

April 2009 Israel News Review

By [David Dolan](#)

Shalom to All!

Below is this month's news and analysis report covering important developments in Israel and the Middle East during April. It centers this time on the increasingly worrisome role that Iran is playing in destabilizing the region. This was especially illustrated by the cracking of an Iranian-backed terrorist ring operating in the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula, mainly designed to kidnap and kill Israeli tourists while smuggling more Iranian arms into the Gaza Strip. This in turn led to a war of words between Cairo and Tehran. The issue of Iran was also front and center as Binyamin Netanyahu assumed the mantle of Israeli Prime Minister early in the month, along with Israel's increasing economic woes.

A television documentary program that I narrate on camera about the long missing Ark of the Covenant will be broadcast throughout the United States and parts of Canada next weekend over the TBN television network. The network is available on most cable and satellite outlets and via regular broadcast channels in many cities. Called Jehovah's Treasure, it will be screened at 9:00 PM on Saturday evening, May 3, on the West Coast (PST), which is unfortunately midnight back east! However it will also be shown several more times on the TBN network in the coming weeks and months, so if you are interested in seeing it, be looking out for that. It can also be ordered on DVD from the [Zola Levitt ministry](#) based in Dallas Texas. The program contains some lovely footage of Israel and interesting interviews with several Israeli and international archaeologists and scientists who examine the possible locations of the missing ark that once sat in the Holy of Holies at the heart of the ancient Jerusalem Temple.

New Government Takes Charge in Israel

Soon after Binyamin Netanyahu's coalition was sworn in the last day of March, cabinet ministers began reviewing previous government policies covering nearly every critical issue facing the country. The tone was quickly set by the new Prime Minister himself. He told the Knesset during his maiden speech that two overriding issues needed to be tackled right away — the growing economic crisis affecting Israel, which is part of the larger worldwide financial meltdown, and the looming Iranian nuclear threat. This came as statistics were released showing many Israelis are losing their jobs as economic activity decreases.

The menacing Iranian threat was rapidly illustrated as Israeli tourists were warned to stay away from Egypt's Sinai Peninsula during the Passover holidays due to intelligence reports that Iranian-backed terror groups were operating in the area, intending to kidnap and kill Israeli visitors. Two days later, Egyptian officials announced they had uncovered a large Iranian-funded terror network in the Sinai

working to aid the Palestinian Hamas movement in the Gaza Strip.

Meanwhile officials in Cairo accused the extremist Iranian regime of plotting to topple the Mubarak government, in coordination with several other regional powers, including Syria. Iran's notorious president later blasted Israel once again at a UN sponsored racism conference in Switzerland which was boycotted by Israel, the United States and several European countries.

The Palestinians held more fruitless unity talks during the month as terror attacks were launched upon Israeli civilians in several places, leaving two Jewish teenagers dead in one incident. A government sanctioned probe of Israeli army conduct during the Gaza conflict earlier this year concluded that no war crimes had been committed. However that did not stop the United Nations from ordering its own investigation. Meanwhile details were unveiled of a daring IDF operation in the battle-scarred African country of Sudan designed to halt Iranian weapons smuggling into the Gaza Strip.

Netanyahu Back in Power

After weeks of intense political wrangling, Binyamin Netanyahu was finally sworn in as Prime Minister on April 1 in a ceremony held at the official presidential residence in Jerusalem. Israel's latest coalition government won the support of 69 legislators, a comfortable majority in the 120 member Knesset. However this came after a dramatic last minute revolt was launched inside Netanyahu's own Likud party by former Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom, who threatened to withhold backing for the new six party coalition if the Likud was not granted additional cabinet portfolios.

Shalom's nay saying could have proved disastrous since he has many loyal followers inside the Likud who vowed to follow his lead. Shalom and company were particularly irked that the Labor party, which captured only 13 Knesset seats in the February 10 parliamentary elections compared to the Likud's 27, was offered no less than five cabinet positions, most of them senior posts. Netanyahu responded that the sweet deal was made necessary by Labor's reluctance to join his coalition unless the once dominant party was granted substantial representation in the new coalition alignment.

In the end, Netanyahu solved the cliffhanger by granting Shalom no less than three cabinet titles: the honorary position of Vice Premier, plus Minister for Regional Cooperation (which some noted was fairly spurious since only three regional countries have diplomatic ties with Israel), and Minister for Negev and Galilee Development. However Netanyahu made clear that another politician who was also named Vice Premier — former Armed Forces Chief Moshe Ya'alon, dismissed by Ariel Sharon in 2005 for opposing the then pending Israeli civilian and military withdrawal from the Gaza Strip — would be the one to officially take hold of the government's reigns when the Premier is out of the country.

In all, Netanyahu doled out no less than 30 cabinet ministerial positions, along with seven deputy portfolios, many of them newly created. This meant that nearly half of his legislative backers were somehow positioned around the crowded cabinet table — a fact that opposition politicians condemned as irresponsible and unnecessarily expensive.

Another last minute drama involved the Labor party. Nearly half of its 13 members, none of them offered cabinet positions, threatened to split from the party if leader Ehud Barak joined Netanyahu's coalition government. In the end, the sitting Defense Minister was able to persuade all of them to back his decision to jump on board, explaining he was doing so for "national security" reasons. In other words, he wanted his center-left party to retain its position as a major player in all security issues, and especially to have a significant say in deciding whether or not Israel launches a military offensive against Iran's threatening nuclear program in the coming months or years.

Target Iran

In his maiden speech as Premier given just before midnight on March 31, Binyamin Netanyahu spelled out his main policy aims and concerns. He stated that "these are irregular times" which would necessitate unusual actions. He said Israel "seeks peace with the entire Arab and Muslim world," while also noting that the Jewish state "continues to be threatened by the forces of Islamic extremism."

"Israel is faced with two tests: an economic crisis and a security crisis. The source of both crisis situations is neither our past actions nor past mistakes...but our current actions will determine the results of them."

Netanyahu stated quite emphatically that the Iranian nuclear threat is the greatest challenge facing the country, being no less than an existential one. He vowed to deal decisively with the issue during his time in office, hinting that drastic military action might be necessary if international diplomatic efforts to successfully deal with Iran's nuclear program fail.

"The Jewish people have experience with dictators, and therefore cannot overestimate megalomaniac dictators who threaten to destroy it," the Premier told his Knesset colleagues, adding that the very worst thing for both Israel and the entire world would be for "a radical regime to obtain nuclear weapons." He made clear that Israel has nothing against the religion of Islam per se, but is only concerned with "the spread of extremist Islam in the region and the world," which he noted also "threatens moderate Arab countries" in the region.

Netanyahu's pledge to take significant action during his time in office was dramatically amplified in a pointed comment he made during an interview with the American Atlantic Monthly magazine, published in April. The new Premier

said he backs the Obama administration's policy shift to engage the Iranian regime in dialogue "as long as the goal remains the swift ending of Iran's nuclear program." But he also implied that military action might be the best way to halt the threatening program, saying that "how you achieve this goal is less important than achieving it."

Indirectly referring to the chilling comments made in the past by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad that violent upheaval in the Middle East could end with the coming of the Madhi, a medieval Shiite cleric who, according to Shiite religious tradition, is supposed to appear again in public in the last days and transform the world into an Islamic paradise after a final worldwide apocalypse, Netanyahu added that "you don't want a messianic apocalyptic cult controlling atomic bombs."

Mad Ahmadinejad

Just how dangerous Shiite-ruled Iran is becoming was vividly demonstrated by several highly disturbing things that occurred during late March and April. First came reports in the Iranian government controlled media that Ahmadinejad had told his Syrian counterpart Bashar Assad in a phone conversation that Israel and the United States were "weakening with Allah's help." He was said to have added that "the strong camp of friendly countries such as Iran and Syria are on their way to victory, with regional conditions working in favor of the Muslim countries and against the Zionist regime and its allies." Assad reportedly responded that Syria and Iran are "in the same fortress," which some Israeli analysts viewed as a pledge of military support from Damascus if Iran's nuclear program comes under Israeli attack.

Speaking at a controversial international UN racism conference convened in Geneva in mid April, the rogue Iranian leader drew swift condemnations for equating the fight against racism with his regime's strident vow to annihilate Israel. "Governments must be encouraged and supported in their fight to eradicate barbaric racism. Efforts must also be made to put an end to Zionism," he said. As he has done many times before, Ahmadinejad averred that Israeli leaders "use the pretext of Jewish suffering" under Hitler to persecute the Palestinian people. He went on to denounce the United States over its successful effort six years ago to topple Saddam Hussein's brutal regime in Iraq, maintaining that the superpower "arrogantly rules the world" by using its veto power at the United Nations, and other nefarious methods.

The Israeli Tourism Ministry issued an emergency alert on April 7 warning Israelis to stay away from the nearby Egyptian-ruled Sinai Peninsula during the Passover holidays, due to intelligence indications that Iranian-backed terror groups were plotting to attack Israelis there as terrorists have in the past, possibly even kidnapping some for ransom.

Although similar warnings are issued almost every year, this time the government made clear that it possessed more substantial evidence of danger than ever before: specifically that agents working for the Lebanese Shiite Hizbullah militia were planning to avenge the 2008 assassination in Damascus of the group's senior terrorist planner, Imad Mugniyeh, which Hizbullah leaders blamed on Israeli operatives.

A mere two days later, Egyptian official's announced that a major Hizbullah-linked terrorist ring had been discovered and dismantled in the Sinai. The group of 49 terrorist operatives were said to include Egyptian Bedouins, Lebanese nationals, Palestinians and even some agents from Sudan. They were indeed charged with plotting to destabilize the Mubarak government by kidnapping and killing Israeli tourists and other international visitors from nations considered hostile to radical Islam.

Several days earlier, another cell comprised of 15 Egyptian Bedouins was apprehended in a Sinai village. Egyptian officials discovered high grade explosives and shotgun shells hidden in their homes.

Terror Again

Israeli officials said interrogators later learned that among the attacks being planned by the Sinai-based terrorist cells was a major assault upon Jewish civilians in Tel Aviv. They were also gearing up to attack Israeli vessels traveling in the Suez Canal, and to smuggle additional weapons and foreign fighters into the nearby Gaza Strip.

These disturbing revelations came soon after details emerged of a daring Israeli military strike last January against an Iranian arms convoy in the troubled African nation of Sudan, due south of Egypt. Israeli security sources said dozens of F-15 and F-16 warplanes and drone aircraft took part in the long range mission which intercepted Iranian weapon supplies on their way to aid Hamas forces then battling the IDF in the Gaza Strip. The weapons, including Fajr rockets and some 500 tons of explosives, were reportedly destroyed while being transported on trucks in northern Sudan.

Security sources in Cairo stated that all the apprehended Sinai terrorists admitted to being backed by Iran, which Egypt's pro-western government believes is trying to wrest control over the entire Middle East with the aid of its regional allies, including Syria, Hizbullah and Hamas.

The public charge of Iranian induced terrorist activity sparked a verbal war between the Mubarak government, Iran and the Lebanese Hizbullah movement. This came after officials in Cairo charged that the Iranian regime had ordered its Lebanese Hizbullah surrogate force to step up attempts to overthrow the Mubarak government. The veteran Egyptian President himself spoke out on the

issue in the strongest possible terms, warning Iranian leaders on April 24 that they would “face Egypt’s wrath” if they continued to meddle in Egyptian affairs.

Hizbullah’s clerical leader Sheik Hassan Nasrallah again attacked Egypt’s peace treaty with Israel, but denied any involvement in such a plot to depose the Mubarak government. However he did boast that his extremist Shiite group had sent “a senior representative” to the Sinai to help funnel weapons and additional fighters to the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip. Two days later, the state-run Al Gomhouria newspaper in Cairo poured scorn upon Nasrallah, calling him an “Iranian agent bandit and veteran criminal monkey sheik,” adding pointedly that “if you threaten our sovereignty you will burn!”

Israeli security analysts said the unusually blunt words from Cairo showed that Mubarak has had enough of Iranian interference in his country. They said he directly gave the order to publicize the fact that Iranian-backed terror cells had been apprehended, adding that this gives further proof that moderate pro-western Arab countries in the Middle East will be privately satisfied if Israel carries out a military strike upon Iran’s nuclear program, even as they publicly protest it.

Meanwhile several terror attacks were undertaken by Palestinians against Israeli Jews during the month. An axe-wielding Palestinian entered the Jewish settlement of Bat Ayin just south of Jerusalem on April 2, murdering a 16-year-old teenage boy and seriously wounding a 7-year-old boy in his skull. The terrorist managed to escape the scene. Two days later, a 15 year old armed Bedouin girl was shot dead as she attempted to enter a Negev army base. An unmanned remote controlled Palestinian fishing boat laden with explosives was intercepted three days later off of the Gaza coast. A knife wielding Palestinian teenager was shot and killed later that same week as he attempted to infiltrate a Jewish community near Hebron.

Don't Do It!

Netanyahu government officials were undoubtedly not too thrilled to hear both American Vice President Joe Biden and Defense Secretary Robert Gates say during April that an Israeli military strike against Tehran’s nuclear program would not be welcomed by the new Obama administration. US logistical support for such a difficult operation could be crucial to its success, say many analysts. The issue is expected to be front and center when PM Netanyahu meets with the US President and other senior American officials in May.

Israeli and American security officials also seem to be at loggerheads over how close Iran is to actually possessing nuclear weapons capability. The latest Israeli assessment was issued by Army Intelligence chief Amos Yadlin in late March. He told a Knesset committee that Iran “has already crossed the technological threshold” necessary to construct a nuclear warhead, but added it has “probably

not done so yet” in order to stave off additional UN sanctions against Tehran. He stated ominously that the radical Shiite regime, with North Korean assistance, has completed development of long range Shihab 3 surface to surface missiles capable of carrying such warheads to Israel and beyond.

Naturally enough, Israel is not just sitting around waiting for the Iranian threat to actually mutate into a nuclear holocaust. The advanced Arrow Two anti-ballistic missile system, built with substantial American assistance, was tested again on April 7. It successfully intercepted and destroyed a missile fired by an Israeli warplane that was designed to mimic the capabilities and dimensions of Iran’s Shihab missile. The test was jointly conducted with the American Missile Defense Agency from an air force base near Ashdod.

Meanwhile it was announced in Washington that the US and Israel will conduct the most extensive joint anti missile tests ever later this year. The tests will integrate the sophisticated Arrow system with the advanced American X Band radar system that the Pentagon sent to the Negev desert region last year, along with the sea-based Aegis anti ballistic missile defense system deployed on US warships which regularly patrol the region.

It was also announced in Jerusalem that the largest ever Home Front defense drills will be conducted throughout the country in early June. Commander Colonel Hilik Sofer told Israeli media outlets that the military would “have to rely on the population itself” to help defend the country in the next major war, likely to involve missile strikes on all parts of the land. He said that while the mass drill was mainly designed to test Israel’s preparedness and capabilities, it would also serve as a necessary reminder to the civilian population that “war can happen at any time, with the entire country instantly transformed into a battlefield with no front lines and no safe places.”

As continuing strong military ties between Israel and America were further highlighted during the month, Britain’s Foreign Secretary David Miliband told Parliament in London on April 21 that “recent events in Gaza” were prompting a review of British weapons sales to Israel to ensure that they were “not being used against the Palestinian people.”

Monetary Woes

During his inaugural speech, PM Netanyahu noted that Israel’s formerly sizzling economy — producing one of the hottest stock markets on earth — is now struggling to stay afloat, along with the rest of the world. He vowed to work night and day to put the country’s financial course back on track. Analysts say this important issue is of particular concern to the new Premier, given that his tough policy changes as Finance Minister in the Sharon government earlier this decade were largely credited for the powerful economic expansion that lasted over five years, only coming to a sudden crashing end in the wake of the American

financial tsunami that struck shores worldwide during the second half of 2008.

Netanyahu's economic comments came just days before the Finance Ministry announced that over 20,000 Israelis lost their jobs during March, bringing the total of pink slips to over 100,000 since the meltdown began last September. That amounts to nearly 7% of the usual workforce, with the Bank of Israel forecasting that the jobless rate will probably go above 8% by the end of this year, while the economy shrinks some 1.5%. Although a small percentage of March's job losses were expected seasonal layoffs, most workers were dismissed in the hard hit hi tech and manufacturing industries. Economic analyst's note that both sectors rely heavily on exports to the United States and Europe — each struggling with its own serious financial woes.

Netanyahu quickly announced plans to help stimulate the faltering Israeli economy by launching large government spending projects. Like in the United States and elsewhere, the projects will focus on improving the country's road and other transport infrastructures, along with the construction of several new desalination and electric power plants. Drilling will also be expanded to discover and exploit new gas and oil deposits both inside the small country and off of the Mediterranean coast. Meanwhile new Welfare Minister Isaac Herzog pledged to increase government spending for the country's impoverished poor and homeless sectors. A portion of the designated funds will flow to several large non profit organizations that are increasingly struggling to meet mushrooming needs all over the land.

With increasingly strong shock waves engulfing the region and the world, it appears that the time when Israel's Messiah will reign in glory from Jerusalem is drawing very close!

“And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom that all the 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 that will not be destroyed” (Daniel 7:14).