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Dear Subscriber,

This is to inform you that DEBKA-Net-Weekly will not appear this coming week. The next issue will reach you in the New Year, Jan. 5, 2007, with our best wishes.

The Editor

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*The White House Swings between Iraq Solutions - I*

**A Federal Baghdad, a Fragmented Iraq and Oil Revenues All Round**



The new US defense secretary **Robert Gates** and the head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff **Gen. Peter Pace** did not travel to Iraq Wednesday, Dec. 20, empty handed. They brought with them the latest tentative White House plan for a new strategy to solve the Iraq crisis.

According to **DEBKA-Net-Weekly**, the plan is based on the premise that Iraq has not been caught up in a civil war, only Baghdad. It is therefore necessary to stabilize the capital as the top priority. The idea is for the Americans to promise to secure Baghdad by persuading the leaders of both the Shiite and the Sunni fighting forces that neither can overpower the capital and they will have no option but to co-exist. The sooner they come to this point, the sooner the vicious cycle of bloodshed can be brought to a halt.

The task of persuasion has been assigned to the most influential leaders of the two communities: the most prominent Shiite cleric **Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani**, and **Sheik Hares al-Dari**, head of the leading Sunni group, the Sunna Scholars Council. The plan consists essentially of two parts: a federal Baghdad and the rest of the country split up into three autonomous regions, Kurdish, Sunni Arab and Shiite Muslim. The constitution must be amended to provide the Sunni minority with guarantees that the Shiite majority will never oust them from representative positions in Baghdad's ruling institutions or alter the borders of their self-governing region.

Sistani has accepted the plan and agreed to bring the Shiites round to it. The United States offered him special protection against Iranian threats to harm him in order to derail the arrangement. He rejected the offer and demanded instead that US forces ceremonially hand over the Shiite shrine city of Najef to Iraqi security control so as to symbolize the Shiite assumption of self-government, an act which was carried out Wednesday, Dec. 20.

Iraq's oil resources will be federally owned and managed and revenues distributed equitably among the three communities.

The Americans will guarantee not to allow the Kurds to seize the northern oil fields and the oil city of Kirkuk.

A supreme commission will be set up to manage the installations and exports.

Revenues will be apportioned to regions, thereby assuring the Sunni community of one-third of the income from exported oil. Distribution will be in the hands of a non-Iraqi board appointed by the Iraqi government.

Some issues have been left pending, such as the wild ambitions of the radical Shiite cleric Moqtada Sadr and his rogue Mehdi Army militia. However, every plan carries some risks and Secretary Gates and Gen. Pace were directed by the White House to devote their visit to Iraq to spadework with local US commanders on the plan's details. One early consequence was Washington's decision to assign another naval carrier strike force to the Persian Gulf to deter Iran and Syria from interfering and sabotaging the process.

If it does not work, the White House developed an earlier blueprint as a fallback.

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### *White House Swings between Iraq Solutions – II*

#### **Wanted: A Shiite Strongman as Provisional Ruler**



Some of the other ideas President **George W. Bush** is mulling over for a new Iraq strategy, before making his promised decision after the New War, include the controversial recommendations of the Baker-Hamilton commission and a Shiite formula dubbed by *The New York Times* of Dec. 19 the Darwin Principle - meaning that since the Shiites are the majority community in Iraq, the Americans have no option but to elevate them to government at the expense of the Sunni Arab minority.

Then there is the proposal put forward by the former Army Vice chief of staff **Ret. General Jack Keane** and military expert **Frederick W. Kagan** of the

American Enterprise Institute: The Keane-Kagan Plan, which was first laid out in *The Weekly Standard* Christmas edition. Its main theme is the reinforcement of US strength in Iraq by 50,000 troops. They will clear out the Baghdad districts of guerrilla and militia forces and stay on for an extended holding operation.

(This format was tried earlier this year in the insurgent-ridden province of Anbar and failed to work.)

However, **DEBKA-Net-Weekly's** Washington sources report that, although nothing has been formally settled, the US president has also been considering a more radical blueprint that would entail the following steps:

1. The Iraqi parliament will meet and declare a state of emergency for six months or more. The exact period is not yet decided.
2. The announcement will include the suspension of the government headed by **Nouri al-Maliki** and parliament for a pre-defined period.
3. Parliament will then approve the establishment of a national emergency council to govern the country during the period of emergency.
4. Another option is that parliament will endorse a political or military figure as head of the national emergency council and sole ruler of Iraq.

#### **Suspending the democratic process**

In other words, the principle of democratic rule in Iraq would be set aside pro tem. However, the thinking behind this plan is that the suspension of



the democratic process in Iraq would be voluntary and for a defined period. In any case, democracy is not working in Baghdad or any other part of Iraq. The scenario under consideration would in fact hark back to a proposal offered by **DEBKA-Net-Weekly**'s military experts in Issue 280 on Dec. 1 under the title: *A Military Coup in Baghdad as Last Resort*.

Our sources disclose that the missing keystone of the projected plan is the right man to head Iraq's provisional regime for the emergency period.

He would need two important qualities:

- He must be a Shiite – else parliament would not carry the motion. The Bush administration's first choice would be ex-prime minister **Iyad Allawi** who is a secular Shiite, a former Baathist before he fell out with **Saddam Hussein**, who also has close Sunni associates; or vice president **Abdel Mahdi**, another Shiite, who is not affiliated with the major Shiite parties and is a federalist.

- He must be ruthless and tough enough to crack down and destroy the insurgent forces and the Sunni militias – almost a Saddam Hussein.

But the main thrust of this plan, according to **DEBKA-Net-Weekly**'s military sources in Baghdad and Washington is -

5. To charge the provisional ruler with an iron-fisted crackdown against the Shiite militias and their death squads with the help of the American army beefed up by up to 50,000 soldiers. The Iraqi army would then absorb a large number of Baathist officers and men who served under Saddam Hussein.

President Bush would appear to count on support in his immediate vicinity from **Vice President Dick Cheney**, the secretary of state **Condoleezza Rice**, National Security Adviser **Stephen Hadley** and his staff, the US ambassador to Baghdad **Zalmay Khalilzad**, who originated the plan, **Gen. John Abizaid**, head of Central Command, who wants to retire next March, and **Gen. John Casey**, commander of American forces in Iraq.

### **Sunni insurgents outgun the Shiite majority militias**



Our military and counter-terror experts comment that the plan under consideration is highly complex and demands manpower on a scale way beyond the levels deployed for the US-led 2003 invasion of Iraq, Saddam's ouster and his army's defeat.

According to our sources, the combined strength of Sunni Arab insurgent groups and Shiite militias has swelled to an estimated 100,000 to 120,000 fighting men. US intelligence believes the Sunnis run to 70,000 combatants, while the Shiites are thought to command between 35,000 and 40,000 men.

Four years after the US invasion, and even taking into account the numerical superiority of the Shiite Muslim community, Sunni insurgents are capable today of crushing Shiite armed strength in a face-to-face engagement staged from orderly front lines.

Bush was led to his final appraisal by advice from Ambassador Khalilzad and US commanders in Iraq that the Shiites, laboring under a military disadvantage, stand no chance of capturing the big Sunni towns and main areas of Iraq. At most, they could win control of Baghdad.

In the last week or two, following their visit to Baghdad, **Senators John McCain** and **Joseph Lieberman** have decided to throw their support behind the emerging plan which the White House is putting together with the commanders in Iraq.

The plan has also won endorsement from important Democratic leaders, including **Senators Hillary Rodham Clinton** and **Barack Obama**, as well as the incoming majority leader **John Reid**. But any reasonable and feasible strategy to pull Iraq out of its slough of violence would gain majority bipartisan support in Washington.

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### *Putin Charts a New Middle East Thrust*

## **Picks Lebanon as Stepping-Stone to Big-Power Regional Influence**



Four days before Syrian president **Bashar Asad** arrived in Moscow on Monday, Dec. 19 (See *HOT POINTS* Dec. 19, *Assad is in Moscow with Half-Billion Iranian Dollars to Upgrade his Army*), a less conspicuous visitor, pro-Western Lebanese prime minister **Fouad Siniora**, was received in the Kremlin

**DEBKA-Net-Weekly's** Moscow sources disclose that their visits found Russian president **Vladimir Putin** prepared to stitch both into his latest strategy for re-establishing Russia in the Middle East.

Putin and his defense minister **Sergei Lavrov** propose to make Lebanon the new Russian center of influence in the region after dislodging Washington and Paris.

According to our Middle East sources, neither **President George W. Bush's** strategic advisers nor even the intelligence experts in the region - Israel's included - had any forewarning of the scheme brewing in the Kremlin. Lebanon was the last place they imagined Putin would designate as his first stepping stone on the way to Middle East penetration.

Having digested the new development, some US experts see history repeating itself. In 1955, Soviet prime minister **Georgy Maximilianovich Malenkov** decided to furnish the main Arab countries with armaments to smooth the way for deep Soviet penetration of the Middle East. For the next half a century, the region was the stage of violent Soviet-American Cold War conflicts and turmoil.

Analysts in Washington, London, Paris, Berlin and Jerusalem have jumped today to the advantages offered Moscow by its focus on Lebanon:

1. Lebanon was transformed by the Israeli-Hizballah war – which in fact pitted Israel against Iran – into a forward position for Iran, Syria, the Palestinians and Hizballah to menace Israel as well as American interests in the region at close quarters.

The Kremlin appears to have deduced that, whatever Bush decides, the Iraq war will end as an American write-off and the danger point for US positions in the region has already shifted west from Iraq to the eastern Mediterranean.

### **Lebanon eyed as section of oil and gas pipeline to the Far East**

2. The power that dominates Lebanon will sit astride the main junction of Iran-Syrian-Palestinian collaboration. The Kremlin has already settled on a policy of rapprochement with radical Islam. It now seeks the role of connecting link with the West. Lebanon is seen as the ideal venue to pursue this objective.

Russian leaders are fully aware that Lebanon has become the forward position not only of Iran - via Syria, Hizballah and the Palestinian extremists - but that al Qaeda's cells and bases in the country are also proliferating.

3. Moscow is eyeing a new-old Middle East route for pumping Russian oil and gas to the Far East to slash costs and shorten the time for getting the products to destination. Before the Lebanon war last summer, the Russians pondered laying a pipeline from



Turkey to Israel and on to the Far East through the Red Sea. They made inquiries about Israel's Ashkelon-Eilat trans-Negev pipeline for this purpose. But since then, the Kremlin has dropped the plan, perceiving Israel as prey to future local wars and marked down by both Iran and Syria.

The resurrection of the old Trans-Arabian Pipeline Company – Tapline – is now contemplated in Moscow. When Tapline first began operating in 1950, transporting Saudi Arabian oil through Jordan and over the Golan Heights to the Lebanese Mediterranean port of Sidon, it was the largest oil pipeline of its day. The project was shut down in 1976 and sections of the crude oil line and installations at Sidon handed over to the Lebanese government.

Today, Moscow is considering replacing the rusted sections and reversing the flow to run from Sidon through Syria, on to Kirkuk in northern Iraq, down to the Shatt al Arab waterway and out to the Persian Gulf and the sea lanes to the Far East.

With this scheme in mind, the Russians chose to stay out of the European extension of the UNIFIL peacekeeping force in south Lebanon. Instead, Moscow sent an independent unit of two engineering battalions for deployment in the Sidon district of Lebanon, well protected by commando platoons of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Motorized Rifle Division which is permanently deployed in Chechnya. These commando platoons are part of the Vostok and Zapad Battalions both of which are commanded by Muslim officers who report directly to the an intelligence department of the Russian Army's General Staff in Moscow.

Here again is a signal of Russia's grand design, one which confers on Lebanon the added value of a way station for piping its oil and gas for the lamps of the Far East.

### **Putin teaches Siniora a lesson in reciprocal back-scratching**



4. The Russian president's talks with Syrian president Bashar Asad in Moscow this week also turned on Syrian military intelligence opening doors to Russian influence within the pro-Damascus Sunni Muslim and Christian Maronite elements of northern Lebanon and Sidon, as well as Hizballah. All these

groups and clans depend on Tehran and Damascus for munitions. Putin is offering to compensate Syria with state of the art weapons systems and generous fees payable to a strategic defense force that will protect the Russian oil and gas pipes running through Syria.

The Russian scheme by touching so many sensitive bases is capable of seriously undermining American and French policies and positions in Lebanon and the Levant at large.

Putin's conversation with the Lebanese prime minister this week was a good illustration of the Russian leader's rough-and-ready tactics for achieving his ends.

**DEBKA-Net-Weekly's** Moscow sources disclose that Siniora went to Moscow to ask Putin to use his influence with Asad for him to persuade Hizballah to drop its relentless persecution of his government. Putin surprised him with a proposition, which we can reveal here for the first time.

Moscow would "adjust" the UN Security Council's guidelines for the international tribunal set up to try the accused assassins of former Lebanese prime minister **Rafiq Hariri**. Putin intimated that the new formula would keep Bashar Asad's relatives out of the dock for complicity in the murder plot. If Siniora played along, Hizballah would raise its two-week siege on Beirut and the government compound, including the prime minister's office.

According to our sources, Siniora first declared firmly that his government would never give up its aim to bring Hariri's killers to justice. As the conversation developed, he agreed to consider the proposition if Russian

guarantees were forthcoming for the Syrian role in reining in the Hizballah. The Russian president had his reply pat.

Even before Siniora arrived in Moscow, he said, the Kremlin had arranged with Hizballah to relieve the pressure on the Beirut government. Hizballah demonstrators were drifting off and there was no more talk of an imminent civil war. The quid pro quo was plain: For playing ball with Moscow's effort to rescue the Asad clan from prosecution, the Siniora government would be relieved of the Hizballah threat. Otherwise, the siege would escalate to the point of civil war.

**DEBKA-Net-Weekly's** Lebanese sources report that Siniora briefed Washington on his conversation with Putin as soon as he arrived home. He is now awaiting a counter-proposal from Washington.

In the Kremlin meanwhile, Moscow's deal on Lebanon gathered momentum as the Russian and Syrian presidents talked. They took a hard look at the two facets of the deal: Moscow's veto leverage for dictating the mandate of the Hariri tribunal and future relations between the Siniora government and Hizballah.

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### *Al Qaeda Pokes a Finger in the Palestinian War* **Hijacks a Fatah Legion from its Syrian Base**



**Shaqer Abazi** has big ideas but he is hardly a celebrity in the West or even in the Arab world. His name is bandied among the unknown jihadis fighting for al Qaeda in the fields of Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Middle East. They know him as a notorious al Qaeda death squad chief.

One of his major feats, **DEBKA-Net-Weekly's** counter-terror sources report, was leading the al Qaeda team which gunned down the senior American diplomat **Lawrence "Larry" J. Foley** in Amman on Oct. 28, 2002. Behind his cover as USAID director in Jordan, Foley was in fact a senior US intelligence officer. His murder just over a year after 9/11 was a painful blow for US intelligence.

According to our sources, Abazi managed to flee Jordan after the killing and cross the border into Syria where the local military intelligence picked him up. A secret military tribunal sentenced him to three years in jail.

When US intelligence discovered the whereabouts of Foley's killer in Damascus' notorious Maza prison, they pressed the Syrian government to hand him over, or at least let American agents question him. They were refused time and again.

In 2005 he was a free man.

Now, once again, in December 2006, Shaqer Abazi is back in the same Damascus jail – not because the Americans want him, but because of the high risk he poses Syria's national security and the damage he has wrought Syria's political and logistic support system and plans for radical Palestinian organizations.

According to **DEBKA-Net-Weekly's** sources, when Abazi was released from jail in late 2005, he reported back to work for al Qaeda. **Ayman al-Zuwahri** gave him a key task in al Qaeda's next major enterprise, its Palestinian master-project.

He entrusted Abazi with the sensitive tasks of deepening al Qaeda's penetration of armed Palestinian bodies and arranging the transfer of al Qaeda fighters and recruits from Syria and Lebanon to the Gaza Strip first and the West Bank next.

While generally designated **Osama bin Laden's** deputy, al Zuwahri is a force in his own right; he is the movement's top gun in the organization of terrorist networks across West Europe, North Africa, the Saharan Region and the Middle East.

Zuwahri rates al Qaeda's Palestinian venture as equal in importance to bin Laden's 2004 campaign to enlist young Muslims around the world to fight **Abu Musab al Zarqawi's** war of terror in Iraq. He believes his Palestine operation will be put the achievements of the late al Qaeda commander in Iraq in the shade, by striking simultaneously at al Qaeda's two prime targets – America and Israel.

### **A Fatah group joins al Qaeda**

Abazi's first step was to contact "**Abu Khaled**", whose real name is **Mussa Alama**, leader of a group calling itself Fatah-Intifada who was born in the Jerusalem village of Silwan. Although over 70, Abu Khaled is still rated one of Fatah's most skilled military commanders. He served under **Yasser Arafat** in the 1970s when Fatah ruled large parts of southern Lebanon. As commander of the Palestinian artillery units in Lebanon, he launched Katyusha rocket campaigns against northern Israel. Like many Fatah old-timers, he took exception to Arafat's leadership and in the 1980s, settled in Damascus on a comfortable Syrian stipend.



Twenty years later, in the spring of 2006, Shaqer Abazi came knocking on his door with big talk. Abazi was absolutely certain that together, they were capable of repeating Zarqawi's brilliant achievements and covering themselves with glory in al Qaeda's new Palestinian campaign.

(As **DEBKA-Net-Weekly** reported frequently, Zarqawi, who was killed in an American air strike last June, was acclaimed in radical Islamic circles as a great general who wrought untold harm to the American cause in Iraq. Earlier this month a US official, deputy secretary of state on Iraq affairs **David Satterfield** acknowledged "The Evil Genius of Zarqawi").

The retired Palestinian gunner's imagination was fired. He was back in harness in no time, reviving old ties with the operational elements of Fatah-Intifada. Syrian military intelligence, pleased to see the pensioned-off terrorist back in action, funded a new recruitment center in central Damascus, welcoming the chance of mobilizing fresh Palestinian fighting strength for the Gaza and West Bank fronts against Israel.

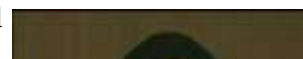
The groups were taken to the Fatah-Intifada training installations lodged in the Palestinian Zabdani and Nahar al-Bard refugee camps near the northern Lebanese town of Tripoli. There they renamed their group Fatah al-Islam and grew beards.

Damascus' agents in the Lebanese training centers started asking questions. But Syrian military intelligence was slow to catch on to the real sponsors behind the new Palestinian intake. It took a while before they realized that the man smuggling large groups of Palestinians and ex-Iraq fighters from Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Sudan across the border into Lebanon was none other than the former jailbird, Shaqer Abazi.

It then dawned on the Syrians that their Palestinian operation had been hijacked and reinvented as al Qaeda's big new venture. When they spotted Shaqer Abazi hanging about the Damascus recruiting center, they realized they had been duped.

### **Al Qaeda's next major enterprise – to set Palestine on fire**

But by early October, some 400 Palestinians had



already been smuggled from Syria into Lebanon. Never before had al Qaeda walked off with the entire core membership of a Fatah group. From northern Lebanon, the recruits headed south – overland to South Lebanon and by small smugglers boats to the Gaza Strip.

There, two local Palestinian terrorist groups were on hand to receive the new arrivals: The Abu Rish Brigades, formerly an integral part of Fatah, defected in the internecine war. The group now sports the name The Islamic Sword-Abu Rish Brigades.

The second faction which came out to welcome the newcomers to Gaza was the al Qaeda-affiliated Army of Islam, whose leader is **Zakariya Durmush**.

At this point, al Zuwahri stepped into the Palestinian factional conflict.

He branded Fatah's **Mahmoud Abbas** as “America's man”, and rebuked both Fatah and Hamas for conduct contrary to al Qaeda's basic tenets.

In a taped broadcast over Al Jazeera TV, on Dec. 20, he raged “Those who try to liberate the Islamic territories through elections based on secular constitutions... will not liberate one grain of sand of Palestine. Liberation will only be achieved by jihad.”

Normally, al Qaeda takes its time before responding to events – especially by top figures. This time, al Zuwahri was unusually quick off the mark, reflecting the big stake al Qaeda had begun investing in the Palestinian conflict.

He condemned Palestinian elections as un-Islamic just five days after **Mahmoud Abbas** announced early presidential and parliamentary polls. (See also **HOT POINTS** below).

The al Qaeda leader was also warning Syria that it was playing with fire. By then, Damascus had put the would-be shooting stars, Abazi and Abu Khaled, behind bars.

Zuwahri was telling the Syrians that by locking them up, they had not squashed al Qaeda's Palestinian project. There were plenty more jihadis to lead and man its networks for Palestine.

So far, US and Israeli policy-makers and army chiefs have ignored al Qaeda's plan to launch its next major enterprise after Iraq to set the Palestinian territories on fire and also threaten Israel from the north. The Palestinian communities of Syria, Lebanon and the Gaza Strip are ripe for conscription to Osama bin Laden's movement and ready to take part in terrorist operations that may be as sweeping and devastating as Abu Musab al Zarqawi's campaign in Iraq.

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### *Tokyo Is Peeved*

## **Washington Turns down Japan's Bid to Join the Mid East Quartet**



Japan has decided to join the race for positions of vantage in the Middle East, along with the Russians in Syria and Lebanon, the Chinese in Iran, and the Europeans on Lebanon on- and offshore.

Last month, Tokyo approached the Americans with a small request: they want to join the Middle East Quartet for promoting peace diplomacy between Israel and the Palestinians. The Quartet is composed

of representatives of the United States, Russia, The European Union and the UN secretary general.

Washington turned Japan down flat. US diplomats explained to the crestfallen Japanese that if they were co-opted to the group, many other powers, such

China and India, would clamor for admittance.

This refusal did not go down well in Tokyo. Japanese prime minister **Shinzo Abe** and its foreign minister **Taro Aso** think they deserve better in view of their cooperation with the Americans on such sensitive issues as the North Korean and Iranian nuclear programs.

**DEBKA-Net-Weekly's** Persian Gulf sources report that Japan is secretly collaborating with America's financial warfare against the Iranian economy.

Japanese banks have closed their doors to transactions with firms or private parties which have investments in Iranian industries. Japanese banks have been instructed by their government to boycott Iranian banks according to a secret list drawn up by the Japanese treasury. Tokyo has turned down offers from Tehran to turn over a part of Iran's reserves to Japanese banks if these sanctions are dropped.

Because of these steps, Japan has been forced to abandon its plans to invest and develop the big Iranian oil and gas field of Azadegan and forfeit most of its concessions in the field. They were quickly snapped up by China.

Considering the extent of its cooperation with America and the losses incurred, the Japanese government expected Washington to be more forthcoming to its request. They would have been content to hear that, because of Chinese and Indian sensitivity, it would take some time to process the Japanese request for membership of the Quartet.

The Bush administration should have held the option open, not slammed the door in their faces.

Even if China had threatened to block Japanese membership with their Security Council veto, Washington ought to have taxed Beijing with failing to deter Iran from developing a nuclear weapon despite its extensive ties with the ayatollahs. It is not right, says Tokyo, for Japan to spearhead the Asian sanctions campaign against Iran while the Chinese and Indians harvest political gains.

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## ***HOT POINTS***

### **A Digest of DEBKAFfile Round-the-Clock Exclusives in Week Ending Dec. 21, 2006**

#### **Hamas escalates its internecine feud with Fatah to jihad**

**15 December:** Hamas leaders said Friday: "Abu Mazen and Fatah have declared war on Allah. Whoever joins them is a shahid."

The fratricidal warfare swept from Gaza to the Palestinian Authority West Bank center in Ramallah Friday wounding dozens.

The murder Sunday, Dec. 10, of the three young sons of a senior Fatah intelligence colonel, was another landmark in the Palestinian Authority's descent into chaos.

The Hamas prime minister returned home from a two-week absence carrying \$31 million of the quarter of a billion dollars Iran donated to bankroll Hamas' buildup for jihadist war. After Israel ordered the Rafah crossing from Egypt to Gaza closed, hundreds of Hamas militiamen seized control of the terminal directing heavy gunfire at the European monitors and Abu Mazen's Force 17 presidential guard. Both fled. Thursday night, Haniya was finally allowed to enter Gaza after leaving the suitcases packed with cash behind in Sinai. It was then that Force 17 shot up the convoy.

In the Palestinian prime minister's party was a senior Hamas military delegation led by Abu Obeida al Jerat, who signed military pacts with the heads of Iran's Revolutionary Guards providing advanced combat training for

Hamas terrorists.

### **Mahmoud Abbas declares new polls for Palestinian presidency and parliament - without setting a date**

**16 December:** Mahmoud Abbas began his tensely-awaited speech in Ramallah by charging that the kidnap of the Israeli soldier Gilead Shalit (by a Hamas-led assault team in June) was the cause of 500 Palestinian deaths, left 4,000 injured and thousands of homes wrecked. Palestinians continue to die as long as the soldier is held captive in the Gaza Strip.

Abbas denied an alleged Fatah plot to assassinate Hamas prime minister Ismail Haniyeh (as he entered the Gaza Strip Thursday, Dec. 14). A returning leader should be welcomed with flowers, said the speaker, not by men armed with RPGs who went on a rampage of destruction and looting at the Rafah border checkpoint.

DEBKAFfile's military sources revealed earlier that Thursday night, ahead of Haniya's arrival, armed Hamas militiamen fired a large number of anti-tank rockets as well as heavy machine gun fire to drive off the Force 17 Abbas loyalists and European monitors on duty at the Rafah crossing.

In their internal communications, Hamas leaders refer to their war with Fatah as a "struggle between the "Movement of God and the Party of Satan."

Palestinian factional warfare in Gaza and the West Bank and its radical religious overtones are being watched with increasing anxiety in neighboring Egypt, Jordan and other Arab nations in the region.

### **DEBKAFfile's military sources reveal that last week, US and Israel transferred a quantity of automatic rifles to Abu Mazen's Fatah forces**

**17 December:** The guns reached Fatah leader Mohammed Dahlan who handed them over to the faction's suicide wing, al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, Abbas' only reliable strike force. Dahlan is now in command of the armed campaign against Hamas from presidential headquarters in Ramallah. Israeli officials are turning a blind eye to transfer of the arms into the hands of the most badly-wanted masterminds of Fatah suicide killings, such as Jemal Tirawi from Nablus.

### **Ahmadinejad's Followers Ordered to Falsify Election Defeats**

**18 December:** The results of Iran's elections for local councils and the powerful Assembly of Experts have been tensely awaited as the first test of the president's popularity since he took office last year.

DEBKAFfile's Tehran sources report that his followers, seeing the wind was blowing against their leader, took matters in their own hands. Backed by armed Revolutionary Guards, they stormed the counting sessions Monday, Dec. 18, using threats and physical harassment to force the counters to falsify the results and reverse the gains.

Sixty hours after balloting ended, when only 10 percent of the returns to the key Tehran city election had been counted, the publication of further results was suspended.

Four prominent Iranians, including ex-presidents Hashem Rafsanani and Mohammed Khatami, protested that vote-rigging was taking place.

But Ahmadinejad's prestige received a painful blow in both elections. His perennial rival Hashem Rafsanjani won a seat on the Assembly of Experts which chooses the supreme ruler.

### **Mossad director Meir Dagan: Syria speeds up arms deliveries to Hizballah while extending fake peace overtures to Israel**

**18 December:** In a briefing to the Knesset foreign affairs and security committee, Dagan said Monday, Syria had accelerated its arms deliveries to the Lebanese Hizballah and is in the throes of a strong bid to overthrow the Siniora government. Furthermore, Syria's Bashar Asad is bent on exacerbating the dangers facing US troops in Iraq. The Mossad chief said Asad is actuated by three motives:

Consolidating his influence in Lebanon, recovering the Golan from Israel and ridding himself of international pressure. The Syrian ruler is maneuvering to show Israel up as an opponent of peace compared with his own momentum. A positive response by Israel would be a stab in the back to moderate Arab rulers.

DEBKAFfile's political sources reported Sunday Israeli ministers were divided over the issue at their cabinet session Sunday, Dec. 17. Wary of playing into Syrian hands, prime minister Ehud Olmert said Israel must not start negotiations with Damascus at a time when US president George W. Bush is insisting that Bashar Asad first stop instigating war. Defense minister, Labor leader Amir Peretz said the price tag is clear – the Golan - but cited the high importance of breaking Syrian ties with the extremist axis.

### **Giora Eiland: The 15-year old concept of an Israel-Palestinian peace based on a two-state settlement along pre-1967 lines is an outdated illusion**

**18 December:** The two sides have never been able to come to an agreement on the interpretation of this formula and, even if by some remote chance they could, the former Israeli national security advisers says there is no way to implement it after all this time.

Eiland addressed the Israeli politicians who argue that Israel has nothing to lose by responding to the latest Syrian calls for peace talks with this warning: Every Israeli prime minister from the late Menahem Begin to Yitzhak Rabin entered into peace talks with the Palestinians certain they could control the process at every stage. They discovered, especially when outside powers were involved, that the negotiations had run out of their hands and they were forced to make concessions harmful to Israel's vital interests.

### **Key Fatah intelligence officers killed after truce announcement**

**18 December:** Hamas gunmen snatched and shot dead key Fatah intelligence officer Col. Adnan Rahmani. DEBKAFfile reports Col. Rahmani was a member of the Palestinian preventive security agency commanded by Rashid Abu Shbak and Samir Mashrawi, two of Mahmoud Abbas' and Mohammed Dahlan's Fatah mainstays in Gaza.

DEBKAFfile reports: The murder of the intelligence colonel Sunday occurred after members of his service swept through six Palestinian ministerial offices smashing computers, furniture, telephones and archives to prepare the way for Abbas to dissolve the Hamas government ahead of an early election.

### **Bashar Asad propositions Israel in hope of getting his family off the hook of the Hariri trial**

**19 December:** DEBKAFfile Middle East sources disclose that a non-official group is working with all its might to push Syria and Israel into talks in order to bypass President George W. Bush. The logic behind this initiative is that while such talks are going on, it will be hard for the international community including the UN to say: Stop: the Asads must stand trial for assassination and terrorism. And if the talks are successful, they might confer enough respectability on the Syrian ruler to make the Bush administration overcome its opposition to engaging Damascus.

Syria's first lady Asmah Asad is also very active in these exchanges. DEBKAfile's sources stress reports that the Syrian ruler has no preconditions for talks are inaccurate. This concession would apply only to any informal contacts prior to formal negotiations, a stage known in diplomatic parlance as Track 2, which has now brought together non-official persons from different countries, veterans of the government or military, and academics. DEBKAfile's sources name the live wires as pro-Arab figures the ex-British MI6 agent Alastair Crook, Asma Asad's British family connections, Mark Perry an American former adviser to Yasser Arafat, Spanish foreign minister Miguel Moratinos and a group of German businessmen and former intelligence officials with strong connections in Damascus.

### **Assad in Moscow, Has Half-Billion Iranian Dollars to Upgrade His Army**

**18 December:** Syrian president Bashar Asad arrived in Moscow with a shopping list for President Vladimir Putin and half a billion dollars put up by Iran - in cash if needed - for Russian arms.

The transaction will include sophisticated Tor-M1 systems, supplies of which began reaching Iran last month, together with thousands of AT-14 anti-tank and SA 5 Gammon anti-air missiles. Damascus also wants to commission Russian military industry to upgrade all 4,500 of its outdated Soviet-era T-62, T-72 and T-80 tanks.

Israel's head of research in AMAN-military intelligence, Brig-Gen Yossi Baidetz was referring to this huge Russian-Syrian arms deal bankrolled by Iran when he warned ministers Sunday Dec. 10, that Asad was preparing his army for a summer war against Israel.

According to DEBKAfile's military experts, Asad's generals have drawn fully on the lessons of Hizballah's war against Israel in July and August, outfitting the Syrian army with Kornet AT-14 anti-tank rockets, especially the five Syrian divisions stationed on the Golan frontier. Hizballah deployed the Kornets delivered by the Syrian army with great effectiveness against the Israeli Chariot tanks, inflicting a high level of casualties. In the face of the evidence, Moscow denies letting the Kornet missiles sold to Syria reach Hizballah's hands.

### **Al Qaeda was in a big hurry to criticize Palestinian elections - only five days after the Abbas declaration of a new poll**

**20 December:** Normally, Qaeda takes its time before reacting to current events. But now a videotape of Al Qaeda's No. 2, Ayman al-Zawahri calling Mahmoud Abbas "America's man" was rushed into broadcast over al Jazeera TV, Wednesday night, Dec. 18. This sign that the Palestine is a burning issue for the Islamist movement confirms Mossad director Meir Dagan's assessment to the Knesset foreign affairs and security committee Monday, Dec. 18, that the jihadist organization's sights are now set on Israel.

DEBKAfile's counter-terror sources reveal that al Qaeda is in the throes of a wide-reaching clandestine campaign to sink deep roots into Palestinian armed ranks. The Islamist organization has secretly transferred hundreds of armed Palestinians from Syria to Lebanon and is building mixed units of Palestinians and Arab fighters from Iraq for planting on two Israeli borders - South Lebanon and the Gaza Strip. Last week, Syrian military intelligence detained in Damascus one of the ringleaders of the operation, "Abu Khaled" (real name Mussa al Alma), of the Fatah-Intifada movement.

In his broadcast, Al-Zawahri delivered a warning that applied equally to Abbas' Fatah and Hamas, clearly aimed at whipping both sides of the movement in line with radical tenets. He said "Those who try to liberate the Islamic territories through elections based on secular constitutions... will not liberate one grain of sand of Palestine."

## **US Middle East Commander puts in request for another carrier in Gulf region as warning to Syria and Iran**

**21 December:** DEBKAFfile's military sources report that this request, revealed by a senior Pentagon official, is the first time in four years that an American general has asked for a special force as a deterrent for Syria and Iran.

Our Washington sources interpret the publication of the request during the visit to Iraq of the new defense secretary Robert Gates' and head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Peter Pace as indicating that the Bush administration is heading for a major operation against the two key threats to Iraq's stability: the Sunni insurgents supported by Syria and the Shiite militias, which receive arms, intelligence and funding from Tehran.

In its latest quarterly report, the defense department accused Iran and Syria of undermining the Iraqi government by providing both active and passive support to anti-government and anti-coalition forces.

The application to deploy a third carrier in the Gulf in late March 2007 is a pointer to the projected timeline of this operation.

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