



News from the Nations

Syria-Iraq relations

According to a media report in Damascus, an improvement in Syria-Iraq relations is worrying the West. Syria is linked to Iraq by the Euphrates and by millennia of history. According to the report, relations between the two neighbours have vastly improved since Syria supported the US-led coalition that drove Iraq from Kuwait in 1991. Trade is booming after border controls were eased two years ago. From almost zero, Syrian exports to Iraq reached £635 million last year, and oil analysts say that Syria is importing about 150,000 barrels a day of Iraqi oil in contravention of UN sanctions—a charge which Syria denies. Western diplomats fear that economic ties may produce deeper ties. At the same time, US dealings with Syria remain tetchy, as Washington weighs up the options for military strikes to implement President Bush's commitment to change Iraq's régime. Izzat Shahbandar, the Iraqi National Congress representative, who has received US funding and has an office in Syria, says he has advised the US to make its aims over Iraq clear to Syria and the Iraqi opposition, both in terms of level of military commitment and the nature of the régime that would replace Hussein's. "The US is discussing attacking Iraq with Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, maybe even Iran, but not with Syria", he says. "This makes the Syrians feel they are being put in the same category as Iraq itself. No wonder Syria is so confused about what the US wants".

Iraq seeks Ukraine arms links

Iraq is exploiting its growing links with Ukraine in an effort to obtain weapons technologies, arms-control experts say. They say the government of the former Soviet republic has been taking an active role in organising direct ties between Ukrainian companies and Iraq. In a report from Kiev, concerns are expressed about Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction; new evidence of links between the two countries has brought calls for a heightened international scrutiny of their relationship. In recordings—heard by the *Financial Times*—of what appears to be a conversation between Ukraine's president, Leonid Kuchma, and the director of Yuzhmash, Ukraine's largest rocket maker, the men mentioned Iraq, Iran and rockets. In a three-part investigation, the *Financial Times* reveals a dangerous lack of control over weapons of mass destruction and their availability to countries such as Iraq, and even to terrorists. Ukraine opened an embassy in Baghdad in 2000, and its ministry of foreign affairs accepted the credentials of Mr Orshansky, a Ukrainian businessman, as an honorary consul for Iraq. Iraq sent a message to the US saying it would continue to strengthen its relationship with Ukraine, and accused the US Government of engineering media reports aimed at damaging Iraq's reputation. Mr Ibrahim, acting head of Iraq's recently opened embassy in Ukraine, said Iraq was primarily interested in using Ukrainian expertise, technology and goods for the oil industry and water and sewage systems.

AMERICAN JEWS EMIGRATE TO ISRAEL

American Jews are emigrating to Israel in large numbers for the first time in decades, spurred by a growth in anti-Semitism and a belief that they might as well face terrorism in their ancestral homeland as in the United States. More than 400 Jews from America and Canada arrived in Israel recently on board a chartered El Al jet. Hundreds of thousands of Jews from the former Soviet Union have poured into Israel in recent years compared with only a trickle from North America. Last year 1,378 American Jews emigrated to Israel, while already this year almost 1,800 have arrived. By comparison, in 1995 more than 2,500 American Jews emigrated, while in 1971 more than 8,000 made the journey. The new arrivals are mostly young professionals—their average age is 35—and while most acknowledge strong religious or secular Zionist factors, many said that the events surrounding September 11 were the trigger.

Security fence in Israel

Work started on sections of a security barrier between Israel and the West Bank on 16 June. Right-wing ministers protested, saying that it would set the outlines of a future Israeli withdrawal.

Syria presides over United Nations

A recent report from the Jerusalem Post said: "This month, the terror-sponsoring nation of Syria is serving as president of the United Nations Security Council. Recently Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for a suicide attack in northern Israel—Islamic Jihad is openly and brazenly headquartered in Damascus. It is funded by the Syrian régime. It couldn't operate for five seconds without the permission and the backing of Syria. Now, at least temporarily, Syria leads the UN Security Council; it's a sick joke. It's a great example of why America is crazy for participating in the charade known as the UN. This is an unaccountable international agency that snubs its nose at everything decent and honourable—and particularly at the United States, which foots most of the bill. Syria should be an international pariah. If the UN served any purpose whatsoever, it should be to impose sanctions on outlaw régimes like Damascus. Syria should not even be permitted to serve on the Security Council. Syria sponsors terrorism—even more than Iran, more than Iraq, more than oil-rich Saudi Arabia. But instead the UN rewards terror states. There are no opposition parties in Syria. There are no elections. There are no opposition newspapers. Syria is a pure totalitarian government at its worst, and against its own people. Yet Damascus is permitted to sit in judgement of the human rights conditions in other countries by the UN, who allows Syria to serve as president of the UN Security Council, the most important arm of the international body. Is this really the road to a more peaceful and just world?"

International criminal court established

With the Rome Treaty establishing the International Criminal Court going into effect on 1 July, Israeli legal experts have expressed fears that officials and military personnel may be hauled before the tribunal and charged with war crimes due to Israel's policies in the territories. According to Ruth Lapidoth, emeritus professor of international law at the Hebrew University and former Foreign Ministry legal adviser, cardinal rules built into the new system mitigate the odds of that happening—at least in the immediate future.

Arab allies press Bush for path to Palestinian state

The foreign ministers of Washington's closest Arab allies pressed the US to concentrate on a political process leading to a Palestinian state. The Arab focus on Palestinian statehood contrasts sharply with the Bush Administration's priority of establishing Israeli security. Colin Powell said recently that the US was close to executing new security arrangements in the region. He also indicated that the Administration was ready to work with two officials appointed by Yasser Arafat, the Palestinian leader, in spite of Mr Bush's call for Mr Arafat's departure from power. Mr Powell said that the US could work with Salam Faiad, the new Palestinian finance minister, and Abdel-Razak al-Yehiyeh, the interior minister, two Palestinian leaders already engaged in talks with the Israeli Government.

BERLIN PRESENTS NEW MIDDLE EAST PLAN

Germany recently presented radical proposals for kick-starting Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, including plans to establish a United Nations Security Council-based representative with executive powers to oversee the reform of Palestinian institutions. The four-page paper, drawn up by Joschka Fischer, German foreign minister, was presented to Javier Solana, the EU's foreign policy chief, Kofi Annan, UN secretary general, William Burns, the US special Middle East envoy, and Igor Ivanov, Russian foreign minister. All four are members of the 'quartet' set up in April to apply maximum diplomatic pressure on Israelis and Palestinians to end the cycle of violence. The international representative will have executive powers to monitor the reforms by way of an international conference and will leave the post once a state is declared. Israel would move in parallel with the three-phase timetable. It would lift the restrictions on the West Bank and Gaza and establish security cooperation with the Palestinians. No new settlements should be built and seizure of Palestinian land should cease.

Saudi envoy says Israel worse than the Nazis

Israeli and Jewish community leaders recently urged Britain to react strongly to remarks by Saudi Ambassador Dr AlGosaibi in which he said that the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza was worse than anything Europe experienced under the Nazis. "This is a war of occupation, far more severe than anything the Germans did when they occupied Europe", he told a group of academics and reporters. An Israel Embassy spokesman said the remarks were "yet another outrage from a man who consistently exploits his diplomatic privilege to incite hatred and violence against Israel".