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A Digest of DEBKAFile Round-the-Clock Exclusives in Week Ending February 22, 2006

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US Forces Start Pulling Back Baghdad's Security Vacuum Spreads Havoc



Iraq was already sinking into the abyss of sectarian strife, fragmentation and terrorist mayhem before the bomb attack which destroyed the Golden Mosque of Samarra on Wednesday, Feb. 22.

Shiite retribution was fierce and the Shiite-Sunni battles across the country soon conjured up fears of sectarian civil war.

Al Qaeda's **Abu Musab al Zarqawi** was able to chalk up another success in his campaign to blow Iraq into a convulsion of sectarian strife, while the ayatollahs in Tehran counted the strategic fruits of the provocation he engineered.

DEBKA-Net-Weekly's intelligence sources in Iraq report that the Samarra bombing was only one of the outrages waiting to happen since American forces began imperceptibly pulling out of Baghdad and the Sunni regions north and west of the capital. Most of the city outside the Green Zone is no longer secured by coalition forces. It has been handed over to Iraq jurisdiction.

Amid the dragging effort to bring Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish politicians into a national unity government, the Americans led by Ambassador **Salmay Khalilzad** are, according to **DEBKA-Net-Weekly's** sources, pushing to keep the ministries controlling the police and army – defense and interior – out of Shiite hands. They would prefer them to go to Sunni Arab politicians.

But as the dickering goes on, Baghdad, the key to a unified Iraq, is spinning out of control and splintering the country.

Our most authoritative intelligence sources in Iraq produce terrifying figures to illustrate the mounting havoc in the capital:

Terrorist attacks up to 120 a day, 190 kidnappings a month

- The number of terrorist attacks in Baghdad has shot up from 40 to 120 a day.
- More than 900 bodies from Baghdad alone have piled up in Iraq's forensic medicine institute. This figure takes no account of victims whose remains were not delivered to the institute from Baghdad or other parts of Iraq, where Iraqi authorities are said to have lost count of the deaths.
- Baghdad is prey to around 190 kidnappings per month – motivated by terrorism, ransom demands and revenge.
- The Iraqi police force is losing men at the rate of 15 per day, whether to murder, injury, abduction or desertion.
- The outlay on counter-terror operations runs to \$1million per hour for the Iraqi army, \$10 million for US forces.
- Six out of Iraq's 18 provinces are out of control, including Baghdad and the regions north and west of the capital. The Shiite and Kurdish-controlled enclaves are more secure.



This means that Iraq cannot get the oil fields back to functioning normally and their production capacity of 3.2 million bpd is far out of reach. The central government is therefore strapped for the cash needed to embark on national reconstruction and recovery.

- At present, oil production is running at a bit over one-third of capacity. To bring it up to scratch, an investment of \$40 billion is needed to upgrade the fields which were badly over-exploited during the Saddam Hussein regime.
- Even the cash shortage is not the most pressing problem besetting the Iraqi oil industry. Two more are:
 1. Even if the new equipment for refurbishing the oil fields is made available, it cannot be transferred to the sites or start work before the local warlords, terrorist chiefs and crime gangs are dealt with. This will take time and a large outlay of cash.
 2. The massive theft of oil which is diverted outside the state system:
Oil tanker convoys ply a smuggling route from the northern Iraqi oil fields across the border into Syria. Syrian intelligence is involved up to its ears in this daylight robbery.
Various Shiite factions dip into the southern oil wells for wholesale private profiteering.
- Only 5% of the funds promised by donor nations (aside from the US) has been delivered. Iraq is saddled with a colossal national debt of \$120bn, of which \$50m is owed in war damages to foreign states like Kuwait which were incurred by the previous regime

Drug-trafficking rife, 150,000 street children in Baghdad



Sectarian animosities, most with long roots, burrow under all efforts at unified government. Iranian meddling keeps the pot on the boil.

According to **DEBKA-Net-Weekly**'s counter-terror sources, Iranian intelligence death squads are systematically hunting down and liquidating Iraqi scientists, generals and fighter pilots who took part

in Saddam Hussein's war against Iran in the 1980s.

They account for some 300-500 of the unsolved murders in the country.

According to figures compiled by the national security council of Iraq, crime militias and their clans maintain 40,000 armed hoods. Most were freed from Iraq's prisons by Saddam in 2002 ahead of the US-led invasion.

The market is flooded with illegal drugs smuggled from Afghanistan through Iran.

Drug abuse is rife, even discovered among some captured Qaeda operatives.

More than 100,000 street children are loose in Baghdad.

According to rough estimates, Iraq has more than 1.5 million handicapped and crippled war victims.

In stark contrast to the impression left by the December general election, that Iraq had set its feet on the road to unity, effective government and normality, the country is more divided than ever.

Sunni Arabs who ruled the country under Saddam Hussein are now subjected to campaigns of ethnic cleansing in all the mixed communal towns. They are being evicted, for instance, from Tal Afar in the northwest, Diyala province northeast of Baghdad, and Hilla and other towns in the predominantly Shiite south.

Kurdish leaders are determined to seize full control of the oil town of Kirkuk

by the end of 2007. By systematic expulsions, Kurds have secured a 55% majority of the Kirkuk district's population.

The Kurds have a bone to pick with the Americans for preventing their takeover of Iraq's third largest city, Mosul. For the moment, the Kurdish drive west is locked in on the eastern bank of the Tigris River bisecting the northwestern town. They are determined to push across and seize the entire city as soon as American troops are out of the way.

Mosul will then be a jumping-off base for the next Kurdish push west across Nineveh province, the most religiously and ethnically diverse part of Iraq, to capture Jebel Sinjar, which is 50 kilometers from the Syrian border.

Their next leap would link Iraqi Kurdistan up with the Kurdish tribes of Syria.

Warlords take over the provinces

In southern Iraq, the Shiite majority is punishing Baghdad by withholding electricity, another source of extreme friction. As a result, the southern town of Nasiriyeh for instance has power 18 hours a day, while Baghdad has only two.

Another of Iraq's multiple vulnerabilities as a self-sustaining national entity are its wide open borders.

The Iraqi National Guard is ostensibly made up of 80 battalions. But its border units exist only on paper. Long smuggler convoys of dozens of vehicles and hundreds of loaded camels wend their way unhindered in and out of Saudi Arabia and Syria, which has consistently defied all policing efforts. The traffic is run mainly from the 800,000-strong expatriate Iraqi community in Jordan.

Now the Saudis have decided it is no use waiting for the Iraqis to secure their common border and plan to invest \$1.5 billion a year to tighten controls.

A functioning economy supporting a consolidated Baghdad is the sine qua non for holding Iraq together as a viable state. The city's 5 million inhabitants are essentially split three ways between 1.5 million Sunni Muslims, half a million Kurds and around 3 million Shiites. Iraq's economy shows no signs of recovering from war and predators, while Baghdad is disintegrating by stages into strife-ridden components.

Some Iraqi officials accuse the Americans of turning their back on the capital and funneling resources from the seat of central government to the provinces - in particular, to steel Sunni militias in their strongholds north of the capital for fighting off Zarqawi's terrorist units.

This tactic is working and there have been some successful actions against al Qaeda's Iraq networks. But it has produced an injurious side-effect: the proliferation of warlordism across the country. The Sunni Triangle and the western Anbar province are succumbing to the blight; enclaves of the south have fallen under the effective sway of assorted Shiite warlords, while Kurdistan remains split between the two main Kurdish militias.

The troubled capital is being punished twice - once by the spreading havoc, again by its backlash, as seen after the Samarra outrage.



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Ahmadinejad Is Hell-Bent on an N-Bomb

But He Is Stalled by a Powerful Faction of Mullahs

America, the European Union and Israel have definite proof that Iran has stalled its nuclear



program a step before weaponization. One inhibitor is the serious division among its leaders. The go-ahead on completing the fuel cycle is not at issue. On that there is consensus. But horns are locked on the ultimate stage of the program which is still in the future, the ability to manufacture a compact, deliverable nuclear device.

That stage calls for a different, very complex technology which is still beyond Iranian nuclear scientists. The hardest part to get right is the detonating mechanism.

According to **DEBKA-Net-Weekly's** Iranian sources, president **Mahmoud Ahmanadinejad** leads the school demanding that Iran go full speed ahead for a weapon.

He calls the nuclear bomb the weapon of the *Musdtadh a-Fin* (Damned on Earth), that is the persecuted and downtrodden peoples whom he claims to champion.

He argues that the Damned on Earth must possess a nuclear bomb because of its compelling quality which transcending the political-military, epitomizes equality as a supreme social value.

The contentious president also claims to speak for the veterans of the Iraq-Iran war of the 1980s, the Islamic republic's most traumatic experience. He confided recently to his circle of close associates:

"If Iran had had the bomb in 1980, Saddam Hussein would not have dared to attack us, history would have been different and one million dead Iranians saved."

Some of his supporters among the Revolutionary Guards and radical conservatives say Iran should quit the Non-Proliferation Treaty altogether.

Ahmadinejad is egged on by a group of firebrand ayatollahs led by his teacher and mentor, **Ayatollah Mohammad Taghi Mesbah-Yazdi** (See **DNW 242**). Mesbah-Yazdi produced a fatwa contradicting the established clergy's ban and authorizing a nuclear bomb "for the purpose of a retaliatory strike against those aspiring to attack us with nuclear weapons."

The president's tame clerics are useful as religious foils against the supreme ruler Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. He is also strongly backed by the Revolutionary Guards and their commander **Gen. Rahim Safavi**. But to push hard and fast all the way, he needs the permission of the 9-member Supreme National Security Council, of which Safavi and others are ex-officio members. So far he has enlisted only one third of its support. Khamenei has the authority to veto a SNSC decision, but has never exercised it before.

Opponents: radical threats erode Iran's standing

The radical president faces some pretty cogent arguments against the great leap to the bomb.

DEBKA-Net-Weekly's Iranian sources sum them up and name their proponents.

The new National Security Council secretary, **Dr. Ali Larijani**, wants to keep the diplomatic ball rolling and opposes confrontation with the West.

He is backed by the Constructionist Faction and, most powerfully, by former president **Hashemi Rafsanjani**, who headed the nuclear program before Ahmadinejad defeated him in the presidential election last year. This old warhorse of Iranian revolutionary politics favors a freeze on the weapons program.

He carries with him the top brass of the armed forces, which are systematically sidelined by the president's backers, the pro-weapon Revolutionary Guards.

Their foremost arguments are as follows:



For the Islamic Republic, a nuclear bomb would not be a deterrent to a US or even a Israeli strike, because Iran is short of an effective anti-missile, anti-air system as well as an up-to-date communications network. Therefore, the acquisition of a nuclear weapon would simply invite outside aggression and isolation.

Iran is in no position to use - or even threaten to use - weapons of mass destruction. A fully-fledged atom bomb would provide less protection than a program that stopped short of one.

Rafsanani goes even further. Once Iran acquires a nuclear bomb, he warns, the Gulf emirs will appeal to Washington for an American security umbrella to encircle Iran. Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt will go shopping for their own bombs.

In the last six months, Ahmadinejad's opponents charge, Tehran's international and strategic standing has been undercut by its radical and threatening posture. In this short period, Iran has lost the contest against America for European sympathies. France, in particular, is now an adversary. The Islamic republic has even lost its great historic friend and ally, India, which now refuses to have any military truck with Tehran. Russia is also pulling away from relations with Iran in the light of China's promotion to senior trading partner.

China cleans up

DEBKA-Net-Weekly's Gulf sources report that those relations are advancing apace.

This week, a big delegation representing the Chinese military and nuclear energy commission held lengthy talks with officials of Iran's nuclear energy commission on Kish Island in the Persian Gulf on the multibillion concession offered Beijing to build nuclear powers stations in Iran. They also discussed terms for Chinese nuclear power, weapons and missile technologies to be granted Iran in exchange for Chinese services for developing and upgrading Iran's dilapidated oil industry.

Beijing is also the beneficiary of huge oil and gas deals as well as investing heavily in the oil wells of southern Iranian Khuzestan.

The controversy roiling back and forth in Tehran over the pros and cons of taking the national nuclear program on to the last stage has reached a standoff.

Khamenei and Rafsanjani have joined forces to wield the argument as a tool to whip up opinion against the president in the Qom and Mashhad clerical establishments, many of whom accuse him of adventurism.

Pamphlets are circulating warning of the hazards of a nuclear weapon. They are signed by a group called the Islamic Participation Party. The main issue now is whether or not to strike a deal with Moscow for the transfer of part of Iran's uranium enrichment processing to Russia, while keeping its hands on the project.

Although the president's campaign is gaining ground by mobilizing the public to the view that Iran must have a nuclear weapon as a matter of national pride, the anti-weapon faction in Tehran is ahead of the game.

But Ahmadinejad is still fighting.

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A Global Terror Movement in the Making

Tehran Probes for Footholds in America's Back Yard

Iran's parliament (majlis) Speaker, **Gholam-Ali**



Haddad Adel, set out on a Latin American jaunt this week. His mission: to lay the foundations of a terrorist network within striking distance of the USA.

DEBKA-Net-Weekly's Iranian sources report that Adel touched down in Caracas, Havana and Brasilia. The formidable delegation he led was made up of Iran's agriculture, industry and minerals ministers, a sprinkling of majlis members, but also a group of tough-looking intelligence and terror experts.

The ministers and the lawmakers held formal talks with Venezuelan and Cuban leaders, **Hugo Chavez** and **Fidel Castro**, while behind the scenes the "experts" huddled with their opposite numbers to explore ways to cooperate in their clandestine business.

While both Latin American governments are far from being fans of Washington, neither is keen on gratuitously prodding their powerful next-door neighbor. Nonetheless, **DEBKA-Net-Weekly's** counter-terror sources report headway was made on a number of tentative issues that are susceptible to further development as real hazards.

1. Tehran was granted permission to use Venezuela's diplomatic mail for transmitting "sensitive" documents to the United States. This will make it possible for Tehran to post intelligence briefings to its agents inside the United States.
2. Venezuela will consider drawing up for the Iranians a list of undercover operatives in the US, as potential candidates for terror and espionage. Tehran values this concession very highly because most of the American Arab, Iranian and Muslim agents it is running at present have fallen under tight US surveillance and are therefore no use for missions.
3. Cuba offered a similar list with the names of Cuban expatriates in the United States, mainly in Florida, who actively support the Castro regime.
4. The Iranian delegation angled for permission to set up operations and training centers for their intelligence and terror operatives in South America. Tehran proposed to use these centers to bring together and train Syrian, Egyptian, Iraqi and other Muslims living in the triangle between Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil. Venezuela and Cuba were asked for permission to locate in their countries camps to train recruits from Brazil and Chile as spies and terrorists.

Chavez is tempted to give the Americans a nuclear scare

Chavez did not give an immediate reply to the request but promised to think it over. Castro was more forthcoming, He promised an answer in weeks, but stressed that if a single word about the project leaked to the American or world media, he would withdraw.



The incentive the Iranians offered Chavez was nuclear collaboration between the two countries. Although Iran has still not acquired its own bomb, the Venezuelan ruler found the proposition attractive. He envisaged the impact the very suggestion of a nuclear bomb being developed in Latin America would have on Washington. He predicted a scare on the scale of the Cuban missile crisis.

Castro was offered a different kind of lure for his collaboration: a promise of substantial financial aid to repair Cuba's national water works, upgrade its farm industry and build a cement factory and a power plant. If things went well, Iranian crude would also gush free of charge.

Nuclear cooperation was the focus of Adel's talks in Brasilia on Feb. 23. According to **DEBKA-Net-Weekly's** Iranian sources, the majlis Speaker,

after applying for Brazilian diplomatic backing in international forums on the nuclear question, asked for closed-door conversations with Brazilian intelligence chiefs and heads of its nuclear program on covert cooperation. For some years, Brazil worked on a project to manufacture nuclear fuel, until it was brought to a halt at US insistence. Still, the Brazilians would like to bring the project to completion. The Iranian proposition was to buy the technology already developed in Brazil before the suspension and secretly employ the Brazilian nuclear scientists who were engaged in the project. Iran would profit from this know-how, while the Brazilians would get the opportunity to complete their experiments and improve their knowledge. The Brazilians agreed to consider the proposition, albeit without much enthusiasm.

DEBKA-Net-Weekly's counter-terror sources have also caught up with the Iranians working on rebuilding their spy networks in Japan. Those cells were broken up when Tokyo expelled thousands of legal and illegal Iranian laborers from the country and closed its borders to Iranian entry.

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Israel

Ehud Olmert's Four-Year Master Plan



The Bush administration is assuming that prime minister **Ehud Olmert** has a good chance of heading an Israeli government for the next four years, provided his Kadima party wins the March 28 general election.

On that assumption, the White House perceives future Israeli policy as being based on the principles outlined here for the first time by **DEBKA-Net-Weekly's** Washington sources:

1. The West Bank defense barrier will be completed by December 2006 – or February 2007, at latest. Olmert informed the Americans that he had taken over the fence project from defense minister **Shaul Mofaz** and means to monitor the progress of work daily. As finance minister, he can waft away problems of budgeting.
 2. The completed fence will enclose 76 percent of the quarter-of-a million Israelis living in the West Bank locations of Ariel, Maaleh Adummim, Efrat, Gush Etzion and the Jordan Valley. Left on the Israeli side of the barrier, will be 1.3 percent of the one and-a-half million West Bank Palestinians.
 3. Some 65,000 Israelis resident on the West Bank will find themselves out in the cold to the east of the West Bank fence.
 4. This group will not be forcibly evacuated, as were the Gush Katif Israelis from Gaza last September. Neither will the Olmert government initiate a unilateral withdrawal. They will be offered a compensation and re-housing program for voluntarily pulling up their stakes and relocating from the West Bank. The sum on offer will be much more modest than the compensation granted the Gaza evacuees. It will total \$1 billion, equal to the allocation granted 10,000 evacuees from Gaza and the northern West Bank last summer. But it will have to be divided up among six times their number should they all opt to move away from the West Bank and resettle in pre-1967 Israel.
- The Israeli prime minister is under no illusion that he can persuade all of them to make the move before 2010, when the next government ends its tenure – if it goes full term. But he hopes that up to half will agree to leave their West Bank homes.
5. On the strength of this limited withdrawal - and the likelihood of

Mahmoud Abbas staying on as president of the Palestinian Authority - the Israeli prime minister believes final-status peace talks with the Palestinians will become feasible to determine the final borders between Israel and the future Palestinian state. For the process to go forward, the Palestinians will have to observe an extended ceasefire in their terror operations. At this point, Jordan is demanding a role.

Olmert prepares aggressive action to eradicate terror

DEBKA-Net-Weekly's military sources report that **King Abdullah** is leaning hard on Olmert, as on **Ariel Sharon** before him, to permit the 3,000-strong Jordanian-Palestinian security contingent, known as the Bader Force, to take up position on the West Bank under the command of Jordanian officers.



The Jordanian government contends that, as the defense barrier's construction progresses and a Hamas government assumes office, West Bank Palestinians will need to be subjected to the control of a professional military force with a finite command hierarchy, which is answerable to an Arab government boasting strong ties with the West.

This week, our sources reveal, King Abdullah sent the Bader Force commander, **General Faisal Fahoum** (scion of a Nazareth Arab family which fled to Jordan in the 1948 War), along with a group of senior officers, on a tour of European capitals.

Their task was to persuade defense ministry officials of those governments to press Israel to agree to the Bader Force's deployment on the West Bank.

6. An Olmert government has charted a four-year military program for the West Bank, according to the impression gained in Washington.

It consists of the following steps:

Israeli forces will enter Palestinian-controlled areas to the east of the defense barrier for a radical campaign to eradicate terrorist strongholds and networks. The operation will be conducted more aggressively than has been normal IDF practice in recent years.

The campaign was launched this week.

Three Israeli battalions were deployed in Nablus against terrorist targets on Sunday, Feb. 19. They are still there five days later.

The Olmert government is planning several more large-scale operations of this type, some to be carried out simultaneously in several Palestinian centers. According to this plan, offensives to wipe out terrorist bases will also be conducted in the Gaza Strip.

The Jordan Valley will remain in Israel's hands as its eastern defense border. The defense frontier will consist of two lines: one will face the Jordan River and Syria to seal the border against the infiltration of terrorists to the West Bank. The second will run opposite the West Bank to secure the Jordan Valley and the eastern border against a Palestinian attack from the west.

The Olmert blueprint has been stuffed into a drawer meanwhile until March 28, depending on whether Ehud Olmert is able to win an election. He attained office - not through the ballot box but as caretaker, after Ariel Sharon suffered a stroke on January 4. He has a little over a month to prove his mettle to the Israeli voter.

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Israel's defense chiefs unhappy with the watered down anti-Hamas sanctions

19 February: Addressing the cabinet, chief of staff Lt. Gen Dan Halutz warned against letting moderate-sounding words from Hamas spokesmen erode Israel's capabilities for combating terror. A Hamas government will take five weeks to install, but Israel must act today on the assumption that the terrorist organization is not about to change its stripes as a threat to Israel. National security adviser Giora Eiland's recommendations were mostly rejected by the ministers. He advised canceling joint Israeli-Palestinian projects and expelling the Gaza Strip from the customs accords with Israel as compared with the West Bank.

Seven of the 23 convicted 23 al Qaeda terrorists who escaped Yemen prison have been captured

19 February: They include Jamal Badawi, mastermind of the Oct. 12 2000 bombing attack on the USS Cole in which 17 US sailors perished. When a Yemeni force picked them up in desolate Hadhramauth, ancestral homeland of their master, Osama bin Laden, it came upon a new 14-man al Qaeda network, geared ready in bomb vests for attacks on Western targets in Yemen.

The Bush Plan Vs the Algerian Formula to Contest Hamas

19 February: Israel's caretaker prime minister Ehud Olmert greeted all the stages of Hamas' rise to power with inertia. Finally, Sunday, Feb. 19, he put a package of steps for action before the Israeli cabinet. Those steps were not choreographed in Jerusalem but in Washington.

1. To starve the Hamas-ruled Palestinian Authority of funding.
2. Channel foreign aid directly to the Palestinian population through international organizations.
3. Sever the Gaza Strip from the West Bank.
4. Orchestrate Abu Mazen's actions as chairman of the Palestinian Authority to ascertain that he uses the next four to six months to restore and consolidate his own defeated Fatah.
5. He will then trump up a constitutional crisis, sack the Hamas government, dissolve the 132-member legislative council and call a snap general election.
6. This time, unlike in January, the United States will apply all its intelligence and financial might to make sure Hamas does not win again.
7. The Olmert government will act in conjunction with the steps laid out in the Bush administration's plan of action.

DEBKAfile's Palestinian experts see little chance of this blueprint actually succeeding for three main reasons:

- A. Reliance on Mahmoud Abbas and his Fatah party for practical steps has never worked – witness the mayhem in the Gaza Strip, the arms smuggling, the failure to rein in terrorists.
- B. Hamas leaders have gained a head start on the Bush plan with moves supported by their Arab and Muslim allies.
- C. Hamas can easily circumvent the plan to starve its administration of finances.

This situation cries out for bold, independent enterprise to bring the menace to heel before it is too late. Israel cannot afford to stand by for another American fiasco like the Palestinian election, which opened the door wide to Hamas.

DEBKAfile's political sources see the advantage of a course modeled on the

Algerian formula.

In the early 1990s, the Algerian army stepped in to prevent violent Muslim extremists from assuming power after their election win. Applied to the Palestinian arena, Israel, preferably in conjunction with the Americans, would instigate and orchestrate a Palestinian military coup d'état in the West Bank, which would leave Hamas government isolated and hanging out to dry in the Gaza Strip.

On the West Bank, Israel has the means and connections to ensure the success of a coup and prevent the West Bank from deteriorating into a second Gaza Strip.

Iran extends its sponsorship of terrorists with a promise of training facilities for Hamas

21 February: This week's Tehran visit by a Hamas delegation led by politburo chief Khaled Meshaal ushered in an era of close military collaboration between the Islamic republic and the Palestinian terrorists, according to DEBKAfile's military sources.

Earlier this year DEBKA-Net-Weekly's counter-terror sources uncovered Iran's support in military training, logistical support, weapons and money for the terrorists fighting US forces in Iraq under Abu Musab al Zarqawi.

According to DEBKAfile's Iranian sources, Hamas leaders in Tehran played hard to get; they balked at putting themselves entirely in Iran's power or letting the Palestinian Authority become an Iranian dependency or outpost for the sake of a financial handout. However, Meshaal and party welcomed any assistance on offer for building a Hamas-controlled military force, available also to support any Tehran action against Israel, whether direct attacks or terrorism modeled on the Iraqi guerrilla-terrorist insurgency.

The Hamas delegation and Iranian leaders came to an agreement for Hamas military missions to be invited to Tehran and given all the formal honors of official Palestinian Authority delegations. The Islamic republic will also make training camps available for Hamas terrorists as well as weapons and military aid.

The Gold Dome of Samarra is shattered by a terrorist bomb, outraging Iraq's Shiites

22 February: The bloodless attack on one of the four holiest Shiite shrines brings Iraq to the brink of civil war.

DEBKAfile's sources: The bombing was carried out by a small squad trained by Abu Musab al Zarqawi especially for the operation. Four-to-six men entered the Askariya mosque Tuesday night and placed explosive charges around the interior of the gold dome so as to bring it crashing down on the sacred tombs below.

Samarra police have made 10 arrests, among them foreigners, as would be typical of al Qaeda.

Olmert apologizes to King Abdullah for a senior Israeli commander's comments on Jordan

22 February: He said the comment by OC Central Command Maj.-General Yair Naveh in no way represented government policy.

The general was quoted as saying in relation to the strengthening of the Hamas-Iran axis: "Jordan has its issues also." Given that Jordan is 80 percent Palestinian and in the light of regional threats, "King Abdullah might be the last Hashemite monarch to rule the kingdom."

Foreign minister Tzipi Livni called her Jordanian counterpart Abdullah al-Khatib to stress relations with Jordan are seen by Israel as a strategic asset.

DEBKAFfile adds: Naveh, however undiplomatically, is the last of several Israeli military and security experts to point up the acute danger threatening the Jewish state and region at large from Hamas' rise to power. He was preceded by Shin Beit director Yuval Diskin and ex-chief of staff Moshe Yaalon.

Acting prime minister Ehud Olmert takes the opposite view. He told the Knesset foreign and security committee Wednesday, Feb. 22, that, unlike Diskin, he does not regard Hamas as a strategic threat to Israel on the scale of a nuclear-armed Iran. His critics accuse him of playing down the Hamas threat in order to whitewash the past errors to which he was party and which made it possible for the Islamist terrorists to take over Palestinian government.

Russian missile cruiser Moskva - on a NATO exercise - docked at Syrian Latakia

February 21: A task force led by the Moskva and the Azov landing ship became the first Russian naval force to pay a call at a Syrian port in decade on Feb. 21.

DEBKAFfile's military sources report: The force sailed out of its home port of Sevastopol on the Black Sea, on Feb. 5, to join a NATO-led anti-terrorist operation in the Mediterranean for a combined three-month drill focusing on combating the smuggling of weapons of mass destruction, illegal weapons trade and migration.

NATO leaders had no idea that the Russian naval force intended to break away from the exercise long enough to put in at a Syrian port – a call which Syrian president Bashar Assad took as a gesture of support from Moscow. The visit underlined the Kremlin's plan to play a larger part in the military affairs of the Middle East, largely by making friendly overtures to America's adversaries. President Vladimir Putin's invitation to discuss arms sales in Moscow with an invited Hamas delegation was part of this picture.

Israel secretly permits Hamas-Fatah coalition talks in Gaza. Negotiations are progressing

22 February: According to DEBKAFfile's Exclusive sources, while preventing the Fatah party from reaching Gaza Feb. 20, the Olmert government changed its mind the next day. The Fatah delegation is led by its parliamentary faction leader Azzam al Ahmad, Mohammed Dahlan and Ahmad Hilar "Abu Maher", secretary general of the Fatah's Gaza branch and Dahlan's sworn enemy.

DEBKAFfile's sources note that Israeli policymakers' decision to allow a coalition that offers a Hamas-led government stability and opens the way for its international recognition poses a number of questions:

1. What is the point of the Israeli PM's tough-sounding refusal to recognize the new "terrorist authority," on the one hand, when on the quiet he plays ball with that same authority?
2. This tactic is no secret in Washington and European capitals. In what light does it place foreign minister Tzipi Livni's campaign for the international boycott of a Hamas government? Will not foreign governments help themselves to a page from Israel's two-handed book?

DEBKAFfile's Palestinian sources report perfect coordination between supposed political rivals, Palestinian Authority chairman Mahmoud Abbas and the designated Hamas prime minister Ismail Haniye. Even their communiqués are synchronized: Abu Mazen seems to argue the US-Israeli case and urges Hamas to accept terms for buying recognition, while Haniye consistently turns them down and refuses any truck with Israel. This act invariably ends with Abbas brushing aside Israel's demands as irrelevant

because its government rejects any Palestinian negotiating partner whoever heads their government. Israel is thus put in the wrong by a falsehood because, in point of fact, the lines have always been open between Abu Mazen's and the Israeli prime minister's offices, over and above the frequent exchanges via Washington.

But the Olmert government has so far not been able to develop a consistent, practicable policy on the Hamas question and is therefore stumbling from one contradiction to another.

Rice fails to persuade Saudi King Abdullah and Mubarak to stop funding Hamas

23 February: This was the main object of the US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice's Middle East trip. With financial support from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the Persian Gulf states and private Muslim donors, the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority government of Ismail Haniyeh is guaranteed at least half a billion dollars a year, or \$40 million a month.

DEBKAfile's Middle East sources: Saudi Arabian King Abdullah decided to pledge the financial support needed to prop up the Hamas-led PA government and maintain its ability to function. (During the first week of February, immediately after Hamas's victory in the Palestinian elections, **DEBKA-Net-Weekly 241**, February 10, reported the failure of US attempts to dry up Hamas's financial sources, as had Israel's diplomatic efforts led by Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni). The king also decided that the Hamas should not be forced to recognize Israel, only to be more flexible in maintaining regular contacts with the Jewish states and honoring the agreements signed by the PA. The Hamas assented.

French President and Prime Minister Pay Tribute to Ilan Halimi at Paris Synagogue Memorial

23 February: For a crime that has shocked all of France, the head of the anti-Semitic gang which is suspected of kidnapping, torturing and murdering 23-year old Halimi has been arrested in Ivory Coast. Youssef Fofana, 26, is in the custody of French police who went to Ivory Coast to question him after issuing an international warrant for his arrest.

Ilan Halimi was found naked, bound and gagged near Paris, with horrific injuries after being held for ransom three weeks. He died on the way to hospital. French prosecutors at first denied anti-Semitic motives for the crime.

French ministers, clerics and trade union leaders will join a protest rally in Paris next Sunday.

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