while they were simply living their quiet lives, caused additional mourning during the week between Israel's annual Holocaust Remembrance Day and Memorial Day for Fallen Soldiers. Speaking at the official state ceremony on May 6 to commemorate and salute Israel's 22,437 soldiers killed in eight wars, dozens of limited operations and hundreds of terror attacks since 1948, Prime Minister Olmert said Israel's survival in such a hostile region "depends on our willingness and ability to continue to defend ourselves, to battle our enemies when we need to."

MOTHER AND CHILD

As hundreds of foreign dignitaries, including American President George W. Bush, were gathering inside Jerusalem's main convention center to mark David Ben Gurion's historic declaration of independence in Tel Aviv, an Iranian-made Grad rocket struck a shopping mall in Ashkelon. A 24 year old mother was holding her young daughter in her lap while

talking to a doctor at a gynecological clinic, located on the top floor of the four story Hutzot mall, when the rocket came crashing through the roof in the coastal city with 120,000 residents.

The subsequent explosion and falling debris severely injured all three females, along with another female patient sitting in a nearby waiting room. An additional eight people shopping or working in the crowded floors below were wounded, most of them struck by falling debris. Around 87 others were treated for shock as the large building shook from the powerful blast. Officials said the number of wounded and/or dead would have been significantly higher if the Grad rocket had not exploded when striking a thick crossbeam holding up the roof, which they said kept it from crashing through the floors below.

The sinister attack seemed to be the final straw for many Israeli officials, some of whom heard about it while meeting with their foreign counterparts in the early evening of May 14. Defense Minister Ehud Barak toured the scene the following evening, where he told angry residents "You all need to bite you lips, but not for very much longer." Other political and military officials spoke even more bluntly, telling military reporters that a massive IDF operation to oust Hamas leaders from power in the Gaza Strip, and to defeat and dismember the estimated 20,000 Hamas militia force, would likely begin soon after this month's anniversary celebrations are over—meaning possibly at any time now.

As reported in last month's news report, such an operation is projected to be very costly in terms of IDF casualties. On top of top of that, civilian injuries and deaths on both sides could be quite high. Security experts warn that Hamas and Islamic Jihad will probably launch all available Grad and Kassam rockets and mortar shells at Israeli communities in the initial stages of such an operation, which officials admit could mean many hundreds of hits in the area. The rogue Palestinian groups cynically station most of their fighters and store weapons in the middle of their own civilian neighborhoods, meaning hundreds of

Arab non-combatants could be killed in what is projected to be fierce ground combat.

Adding to government concerns is the possibility that Shiite Hizbullah forces in Lebanon might support their fellow Muslim radicals in Gaza by lobbing missiles at Israel from the north, probably under orders from Tehran. Israeli military leaders say the Lebanese group—which emerged politically stronger after launching street battles against anti-Syrian forces in early May—now possesses a massive arsenal around four times larger than at the start of the Second Lebanon War in July 2006, with rockets that can hit as far as Beersheva in the south, along with Israel’s nuclear power plant in nearby Dimona.

GIVE PEACE WITH HAMAS A CHANCE?

It became clear during May that Egyptian-mediated indirect ceasefire talks between Israel and Hamas would probably not succeed after both sides spelled out their conflicting requirements to enact a temporary six-month truce. Analysts said failure to reach a truce pact would quickly lead to intensified conflict, although Hamas officials seemed eager to forestall a crushing IDF operation, meaning they still might reverse their stand and accept Israel’s ceasefire conditions.

Hamas leaders attending the talks, including former Palestinian Authority (PA) Foreign Minister Mahmoud Zahar, rejected Israel’s insistence that abducted IDF soldier Gilad Shalit be set free as part of a temporary truce deal. Hamas officials claimed Israel would not agree to their demand for an immediate opening of all border crossings into the Gaza Strip as soon as an agreement was initialed, but wanted to wait and see if several other terror groups based there, especially the Iranian-controlled Islamic Jihad group, actually stopped firing rockets and mortar shells into Israel over a period of some days. Israel would also not commit to an instant halt to all military operations inside the Palestinian coastal zone, said Hamas leaders.

Media reports said Hamas negotiators who met with Egypt’s main mediator, Intelligence chief Omar Suleiman, were angry to discover that Cairo basically backed the Israeli truce positions over their own. In particular, Egypt wants to see the border crossing at Rafah, which connects the Gaza Strip to Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula, restored to full PA control, as was the case before PA forces were routed in violent clashes with Hamas gunmen last June. Egypt also agreed with Israel that European Union monitors should be stationed at the crossing—another position Hamas rejected. Hamas leaders maintained the conditions were aimed at “further humiliating the Palestinians and aggravating their suffering.”

Israeli Middle East analysts said the American-backed Mubarak regime fears growing Hamas military and economic power in the Gaza Strip, and the radical group’s burgeoning alliance with Iran, almost as much as Israel does. They note that the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement (from which the Arabic acronym HAMAS is derived) was established in 1988 as a direct offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood Movement, which seeks to oust the Mubarak government and replace it with a Islamic fundamentalist administration that would revoke the 1978 Camp David peace treaty with Israel and return to the active path of jihad war against the detested “Zionist entity.” Therefore it is in Cairo’s vested interest to see Israeli forces crush Hamas in the small Palestinian coastal zone, even if Egyptian leaders will dutifully rebuke Jerusalem for any massive IDF action, along with most other Arab states—fanned as usual by strongly anti-Israel Arabic media reports by the Qatar-based Al Jazeera satellite news network.

GIVE PEACE WITH SYRIA A CHANCE?

While indirect ceasefire negotiations with Hamas were struggling in Cairo, it was formally announced in Jerusalem and Damascus that the Muslim nation of Turkey was mediating indirect peace talks between Israel and Syria. Media

reports that secret exploratory negotiations were taking place first surfaced last year, as noted at the time in this monthly news summary, but were either denied or at least not confirmed by officials in all three countries. However a joint decision was made by the parties to place the talks on the public record, with simultaneous announcements made in all three capitals on May 21.

The statement from the Prime Minister's office hit the Israeli public like a bombshell. Many politicians from across the political spectrum charged that Ehud Olmert was attempting to deflect attention away from pending criminal charges against him by agreeing to raise the veil surrounding the controversial peace talks. Indeed, the announcement—which reportedly also shocked and angered Syria's main ally, Iran—was made the very same hour as a court imposed gag order restricting publication of some of the details of the charges against Olmert was lifted. However the Premier's aides maintained the timing was decided upon by the three countries some days before, and had nothing to do with the ongoing police investigation.

Whatever the case, it has been clear from public opinion surveys for some time that a large majority of Israelis do not want their leaders to conduct peace talks with Damascus unless the Iranian-allied regime agrees beforehand to break all ties with Tehran and stop actively supporting the Hizbullah movement that is increasing its chokehold over Lebanon and threatening to rain missiles upon Israeli cities once again.

Various opinion surveys taken in the wake of the dramatic announcement revealed that while a slight majority of Israelis are not opposed in principal to holding peace talks with Syria, a significant majority—over 60%—are not willing to abandon the strategic Golan Heights, from where Israel gets a good portion of its vital national fresh water supplies, not to mention some of its best vineyards and its only snow ski resort (on the Mount Hermon peak that towers above the Heights, which also hosts an irreplaceable military outpost that monitors activity in neighboring countries, up to western Iran).

More disquieting to government officials, a full 35% said in one survey that they were

“moderately to highly likely” to engage in civil disobedience to disrupt any scheduled Israeli land withdrawal from the verdant high ground that sits like a king directly above the Sea of Galilee's eastern shoreline, the city of Tiberius and the entire Upper Galilee region.

GIVE US YOUR WATER!

There was further public consternation when Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Mualem claimed that PM Olmert had already consented to Syria's precondition that he pledge to carry out a complete Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights as part of any final peace accord. Adding even more fuel to the fire, he insisted the Israeli leader had agreed that such an evacuation would have to be right up to the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, which was not the recognized 1948 international border between Israel and Syria, but includes territory Syrian soldiers captured in skirmishes with IDF forces in the run-up to the Six Day War. It was this outlandish demand—which would give Syria legal access under international law to the lake's fresh water—that caused earlier American-mediated peace talks between Israel and Syria to break down in January 2000.

The besieged PM denied that he had given such a pullout commitment, but many Israeli politicians and analysts said they suspected Olmert was not telling the truth. Opposition leader Binyamin Netanyahu, who opinion polls project will return to the premier's chair if new elections are held in the coming months, lashed out at his political rival, saying “Olmert, who is up to his neck in investigations, has no moral or public mandate to conduct fateful negotiations on Israel's future.” He added that if Syrian government claims are true that the PM has already agreed to a pullback up to the Sea of Galilee shoreline, “it would be an unprecedented diplomatic and security abandonment.”