



News from the Nations

Nuclear Iran

Iran has begun constructing a new nuclear reactor without any foreign assistance, the head of its nuclear agency, Vice President Gholamreza Aghazadeh, said in March. "As per President Ahmadinejad's demand, the construction of the first independent, 360-megawatt reactor has already started", an agency statement read. Speaking at a conference on Iran's nuclear programme, Aghazadeh said, "The enemies know that they cannot affect our people's determination to achieve nuclear energy for peaceful purposes and they are trying to create voices of dissent".

Teheran embassies prepare for an attack

Several foreign embassies in Teheran are updating their emergency evacuation plans should a Western or Israeli attack on Iran occur. According to foreign sources, foreign diplomats believe a possible attack could take place before the end of 2007. By that time, Iran might have enough enriched uranium to cause a humanitarian and environmental catastrophe from radioactive fallout should its nuclear facilities be damaged or destroyed in an attack. Embassies in all countries generally have evacuation plans for their staff, but foreign sources describe the general atmosphere in Iran as one of heightened preparedness. It is, of course, the job of diplomats to keep their ear to the ground, and such reports indicate the seriousness of war threats.

The Testimony, April 2007

Israel prepares for possible war with Syria

While chances for all-out war with Syria in 2007 are deemed low by Israel's top intelligence officials, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has instructed the defence establishment to prepare for the possibility, according to a report in the *Jerusalem Post*, which says, "The cabinet in February heard intelligence assessments from the Mossad, the Shin Bet, Military Intelligence, the National Security Council and the Foreign Ministry. Military Intelligence chief Maj.-Gen. Amos Yadlin opened a briefing and told the ministers that 'Israel is surrounded by negative processes . . . that create more instability in the Middle East than in the past'. Yadlin and Mossad head Meir Dagan agreed that the chances for war with Syria are low, but the chances are high however that Syria would respond militarily to Israeli acts. Dagan refrained from elaborating, but officials said that war could erupt in response to a renewed conflict with Hizbullah or to IDF action in Syria. Military Intelligence warned that the global Jihad movement saw Israel as a target, and that Sunni-Shi'ite tensions could spread throughout the region. While discounting chances of an all-out Middle East war, Mossad officials warned that a premature US pullout from Iraq could trigger chaos there and throughout the region".

HAMAS TRAINS IN IRAN

Hamas has sent dozens of its members to Iran to receive military training, and hundreds more are preparing to go, Shin Bet (Israel Security Agency) chief Yuval Diskin told the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee on March 13, as reported in the Jerusalem Post. Mr Diskin said that this was a "strategic danger, more than any weapons smuggled into Gaza". Diskin also said that thirty-one tons of dynamite were smuggled into Gaza during 2006, up from five tons in 2005. He said the Shin Bet projected that, if the smuggling was not stopped, terrorist organisations in the Gaza Strip would develop sophisticated rockets with ranges of thirteen to twenty kilometres, bringing Ashkelon within easy reach.

EU backs Syria's bid for the Golan

Europe supports Syria's plans to get back the Golan Heights, EU Foreign Policy Chief Javier Solana said in mid-March following a meeting with Syrian President Bashar Assad. Solana said at a press conference in Damascus, "We are interested in working for your country to return to itself the territories that were captured in the 1967 war". Israeli officials had opposed Solana's visit to Damascus, saying it lent legitimacy to a government that is supporting terrorism. This was Solana's first visit to Damascus in two years.

Arab states peace deal

Arab leaders were expected to sign up to the Saudi peace initiative at a Riyadh summit, which ended recently. The plan promises Arab recognition of Israel and full peace in return for Israel's withdrawal from the 'occupied territories' and a solution to the Palestinian refugee problem. It was first adopted at the 2002 Arab League summit, but floundered amid the Intifada. The relaunch takes shape as Israel and Sunni Arab nations such as Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states are increasingly concerned by Shia Iran's desire for nuclear power and regional hegemony. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who has reportedly held two secret meetings with high-level Saudis recently, has said the plan has "positive elements". But Israel insists that settlement blocs must be taken into account, and that Palestinian refugees can return only to Palestine, not to Israel itself. Saudi Arabia's foreign minister, Prince al-Faisal, hinted that Arab leaders would be willing to consider some changes to the initiative. Whereas Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas is likely to announce that the Palestinian Authority supports the initiative, Hamas ministers are expected to reject it. Mr Abbas told reporters at the summit, "If this initiative is destroyed, I don't believe there will be another opportunity in the future like this". Mr Ban Ki-moon, the UN Secretary General, met Mr Olmert and suggested the Quartet convene a summit between Saudi Arabia, Israel and moderate Arab countries in order to build on the Saudi initiative. Mr Olmert agreed to consider this.

Growth in China's exports to Europe

China displaced the US as the largest source of European Union imports last year, official figures have showed. The rapid growth in Chinese imports has become politically sensitive in Europe, and has raised fears about the continent's industrial competitiveness. Last year, imports from China into the twenty-five countries comprising the EU rose by twenty-one per cent, according to Eurostat. In contrast, imports from the US rose by eight per cent.

ISRAEL CONSIDERING STRIKE ON IRAN

The likelihood of military action by Israel against Iran's nuclear installations "is increasing daily", a leading analyst at London's Royal Institute of International Affairs told an audience of diplomats and defence experts, as reported in the Jerusalem Post. Yossi Mekelberg, an associate fellow of Chatham House, noted that concerns about Teheran's atomic programme, and inflammatory rhetoric by Ahmadinejad, had combined to create a perception among Israeli leaders that Iran posed an existential threat to the Jewish state. While Israel's preferred option for dealing with Iran was non-military, it was widely assumed that preparations for military action against Iran were "well under way". The Jewish state is currently threatened by no less than four enemies: Iran, Syria, Hizbullah and Hamas. The Iranian threat is the most blatant. A nuclear Iran is a threat not only to Israel but also to the whole Sunni, pro-Western Arab world, and even to Europe. Yet only Israel has been publicly declared the target of Iran's aggression.

Call to EU to recognise Hamas

A top politician has called on the European Union to recognise the new Palestinian government despite the involvement of Hamas, which is banned by the EU. Luisa Morgantini, vice president of the European Parliament, also praised the role of "political prisoners" held by Israel for their "invaluable contribution" to the setting up of the Palestinian Authority. The terrorist group, which refuses to accept Israel's right to exist, had "implied" recognition of Israel, said Ms Morgantini. It had also "long been respecting a cease-fire and had recognised the Oslo accords". This, said the left-wing Italian MEP, "should be sufficient for the EU to immediately recognise the new Palestinian government. Such recognition would put an end to the international isolation of the PA, which has been starved of aid since Hamas was elected. Urging the EU to express its independence from American policy in the Middle East, she called on the organisation to build alliances with those interested in restoring negotiations for a two-state solution, with Jerusalem "as a shared capital".

Olmert and Abbas pledge to talk

Israel's Prime Minister Olmert and Palestinian President Abbas have agreed to meet every fortnight to discuss both day-to-day issues and the peace process, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said at the end of a three-day visit to the region. She said, "The parties will also begin to discuss the development of a political horizon consistent with the establishment of a Palestinian state in accordance with the road map—these are initial discussions to build confidence between parties".