



News from the Nations

Gaza's mini boom revealed

As reported in the *Jewish Chronicle*, "the conventional understanding on Gaza is that it is the largest prison camp in the world". It is also noted that the tunnels that connected Gaza to Egypt have multiplied so fast that the supply of goods travelling through them, from cement to 'Chelsea tractors', now exceeds the demand. Israel still keeps strict control on goods entering Gaza from its side of the border, with only seventy-three categories of goods approved. The *Economist* reports that more than 4,000 different items are now on sale inside Gaza. "Israel itself has also been loosening the blockade, and the international news agencies reported recently that, for the first time in three years, the Israeli authorities are allowing shipments of clothes and shoes to pass through the Kerem Shalom crossing, with more than ten truckloads going over the border. But there is still plenty of misery inside Gaza, although the economic data is increasingly encouraging". The report goes on to say that "Cement, which cost 300 Israeli shekels per sack a year ago, has dropped tenfold in price. Petrol being pumped into Gaza from Egypt via underground pipes sells for one third of the price paid on the West Bank and imports travel much faster through tunnels than via Israel". The question asked is, Where does the income that is producing a mini-Gazan boom come from? The *Economist* reports that much of it derives from subventions provided by official development assistance. The United Nations, largely through the Works and Relief Agency (UNWRA), employs 10,000 Gazans to provide assistance in areas such as health, housing and education. The local Hamas government has its own civil service, but the largest employer of all is the alternative civil service provided by Salam Fayyad's West Bank government. The remarkable thing about much of this reporting from Gaza is "how little we have heard of it before. For Western journalists access to the territory is tricky and dangerous, but the narrative of humanitarian disaster—often served up by the Western press—looks for the moment to be wide of the mark".

EU chief allowed into Gaza

Israel recently allowed European Union Foreign Affairs Representative Baroness Catherine Ashton, and United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, to enter the Gaza Strip in an apparent reversal of policy. According to *World News in the Jewish Chronicle*, both asked Israel to open the Erez crossing into Gaza for their delegations. "Officials at the Foreign Ministry explained that, since Baroness Ashton and Mr Ban represent major international organisations with numerous aid programmes in Gaza, it was decided to make an exception. One high-level official explained that the visits it was felt would not affect Hamas's isolation".

The Testimony, April 2010

Waiting out the storm

The *Jerusalem Post* reports that the day after Dubai police chief Dahi Khalfan Tamim said travellers suspected of being Israeli would not be allowed into the country, Israeli business people who visit there regularly said his statement was mostly hot air.

West Bank also booming

Due to Middle East news being dominated by Iran's nuclear programme, the continuing financial crisis in Dubai and the recent upset between Israel and the US over construction in Jerusalem, very little attention is being paid to the economic situation in the West Bank. An expert's view reported in the *Jewish Chronicle* draws a surprising economic picture in the Palestinian cities and towns under the control of President Abbas' government: "The International Monetary Fund projected that growth for the West Bank in 2009 would come out at 7 per cent, with a similar figure forecast for this year; and, according to the Palestinian Central Bureau for Statistics, industrial production for the West Bank in January 2010 increased by almost 12 per cent over the previous year. Several new development projects have been announced . . . in other words, the West Bank is booming. An indication of how far things have changed was the recent London road show organised by the Palestine Securities Exchange in conjunction with the Portland Trust. It featured telecoms, real estate, financial and pharmaceutical companies. 36 PSE listed companies have reported profits in 2009".

Netanyahu feels history on his side

Binyamin Netanyahu is the son of a historian. Recently, hundreds of guests celebrated Benzion Netanyahu's 100th birthday, and the prime minister extolled his father's ability to foresee major historical events. He said that the "wise old historian spoke of the future and warned of the terrible consequences if Iran is allowed to obtain nuclear weapons". Netanyahu's fervent belief is identical to that of his father, that Israel has one overriding concern: the Iranian threat. Everything else is merely a hindrance and no one can tell him otherwise. Mr Netanyahu's view of the world is also formed by staunch ideology, also inherited from Benzion, that Israel should hold onto all the land captured in 1967 and that most Arabs will never reconcile to the Jewish state. He was forced in his first term as PM to hand over most of Hebron and other parts of the West Bank to the PA, but his heart was never in it. He really believes in building in east Jerusalem. His arguments have failed to convince the Israeli public, who now believe in a two-state solution. Mr Netanyahu's loyal circle of aides is telling him to stand up to the American dictation. Will he listen to them and to his historical certainty that he will be proven right, or will he listen to Shimon Peres, Ehud Barak and others who tell him that for Israel to confront Iran it needs to do whatever it takes to have America by its side?"

ISRAEL PREPARES WAR PLANES

The Israeli defence establishment is gearing up its preparations for extensive missile attacks on its towns and military bases in case of war. At a special meeting chaired by the prime minister, the chiefs of the military and emergency services presented the latest civil-defence readiness plans. The exact details of the threat assessments are not given, but it is expected that, in a war between Israel and its neighbours to the north—Syria, and Hizbullah in Lebanon—hundreds, perhaps thousands, of missiles would rain down on the north and the Tel Aviv area. Hizbullah currently has stockpiled about 40,000 missiles of various ranges, while Syria has over 100,000. Israel is expected to attack the missile sites in Lebanon and Syria at the start of any conflict, and is also developing a multilayered missile-defence system. Also being discussed are limited evacuations of civilians to locations such as Eilat. The IDF carried out exercises simulating a full-war scenario. They have also carried out exercises simulating biological attacks on the Tel Aviv area. Deputy Defence Minister Matan Vilnai explained that the chance that enemies will use nonconventional weapons is small, but Israel has to be prepared. The IDF are also concerned by the increased accuracy of the Syrian and Hizbullah missiles, which may enable them to go for specific targets smaller than cities, such as army bases and military airfields.

Israel's list of national heritage sites

The Palestinian Authority has called on the international community to stop Israel from including the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron and Rachel's Tomb in Bethlehem on its list of national heritage sites. To protest the inclusion of the West Bank sites the PA wants as part of a Palestinian state, in March the PA held its weekly cabinet meeting in Hebron, instead of the usual Ramallah.

Embarrassing Netanyahu

Senior Israeli officials are accusing both the left and the right wings of sabotaging the Netanyahu government's relations with the US by leaking details of building plans in east Jerusalem. As Netanyahu was due to meet President Obama recently, Israeli websites broke the story that the Jerusalem municipal planning council had given the final authorisation for a new building project in Sheikh Jarrah in east Jerusalem. The timing of the report was designed to sabotage the meeting at the White House by those in opposition of Netanyahu's policies. Environment Minister Gilad Arden said that "the report is spin by the left wing". The timing of the announcement was set to embarrass the prime minister during the crucial visit.

American Jews turn against Obama

The row over new building plans in east Jerusalem evolved from a diplomatic embarrassment to a major crisis between Jerusalem and Washington. The American Jewish approach to the conflict shifted as well. The *Jewish Chronicle* reported that, "as the dispute deepened and Hillary Clinton slammed Mr Netanyahu in person and in public, Jewish groups decided it was time to jump in. Zionist Organisation of America and the Orthodox Union followed suit, but it was only when the American Israel Public Affairs Committee [AIPAC] weighed in recently that the shift in mainstream Jewish opinion was complete. But a statement issued recently by the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organisations made clear that most of the Jewish organisational world does see AIPAC's view as a true representation of their own. In its statement AIPAC called the Administration's handling of the dispute a matter of serious concern".