

IRAN

THE current situation between Iran and the US is very tense, primarily because of Iran's pursuit of nuclear power. But secondly because of its brand of Islamic fundamentalism that it exports - as in Sudan, Iraq, Lebanon, and in Israel; and its threats to all non-fundamentalist regimes throughout the Middle East.

US 'DRONE' AIRCRAFT SPY ON IRAN

US has been flying surveillance drones over Iran to seek evidence of nuclear weapons programs and to detect weaknesses in air defences, according to the *Washington Post*. (13 Feb 05)

News sources quote officials as saying the small, pilotless planes, penetrating Iranian airspace from US military facilities in Iraq, use radar, video, still photography and air filters designed to pick up traces of nuclear activity to gather information that is not accessible to satellites.

Aerial espionage is standard in military preparations for an eventual air attack and is also employed as a tool for intimidation.

"The Iranian government, using Swiss channels in the absence of diplomatic relations with Washington, formally protested the illegal incursions."

IRAN WARNS U.S. NOT TO 'PLAY WITH FIRE'

IRAN has warned the US not to attack its nuclear facilities, and said talks with European nations might produce a deal to defuse the dispute over its alleged ambitions to build atomic weapons.

"They know our capabilities. We have clearly told the Europeans to tell the Americans not to play with fire," an Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman said, referring to Washington's refusal to rule out the use of force.

He said Iran was determined to continue its nuclear energy program despite pressure from Washington, which accuses Tehran of pursuing atomic weapons and says it does not rule out any option to stop it acquiring them.

France, Britain and Germany, on behalf of the European Union, have been trying to persuade Iran to scrap potential weapons-related activities in return for economic incentives. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said last week Tehran must accept terms offered by the European Union or be referred to the UN Security Council for possible sanctions.

Iran denies US accusations that it is building bombs under cover of a civilian nuclear energy program, and says it would never permanently end its disputed nuclear activities.

"IRAN PREPARES FOR INVASION"

FEB 19. According to the *Globe and Mail*, Iran has begun publicly preparing for a possible US attack. "Iran would respond within 15 minutes to any attack by the US or any other country," said an official.

Tensions between Iran and the United States have increased over Iran's pursuit of nuclear technology. The Pentagon said recently that it has upgraded its battle plans for Iran — an act it described as routine. Iranian authorities say they, too, are preparing for war.

Iran's Basiji militia, who were deployed in human-wave attacks during the Iran-Iraq war, is at present seven million strong. *Globe* says that Iran is seeking to mobilize militia recruits as it plans for the kind of warfare that has plagued US troops in Iraq.

How much of the activity is actual mobilization and how much is propaganda is not clear. Right now it's a psychological war. Iran wants to raise the stakes for the US by highlighting the possible cost of an attack.

Within minutes of any attack, Iran's air and sea forces could threaten oil shipments in the Persian Gulf or the Gulf of Oman. Allied Hizb'allah militia in Lebanon could launch attacks on Israel. And Iran could escalate the war by attacking US interests in Azerbaijan, Central Asia or Turkey.

Many analysts say Iran's most powerful card is its influence in Iraq, where Iraqis who spent years in Iran as exiles are about to assume control of the government. "If Iran wanted, it could make Iraq a hell for the United States," Hamid al-Bayati, Iraq's deputy foreign minister, said in a recent interview.

- IRAQ - SHI'ITE BLOC WINS ELECTION - SUNNIS MARGINALIZED

FEB 13. A Shi'ite Islamist bloc won Iraq's first multi-party election for half a century on Jan. 30, sealing the political resurgence of the long-oppressed majority, and sidelining the restive Sunni Arab minority.

The Shi'ite United Iraqi Alliance took around 48% of the vote, but that left it six or seven seats short of a majority in parliament.

A powerful Kurdish alliance came second with 25%, while a grouping led by interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, a secular Shi'ite, came third with nearly 14%.

Few Sunni Arabs took part in the voting, which means the minority that has traditionally ruled modern Iraq and held a privileged position under Saddam, will have just a handful of seats and little political clout.

With no bloc gaining dominance on its own, there has already been furious horse-trading to try to strike deals. The Shi'ite bloc now has not only got to hold together as a group, but also form an alliance with others."

In Washington, President Bush congratulated the Iraqi people "for defying terrorist threats and setting their country on the path of democracy and freedom."

The 275-member National Assembly must agree on a president and two vice-presidents by a two-thirds majority. Those three officials will then agree on a prime minister and cabinet, and their choices must be approved by a majority in the assembly.

CONSTITUTION TO BE DRAFTED

ONE of the main tasks of the National Assembly this year is to oversee the drafting of a constitution, which must be approved by a referendum. If the Sunni Arabs are largely shut out of government, they could potentially veto the constitution, causing political deadlock.

In other signs of tension ahead, Kurds in the ethnically mixed city of Kirkuk erupted in celebrations after results showed them well ahead in the provincial vote — an outcome that will anger Arabs and Turkmen, who also lay claim to the city.

Sunni insurgents who have been attacking US troops and Iraqi security forces and officials, have also now turned on Shi'ites, raising fears of sectarian civil war in Iraq.

ISRAEL & THE PALESTINIANS

SHARM EL-SHEIK:

“SUMMIT OF HOPE”

AFTER four years of bloodshed, Israeli and Palestinian leaders promised to halt attacks on each other's peoples and to renew their commitment to the internationally-backed roadmap peace plan.

“We are looking forward to replacing the language of bullets and bombs with the language of good dialogue,” declared PA President Mahmoud Abbas. Israeli PM Ariel Sharon concurred: “For the first time in a long time there exists in our region, hope for a better future for us and our grandchildren.”

At a summit hosted by Egypt on Feb 8, Sharon and Abbas were joined by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Jordan's King Abdullah.

Speaking after the summit meeting in the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheik, Ariel Sharon said Israel is determined to “seize the opportunity” for peace, and he asked the Palestinians to prove that they are willing to compromise. “Israel will fulfill its commitments in the peace process, and it expects the Palestinians to do the same ... deeds, not words, matter most to Israel.”

Mr Sharon assured the Palestinians that Israel does not want to rule them, nor does it want to dictate the Palestinians' future. Addressing his own people, he again mentioned the need for compromise: “We need to make some painful steps, but we should not miss this opportunity to try to fulfill what we've been yearning for ... security, peace and quiet.”

For his part, Mahmoud Abbas made a widely anticipated declaration: “We have agreed with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to cease all acts of violence against the Israelis and the Palestinians wherever they are,” he said at the end of what was called a “summit of hope.”

Mr Abbas called for a halt to Israeli settlement activity and the release of all Palestinian prisoners. He criticized the security fence, saying it was not conducive to co-existence.

The Palestinian negotiators want Israel to return to the positions it held prior to the start of the uprising, when Palestinians were in control of major West Bank cities and the Palestinian people could move about freely. They say the final status negotiations should defer to the 1967 lines with Jerusalem as its capital, and must resolve the refugee issue.

Mahmoud Abbas and Hosni Mubarak called for **Syria** and **Lebanon** to be included in the peace process.

SILVAN SHALOM:

“AGE OF PALESTINIAN EXCUSES HAS ENDED”

THE Palestinian Authority can no longer make excuses for failing to honor its commitment to eliminate anti-Jewish terror, says Israel's Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom. “With Arafat's demise and the election of Mahmoud Abbas as his successor, the age of Palestinian excuses has come to an end. Abbas has at his disposal the means to stop the attacks on Israel's civilians and communities. What he needs to show us, and to show his own people, is that he has the will to use them to bring Palestinian terror to an end.”

Shalom said Israel was ready to go to great lengths to make peace and facilitate the well-being of the Palestinian Arabs, if the PA continues to take constructive steps towards ending

terror. "We accept the Road Map, and we are ready to implement it, in accordance with its performance-based structure and sequence."

While constructive, Shalom reiterated that the Abbas-brokered *hudna*, or temporary terrorist truce, was in and of itself an insufficient move. A cease-fire is not the answer. It is an optical illusion, which will explode in our faces.

In order to prevent the terrorists from undermining the dialogue between the two sides, Shalom insisted, we must remove them completely from the equation, and dismantle their ability to strike. There are no shortcuts in this process. "Israel," Shalom said, "would not tolerate a return to the pattern of terror in the morning, funerals in the afternoon, and negotiations and summits in comfortable hotels by night."

Jerusalem's willingness to work with the PA leadership would henceforth be "based on a test of actions, not of declarations; and of outcomes, not ceremonies."

"We must remember: Progress towards peace will not be possible without consistent and effective Palestinian action on the ground to end the terror against Israel's civilians, as required by the Road Map," Shalom said.

jnewswire.com, 4 Feb 05

\$100 MONTHLY PENSION FOR TERRORISTS

FEB 7. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has proposed a US \$100 monthly allowance to terrorists who agree to lay down their arms and retire or find another profession, in a proposal of a pension fund for at least 1000 terrorists. The money would be part of a US \$350 million package deal announced by President George Bush.

"HIZB'ALLAH RECRUITING BOMBERS TO DERAIL TRUCE"

LEBANESE Hizb'allah guerrillas are trying to recruit Palestinian militants for attacks on Israelis in order to sabotage Middle East peace efforts, according to senior Palestinian officials. Hizb'allah denies the accusation.

A top Palestinian official said, "We know that Hizb'allah has been trying to recruit suicide bombers in the name of the Al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade, to wage attacks that would sabotage the truce." Intercepted e-mail communications and bank transactions suggested Hizb'allah had raised its cash offers to militants, but it was unclear whether this reflected a heightened desire to see violence flare up, or a dearth of recruits.

"Now they are willing to pay \$100,000 for a whole operation, [suicide bombing]. In the past they paid \$20,000, then they raised it to \$50,000," the official said.

www.boston.com /15 Feb 05

PALESTINIAN MILITANTS DISOWN TRUCE

THE ceasefire agreement at Sharm el-Sheikh between Israel and the PA is designed to bring the intifada, and four years of violence, to an end. 3000 Palestinians and 1200 Israelis have died during the uprising.

While many observers are hoping the new deal will lead to a permanent peace, expectations are not high. Some are quite pessimistic!

While Mahmoud Abbas was popularly elected as President, support for him among the militant groups Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine) is extremely weak.

Mr Abbas is reportedly seeking to convince these groups that he can achieve more through dialogue and negotiation than they can through bombings and missile attacks.

Hamas and Islamic jihad have said they are not bound by the PA-Israel ceasefire. Both groups were at the forefront of attacks on Israel during the Palestinian uprising.

Abbas believed he had their compliance, but two days after the ceasefire agreement, Hamas unleashed 40 mortar shells and two Qassam rockets at Jewish settlements in the Gaza strip. The Palestinian leadership “reacted furiously,” with Abbas sacking several security officials for failing to stop the attacks. Abbas also vowed to take action against any future Palestinian cease-fire violations.

Israel announced that it would refrain from any military response to the shelling. But Israeli Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz warned: “We will not consent to a situation in which Qassams and mortars are fired at Israeli citizens. If the Palestinians won’t fight terror, we will have to do it. But we still think there is an historic window of opportunity that we must not let slip by.”

The Israel Defence Force views the shelling that was perpetrated primarily by Hamas, mainly as a challenge to Abbas by that organization. However, it seems that Hamas is also trying to maintain a “balance of deterrence” against Israel, in which the organization will respond to every dead Palestinian with heavy shelling. Hamas itself said that the shelling was a response to two Palestinians killed the day before.

“The firing was self-defense against aggression,” it said. “We did not sign or agree to a cease-fire with anyone, and every violation by the Zionists will draw a response.”

Reports say that Hamas has not openly rejected the ceasefire, and that it has agreed to give the truce a chance. But as an observer has pointed out, “a truce is Hamas’ way of probing the enemy’s intentions.”

HOW THE NEW DEAL IS WORKING OUT

* Mohammed Dahlan, an Abbas adviser who met with Israeli Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz, said that in return for a commitment by wanted militants to abide by a **hudna - a truce**, Israel would “stop assassinations and cease chasing them.”

* Abbas won a pledge from Islamic militants to observe a *hudna* while they consider the ceasefire. In a major policy shift, the Hamas and Islamic Jihad groups said they would not retaliate immediately for any Israeli military action.

* **Freedom for 8,000 Palestinians** in Israeli jails is a highly emotive issue for Palestinians, who regard them as heroes of the uprising. “We are insisting that all prisoners must return to their families. The issue is sensitive and humanitarian,” Abbas told a news conference.

* So far Israel has **approved** the release of **900 Palestinian “prisoners** without blood on their hands,” but the Palestinians dismissed this offer as insulting and urged the formation of a joint committee to coordinate the release of prisoners. Israel then accepted the proposal for a joint committee to examine the release of prisoners. The committee will examine the release of prisoners from three categories: those jailed prior to the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993; those jailed between 1993 and the outbreak of the intifada in September 2000; and female prisoners.

Israel continues to insist that they will not release “prisoners with blood on their hands,” or those with direct involvement in terrorist operations against Israelis.

* In Feb, **500 Palestinian prisoners were released** in a goodwill gesture to bolster Mahmoud Abbas, and to build mutual trust. Prior to their release, every one of the prisoners, which included 380 prisoners and 120 administrative detainees, signed waivers

promising to refrain from any terrorist activities in the future. Another 400 will be released within three months.

* Some **1,000 workers and 500 merchants** have been given permission to cross into Israel and a further 500 laborers could work at the Erez joint industrial zone.

* Israel has reportedly agreed to **withdraw from five West Bank towns** quite soon - Jericho, Tulkarm, Qalqilya, Bethlehem and Ramallah. Jericho was to be the first, but the planned handover was delayed because of a dispute over the scope of the withdrawal and security arrangements. The Palestinians want Israel to withdraw military checkpoints from around the towns. Previously when Israel has withdrawn from Palestinian population centres, it left them ringed with checkpoints, severely restricting movement.

* **PA President Mahmoud Abbas has ratified the death sentences against three Palestinians found guilty of "collaboration" with Israel.** The three have been convicted of assisting Israel in the assassination of a number of Palestinian activists in the Gaza Strip over the past four years.

* Abbas also approved death sentences passed against scores of **Palestinians found guilty of criminally motivated murders.** At least 51 Palestinians are on death row. Under pressure to crack down on an upsurge in crime and anarchy in PA-controlled areas, Abbas instructed the mufti to quickly review the cases of the convicts so that the executions can be carried out as soon as possible.

* Sixteen Palestinians deported by the Israeli army to the Gaza Strip during the intifada have been allowed to **return to the West Bank.** About 55 people were expelled to Gaza during the uprising, or intifada. A further 39 found refuge in Europe after being expelled at the end of a month-long siege of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem in 2002. Israel said 20 of these could return after Israel transfers control of the city. **Bethlehem is due to pass to full Palestinian control** in the next few weeks.

* The defence ministry declared **an end to the policy of demolishing Palestinian suicide bombers' houses.** According to Ha'aretz, 270 punitive demolitions were carried out. The decision came after an army internal review concluded that demolitions as a form of deterrent only increased Palestinian hatred and hostility towards Israel.

The moves are part of a package of measures agreed to in early Feb, aimed at restarting the peace process.

* For their part, **Palestinian authorities are seeking to restrain militant groups** from attacking Israel.

* It is clear that just about every step forward is going to be hotly contested. And **the threat of the whole deal will be constantly in danger of breaking down altogether.**

HAMAS TURNS STREET SIGNS INTO KASSAMS

FEB 14. After announcing it would agree to a *hudna* - a cease-fire, Hamas is using the lull in Israel's offensive actions to stock up on Kassam rockets, mines, and mortar shells in the Gaza Strip.

Kassam rocket makers have begun stealing and using street sign pipes because of a lack of raw materials. Apparently street signs are becoming rare in Gaza.

The sources told the *Jerusalem Post* that Hamas are working at a heightened pace to produce more weaponry in order to be better prepared for future hostilities if and when the de facto cease-fire breaks down and they are again targeted by the IDF (Israel Defence Force).

They are also continuing to operate their smuggling rings during this period to bring in weapons and other material.

A spirit of lawlessness pervades Gaza and other Palestinian areas. Terror cells, gangs, and criminals operate freely. Pray that the Palestinian Authority and the new Prime Minister, Mahmoud Abbas, will begin to encourage lawful behaviour. Pray that God will protect the people of Israel from terror attacks.

PA RELIGIOUS LEADER: GOAL IS ISRAEL'S DESTRUCTION

THE Palestinian Authority, in its Arabic messages to its people, has always denied Israel's right to exist, and has often presented the peace process as a tactic leading to Israel's destruction.

This goal was repeated on Friday, 4 Feb, in the official sermon on the Palestinian Authority television. Senior religious figure, Ibrahim Mudyris, explained that the limitation of the diplomatic process is that it can only achieve the 1967 borders, and that at a later stage, the Palestinian Authority will achieve its goal.

This man is not an isolated thinker. His words reflect the deep heartfelt conviction of many Palestinians.

KNESSET OKs SURRENDER OF GAZA & NORTH SAMARIA

FEB 16. Israel's **Knesset** has decided to relinquish control over the Gaza Strip and northern Samaria to the Palestinian Authority (PA). Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's Expulsion Compensation Bill, passed by a vote of 59-40, grants official legislative approval for the Sharon government to uproot the Jewish residents of Gaza and Northern Samaria.

The Disengagement from Gaza and N Samaria was a unilateral decision of the Israeli government, and although fragile, the hopes for peace are presently seen as encouraging. Most observers, however, understand that the surrender of Gaza and northern Samaria will take place in the absence of peace, and that it will happen as a direct result of relentless Arab aggression. Hamas and other Palestinian terror groups have already said they view the planned pullout as a victory for their campaign of terror against Israel's Jews.

Amendments calling for a national referendum on the pullout were soundly defeated.

FEB 20. The **Israeli cabinet** approved the implementation of the Gaza and N Samaria pullout, and the government will send letters by the end of Feb to the 9000 settlers affected, informing them they will have to evacuate their homes from **July**.

The Bible records the covenant of Yahweh giving sovereignty over what is today Israel - Judea, Samaria, Galilee, the Negev, and the Gaza Strip to the descendents of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The book of Joshua notes that Gaza was to be included in the land allotted to the Tribe of Judah. (Joshua 15:2-4)

At present, tragically, the Israeli government is not taking decisions in line with the Scriptures - for the simple reason that the great majority of Israel, including many of its leaders, are still in unbelief.

'HUDNA' AND THE PALESTINIAN STATE

LAST December President George W Bush predicted that he would bring peace between Israel and the Palestinians during his second term in office. "I want you to know that I am going to invest a lot of time and a lot of creative thinking so that there will finally be peace between Israel and the Palestinians," he told the Israeli newspaper *Yedioth Aharonoth*. "I am convinced that, during this term, I will manage to bring peace."

The new Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, has made it clear, "There **will** be a Palestinian state." The Quartet also, guided by rationalism, are pushing Israel into granting a Palestinian state.

Ariel Sharon has evidently decided that a Palestinian state is inevitable, and that by taking the withdrawal initiative, with American concurrence, he will get the best deal for Israel and will be able to annex the majority of the West Bank settlements into Israel proper. The hope of Ariel Sharon and Shimon Peres is that, allied with a moderate, peace-desiring PA regime, Israel will be able to contain or eliminate the radical Palestinian groups.

The "valiant efforts" of Mahmoud Abbas to secure a "*hudna*" – a "cease-fire" commitment from the radical Palestinian groups have been applauded, and wishful thinkers are convinced the violence will wind down as the militants realize their goal of a Palestinian state.

Realists, however, point out that Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and PFLP are radical organizations that have sworn they will never have a permanent peace with Israel. To them, "*hudna*" never means a permanent peace. It is a tactical interlude in a long-term strategy to fulfil their goal - the ultimate annihilation of the state of Israel. *Hudna* gives the Palestinians the chance to rearm for the next stage of jihad.

All Israel is acutely aware that once the Palestinians have a state, they can bring all manner of weapons and trained militants into the very heart of Israel.

After it has been forced into indefensible borders, its very existence will be threatened by Palestine, Syria, Iran, Egypt and Iraq. Israel will have only one ultimate military option – nuclear weapons.

SHARON'S STRATEGIES?

ARIEL Sharon, undoubtedly, has his plans as to how to deal with future Palestinian attacks once a separate state is established. I expect, that attacks from Palestine being no longer an uprising of an occupied people, but warfare waged by an independent hostile nation, that Israel would deal with it as such. **A short, powerful decisive war (such as the 6-day war) would be preferred to an endless no-win intifada.**

From a Biblical, prophetic perspective, we know a permanent peace between Israel and Palestine is a "pipe dream." The Scriptures tell us much of what is ahead:

"For I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to fight *against it*, declares YHWH, and the city will be captured, the houses plundered, and the women raped. Half of the city will go into captivity, but the rest of the people will not be exiled from the city." (Zechariah 14:2)

"Look!" declares YHWH, "I am going to make Jerusalem a cup that causes reeling to all the people around. Judah will be besieged as well as Jerusalem. And on that day, when all the nations of the earth are gathered against her, I will make Jerusalem a very heavy rock for all the nations. All who try to move it will be severely injured." (Zechariah 12:2-3)

"A king will arise, insolent and skilled in intrigue. He (*Antichrist*) will become very strong, but not by his own power. He will destroy to an extraordinary degree." (Daniel 8:23-24)

"The people of the (*endtime Roman*) ruler (*Antichrist*) who is to come will destroy the city (*Jerusalem*) and the sanctuary. The end will come like a flood. To the end there will be war, and desolations have been decreed." (Daniel 9:26)

The Day of YHWH is drawing nearer every day – the Great and Awesome Day of the LORD – the Great Tribulation - the Day of Jacob's Trouble of which the prophets have foretold. Zechariah says:

“In the whole land, declares YHWH, two thirds will be struck down and perish; but one third will be left in it. And I will bring this third through the fire, refine them as silver is refined, and test them as gold is tested. They will call on My Name and I will answer them; I will say, ‘They are My people,’ and they will say, ‘YHWH is my God’.”
(Zechariah 13:8-9)

It is only after the seven years of purging that God's promise of millennial blessing will be fulfilled:

“I will also plant them on their own land, and they will never again be uprooted from their land which I have given them, says YHWH your God.”
(Amos 9:15)