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More rockets were fired into Israel from the Gaza Strip during September as American President Barack Obama prodded Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu to quickly begin final status peace negotiations. This action was deemed extremely risky by many Israeli political commentators, who warned that intense White House pressure for what most termed a premature resumption of peace talks could easily backfire and help ignite a new violent Palestinian attrition war backed by Iran.

The issue of Israeli home building in the disputed territories and parts of Jerusalem remained front and center during the month, as the Palestinians continued to echo Obama's demand for a total settlement freeze before they would sit down at the negotiating table. Strong opposition to such action was expressed by many legislators inside Netanyahu's Likud party, while rallies were held in the capital city to protest against the proposed building suspension.

Extremist Iranian leaders continued to speak of Israel's destruction during the month as they simultaneously denounced escalating calls in the West for stepped up economic sanctions designed to pressure them to halt their nefarious nuclear program. This came as Obama joined European leaders in revealing that Iran has been secretly building a second uranium enrichment plant capable of supplying fuel for nuclear bombs.

Three weeks before, PM Netanyahu flew clandestinely to Moscow to urge Russian leaders to stop supplying advanced anti aircraft missiles to Tehran. The Israeli Premier was said to be heartened by the Obama administration's subsequent announcement that Israel would be integrated into a new NATO anti-missile shield designed to protect regional and European countries from Iranian long range missiles.

Tensions remained high during September between Israel and Lebanon, where reports emerged that Iran has taken complete military control over the menacing Shiite Hizbullah militia. In Beirut, the anti-Syrian political block failed to form a new government, which analysts said might result in fresh sectarian violence in the troubled land, and possibly another Hizbullah rocket assault upon Israel.

On the brighter side, early and heavy rains fell in parts of northern Israel during the Rosh Ha Shana New Year weekend. Nearly two and half inches poured down on the Golan Heights, whose streams feed into the severely depleted Sea of Galilee below — Israel's main fresh water reservoir. The amount was above the annual average rainfall for all of September and October. Lesser but still significant amounts fell in and around Jerusalem, and also along the coast from Nahariya in the north to Ashkelon, with some precipitation even falling in the arid Negev Desert. Israeli meteorologists are predicting an above average winter rainfall due mainly to El Niño conditions currently prevailing in the eastern Pacific Ocean, over half a world away.

Too Eager by Half

Described by the American Associated Press news agency as “bristling with impatience,” President Barack Obama hosted a tripartite meeting with Binyamin Netanyahu and Mahmoud Abbas on September 22 at Manhattan’s renowned Waldorf Astoria hotel. According to the AP report, the US leader “won an awkward, stone-faced handshake, but no other apparent progress beyond a promise to talk about more talks.”

Israeli Defense Minister and Labor party leader Ehud Barak sat in on the meeting, as did Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, who heads the right wing Israel Beiteinu party. American Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who was publicly tasked by Obama with following up on the summit meeting to get the two sides back to the peace table by mid October, attended as well, along with special Middle East envoy George Mitchell, who brokered the New York meeting with great difficulty.

Israel’s Ha’aretz newspaper quoted a “senior US official” who reported that “Obama strongly expressed his impatience” to the two regional leaders over his constantly thwarted efforts to get the negotiating process moving again. The unnamed American source described the closed three way summit meeting as “business like” but not cordial. This was apparently reflected in the short and terse handshake between Abbas and Netanyahu in front of cameras after the short parlay ended. Obama “scolded Netanyahu and Abbas” said the Israeli newspaper when he stated to reporters after the 45 minute meeting ended that “We’ve had enough talks. We need to end this conflict. There is a window of opportunity but it might shut.”

In their own comments, both the Israeli and Palestinian leaders reiterated their desire to unthaw the frozen peace process, but not at any price. Israel would continue to build Jewish homes in the eastern half of its capital city, Netanyahu made clear during several subsequent media interviews — as he has many times since coming to power in early April. Abbas again demanded a total cessation of such construction, although he did not unequivocally state that he would refuse to attend renewed American-sponsored peace talks if such a complete halt was not ordered by the veteran Israeli leader. Indeed, both politicians agreed to send delegations to Washington the last week of September to hold more discussions that could lead to renewed peace negotiations, although most Israeli and Palestinian commentators doubted the meetings would produce any breakthroughs.

Senior Israeli officials were said to be happy to hear a slight but important change in tone coming from the American President concerning the disputed Jewish communities. Obama told reporters he held important talks with the leaders about “restraining” settlement building. He had earlier used such words as “complete halt” and “stop” when calling for a construction curb. Palestinian officials noticed the difference as well, and expressed their chagrin.

Political Suicide

Israeli analysts said it should be abundantly clear to both Obama and Abbas that they are

essentially asking Binyamin Netanyahu to commit political suicide by demanding a halt to Jewish home building in the contested territories, especially in a city that has been the center of Jewish life and religious devotion for over 3,000 years. There is little doubt that his coalition government, if not his own Likud party, would split apart if he ever agreed to stop all construction within eyesight of Judaism's holiest ground on earth. In fact, some pointed out that the Premier does not even possess the legal authority to issue a building ban anywhere inside of Jerusalem's municipal boundaries, since the eastern half of the city, captured from Jordan in 1967, was formally annexed by the Knesset in 1980. "It's the same as saying no new homes can be built in Tel Aviv — it is not within the national government's sphere of powers to halt construction once local building permits have been issued," noted one Jerusalem city council member.

Commentators also reminded the public that precisely ten years ago, Netanyahu lost his government, and then early elections, when he reluctantly caved in to Bill Clinton's persistent arm twisting to carry out an army withdrawal from Hebron. Netanyahu apparently needed no such reminder of the lowest point in his long political career.

Of course, it is not only the Israeli leader that risks his political skin — if not his actual life — by bowing to the President's adamant (some also term it arrogant) insistence that peace talks must be resumed at this time, whether the opposing sides are ready or not. With the radical Islamic Hamas movement lording it over one-third of his people in the Gaza Strip, and constantly threatening to violently seize control of the rest of his Palestinian Authority zones of control, Abbas is also hardly in any position at present to reach a final peace accord with Israel. After all, the Hamas founding charter makes abundantly clear that peace talks with "the Zionist Entity" will never be considered legitimate by the group, since a Jewish state simply cannot exist on land long governed by Islamic rulers, as clearly stated in the Hadith, Islam's venerated "oral tradition."

Indeed, Abbas was harshly criticized in the regional Arab media for simply shaking hands with Netanyahu before a total settlement freeze was in place. Hamas strongly condemned the fact that he even went to New York to meet with Obama and Netanyahu. This may help explain why the PA leader told the London-based Al Hayat newspaper one day after the summit ended that he cannot resume peace talks at this time, claiming "there is no common ground for discussion" with Israeli leaders.

Given these domestic realities, Israeli political analysts said it is nearly 100% certain that peace negotiations will not resume next month, nor anytime soon after that. And many continue to blame Obama himself for this new impasse, since it was politically impossible for Abbas to demand anything less than the new US leader concerning the settlement issue, even though the PA had participated in peace negotiations under the previous American President and former PM Ehud Olmert without such a building ban being in place. Therefore it was also a pre-condition that Netanyahu — leader of a more right wing coalition government — could not possibly accept, as should have also been evident to American officials. Some asked why the Obama administration did not digest this reality. A few even speculated that some Democratic Party leaders may have actually been looking for an excuse to weaken US ties with Israel, and so deliberately backed

Netanyahu into a corner. Whatever the case, several commentators warned that if a new wave of Palestinian violence erupts due to freshly dashed hopes, many Israelis will blame the American leader for it.

Strong Words at the United Nations

During his speech at the United Nation's General Assembly annual opening session, President Obama said several things that were well received by attending Israeli leaders, even if he did again refer to the contested Jewish communities as "illegal." He called for peace talks to be re-launched "without preconditions," which is the position espoused by PM Netanyahu.

Israeli officials were especially heartened to hear the American leader call for the Palestinians to accept Israel's legitimacy "as a Jewish state." This has become one of PM Netanyahu's main themes over the past few months. He frequently points out that the conflict began two decades before Israel captured Jordan's self-annexed West Bank, the Golan Heights and the Gaza Strip and started building homes in those locations. It was the Arab Muslim world's rejection of the idea of a Jewish ruled state that was behind their military attacks in 1947-49 and again in 1967 and 1973, he insists.

However Palestinian leaders replied to Obama's recognition call in their usual manner. Echoing the position officially adopted at the PLO Fatah convention in August, senior PA negotiator Saib Erekat told reporters it was "unacceptable." Hamas issued a ridiculous statement claiming "Palestine has never been Jewish land" (this came just days after several new archeological discoveries were made public, including the uncovering of the oldest known synagogue north of Tiberius, dated to around 50 BC, containing a carved replica of the ancient Jerusalem Temple menorah).

The Israeli UN delegation was said to be less than thrilled when the American President again implied that they are somehow not really interested in achieving a final peace accord with the Palestinians. Obama stated that "the United States does Israel no favors when we fail to couple an unwavering commitment to its security with an insistence that Israel respect the legitimate claims and rights of the Palestinians."

Commentators pointed out that Israeli leaders accepted the UN's own 1947 Partition Plan which would have led to a Palestinian state being created alongside nascent Israel the following year. In the 1990s they signed the Oslo peace accords with Yasser Arafat and then pulled IDF forces out of most Palestinian cities and towns as peace negotiations continued, and uprooted 21 Jewish communities in the Gaza Strip and four in northern Samaria in 2005. The Oslo accords were rapidly violated when Palestinian terror attacks resumed in 1994, and the Gaza withdrawal was followed by renewed Hamas rocket bombardments of Israeli civilian centers. In other words, it is hardly Israel's fault that the Palestinian people have not been enjoying "legitimate rights" in their own sovereign state over the past 61 years.

Netanyahu Blasts Iran

The UN General Assembly was the scene for two bizarre, if not outrageous, appearances at its opening session. The first was by Libya's notorious dictator, Col Muammar Gaddafi — newly popular in America after warmly welcoming the convicted Lockerbie terrorist plotter back to Tripoli. He dramatically ripped up a copy of the UN Charter while calling the world body a "terrorism council" — likened by many commentators to the pot calling the kettle black. On the issue of Israel, Gaddafi had yet another brilliant idea to propose (he earlier called for the Jewish state to be moved to Alaska). He said a new country should be created to replace Israel which he cleverly named "Isratine." It would encompass all Arabs and Jews living in the land today, along with several million Palestinians currently residing as refugees in nearby countries. Of course, that means it would be yet another Arab state since Muslim citizens would outnumber Jews.

The second speech, by Iran's infamous President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was far more insidious, prompting a delegation walkout by a number of countries including Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Germany, Italy and France (American and Canadian delegations had earlier left the hall before the Shiite leader was called to the podium). Apparently not humbled by the crisis engulfing his own country after he was returned to power last June via obviously rigged elections, Ahmadinejad launched into his usual anti-Western and anti-Semitic tirades and holocaust denials. He maintained that a "small minority" — his code words for Jews — secretly rules the world, controlling most of its political, cultural and financial systems. He vowed to lead the fight against this alleged cartel, apparently when he acquires nuclear weapons capability and can wipe out around half the Jews on earth who currently reside in Israel.

The Israeli Prime Minister focused his allotted time before the General Assembly to speak on the issue that he considers by far to be the most pressing one his country is facing — Iran's menacing nuclear threat and its calls for Israel's annihilation. Of course he also spoke of the frozen peace process, vowing that he was sincerely ready to return to the negotiation table at any time if the Palestinians will attend without setting preconditions.

Referring to the Iranian President's absurd Holocaust denials, Netanyahu dramatically held up two original documents: The minutes of the infamous 1942 Wannsee Nazi conference where Adolph Hitler's mass slaughter of European Jews was mapped out, and the blueprints for the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camps signed by Hitler's deputy, Heinrich Himmler (the PM was given the documents in August by German officials to place in Jerusalem's Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum). He then chastised those UN delegations that remained in the chamber when Ahmadinejad issued his fresh "anti-Semitic rants," saying "For those who stayed, I say on behalf of the Jewish people — my people and decent people everywhere — have you no shame? No decency? What a disgrace, what a mockery of the charter of the UN."

The Israeli leader then spoke directly about Iran's menacing nuclear program, insisting it could ignite a new global conflagration. He starkly warned that "If the most primitive fanaticism can acquire the most deadly weapons, the march of history can be reversed.

This is why the greatest threat facing the world today is the marriage between religious fanaticism and weapons of mass destruction.... Is the UN up to that?"

The Plot Thickens

Just one day after PM Netanyahu's dramatic speech — denounced as over the top by some Israeli commentators but enthusiastically applauded by most — President Obama announced that Western powers possess concrete evidence that Iran has been secretly building a second uranium enrichment facility in an underground mountain bunker since 2006. The hidden Iranian facility, some 100 miles southeast of Tehran, could produce enough uranium for at least two nuclear bombs per year beginning in 2010, said security experts.

More ominously, the US leader stated for the first time that the Iranian regime is apparently aiming to construct nuclear weapons. Obama again expressed his opinion that Iran "has the right for peaceful nuclear power," but added that "the size of the facility is inconsistent with a peaceful program."

Two days later, American Defense Secretary Robert Gates told ABC News that it was his "personal opinion that the Iranians have the intention of having nuclear weapons." He characterized the hidden facility as "part of a pattern of deception and lies on the part of the Iranians from the very beginning with respect to their nuclear program."

Ahmadinejad denounced Obama's revelation (the White House later confirmed press reports that Western leaders have possessed intelligence about the clandestine facility for several years) and bellicosely averred that his country would "cut off any hand that dares to attack us." Two week before, former Israeli Deputy Defense Minister Ephraim Sneh of the Labor Party told the Jerusalem Post that "Israel will be compelled to attack Iran's nuclear facilities if Western powers do not impose serious sanctions against Teheran by the end of 2009."

The American leader's comments were followed by even stronger remarks from British PM Gordon Brown and French President Nicolas Sarkozy. Stating that Iran has been engaging in "serial deception," Brown warned Iranian leaders that "the time has come to draw a line in the sand. We will not let this matter rest." Sarkozy said Tehran has until December to "put everything on the table" or face new economic sanctions. Russian President Medvedev called the revelation "disturbing" and even China, which receives large oil supplies from Iran and usually quietly backs the Shiite regime, said Iran must cooperate with the UN Atomic Energy Agency over its demands to inspect the hidden facility. Three days later, Iran test fired missiles said to be capable of striking Israel, and held country-wide war games.

Meanwhile Israeli leaders strongly denounced a recent UN report condemning IDF military actions during last winter's clash with Hamas forces in the Gaza Strip. The Gladstone Report, named after the South African judge who conducted the probe, focused on the contention that Israel had committed "war crimes" during the conflict, while

barely mentioning the years of unprovoked Hamas rocket attacks upon Israel that sparked off the “Cast Lead” operation. Netanyahu called the report a “travesty”, noting that “not one UN resolution was passed over the years condemning Hamas rocket attacks deliberately aimed at Israeli civilians.” Israeli officials said if the issue is brought to the World Court in the Netherlands, as many suggest, their ability to militarily disrupt terror plots and actions could be severely hampered. This would also affect many other countries attempting to thwart terror groups operating against them, including some Islamic nations like Egypt and Indonesia.

Closer to home, Iran’s main Palestinian surrogate force, the Islamic Jihad terror group, fired a series of rockets into Israeli territory during September, causing no deaths or injuries but prompting Israeli return missile strikes upon underground weapons smuggling tunnels along the Gaza border with Egypt. The Air Force intercepted and killed three Islamic Jihad members attempting to fire additional rockets on September 25. The Palestinian group vowed harsh revenge against Israeli targets, which was quickly followed by fresh violence in Jerusalem where some 150 Muslims threw stones at Jewish worshiper at the Temple Mount. The action came just hours before the onset of Judaism’s holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur.

Judaism’s annual autumn holy days, including the upcoming Feast of Tabernacles celebration, serve to remind Israelis that they have a God who loves and watches over them while restoring them to their ancient homeland, as He promised to do many centuries ago.

“Thus says the Lord God, ‘I will gather you from the peoples and assemble you out of the countries among which you have been scattered, and I shall give you the land of Israel’” (Ezekiel 11:17).