



News from the Nations

Peace deal deadline of end of 2008 is agreed

At the US-sponsored summit in Annapolis, Israeli and Palestinian leaders hailed an "historic opportunity" for peace, and agreed to open negotiations aimed at reaching a final accord on an independent Palestinian state by the end of next year. President Bush read out a joint statement by Ehud Olmert and Mahmoud Abbas at the summit, designed to launch the first substantial talks in years to solve the Middle Eastern conflict. Representatives from more than forty countries were invited to the peace conference. Mr Bush said the timing was perfect to pursue a peace settlement by the time he leaves office in January 2009 because "Palestinians and Israelis have leaders who are determined to achieve peace". He added, "A battle is under way for the future of the Middle East and we must not cede victory to the extremists". Under the so-called work plan, Israeli and Palestinian negotiators arranged to begin talks on 12 December, with Mr Abbas and Mr Olmert holding private bi-weekly talks throughout the process.

Hamas condemns talks

The Palestinian faction Hamas said that the Annapolis initiative was "doomed to failure", and they denounced the leader of Fatah, their rival Palestinian faction, as a "collaborator", insisting that Hamas would always resist attempts to find a lasting peace with Israel. Hamas supporter Mahmoud Zahar said, "The land of Palestine is not for sale. Whoever thinks we will recognise a Jewish state . . . are deluding themselves".

Secret plan to divide Jerusalem

A top-level team is 'secretly' working within Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's office to lay the groundwork for the possible partition of Jerusalem, according to a report in the *Jewish Chronicle*. The preparations are headed by Mr Olmert's chief of staff, Yoram Turbovitch, and include the Foreign Ministry Director General, Aharon Abromovitch, and the former Deputy Head of the National Security Council, Ehud Prayer, who is now head of the policy planning unit. The team has reviewed all previous government information over the future of Jerusalem and asked experts in various fields to offer opinions. Two teams had previously been set up in the National Security Council to try to find a solution. The first, during Ehud Barak's premiership, proposed three possible borders in the Jerusalem area. The second, set up when Ariel Sharon was in power, proposed splitting Jerusalem into separate 'quarters' (one a strictly Orthodox quarter), with a joint municipality, or dispersing local powers to two city halls. Now, for the first time, a government team is going into the detailed practicalities of partition in Jerusalem. The main emphasis of the current team appears to be a formula by which Israel would relinquish what are now being called 'edge neighbourhoods', sixty-four kilometres square and encompassing most of the twenty-eight Palestinian villages added to the Jerusalem municipal area after the Six-Day War. A meeting was called to discuss a collection of policy papers prepared by the institute and entitled, "Parting with the Arab Neighbourhoods of Jerusalem". These detail the strategic, legal, social, economic and demographic ramifications of ceding the outlying areas of Jerusalem to the Palestinian Authority, and state which neighbourhoods and villages could realistically be transferred.

RABBIS SLAM JERUSALEM SHARE PLAN

The prospect of Israel returning parts of Jerusalem to Arab control has sparked widespread dismay in the Orthodox world. Orthodox rabbis have been lining up to condemn the very thought of compromise over the city, whose sanctity to the Jewish people they consider of such transcendent value that it brooks no argument. Rabbi Druckman, Chief Rabbi of Kiryat Motskin, near Haifa, hoped the government will "wake up and change the direction of the horrendous path upon which it is marching, and take a firm stand regarding the borders of the Holy Land; this is the only way to receive God's promised blessing of peace"; otherwise, "it is only a question of time before the state disappears". Protests have also come from beyond Israel. The leaders of America's mainstream Orthodox organisation, the Orthodox Union, told Israel's Prime Minister Olmert in a letter that they were "mandated to undertake all efforts that are necessary to secure and maintain Yerushalayim as the eternal and undivided capital of the State of Israel".

Diplomatic overtures to Hamas

A diplomatic back channel is intensifying between Israeli and Muslim religious leaders, including figures identified with Hamas. The aim of the talks, taking place with the full knowledge of the Israeli and Palestinian leaderships, is to provide a wider consensus at the grass roots for an eventual accord. According to World News, "While all eyes had been on preparations for the Annapolis summit, talks had continued between senior religious figures on both sides. Israel has insisted on not talking to Hamas politically until it recognises Israel and renounces violence, but politicians are aware of the need to engage with Hamas on some level. The Muslim sources involved confirmed the talks but refused to comment openly. Rabbi Michael Melchior, the senior Israeli participant—a former minister and currently a Labour MK [a member of the Israeli parliament, the Knesset]—said, 'There are talks at all levels with Muslim leaders, including those who have influence over Hamas'. Rabbi Melchior said that one aim was for a fatwa [a decree] by senior Islamic clerics to affirm the right of a Jewish state to exist in the region. Among others, the leadership of Israel's Islamic Movement and representatives of the Muslim brotherhood in Egypt are involved. Both have close political and religious ties with Hamas. As Sunnis, they also have a joint interest in minimising Iranian-Shia influence in the region".

RUSSIA'S THREATS OVER US MISSILE SHIELD

Russia threatened to site short-range nuclear missiles in a second location on the European Union's border recently if the United States refuses to abandon plans to erect a missile defence shield in Eastern Europe. In what appeared to be a fresh attempt to divide the West, a senior army general said that Iskander missiles could be deployed in Belarus if US proposals to place ten interceptor missiles and a radar installation in Poland and the Czech Republic go ahead. "Any action meets a counter-action, and this is the case with elements of the US missile defence in Poland and the Czech Republic", said General Vladimir Zaritsky, the chief of artillery and rocket forces for Russia's ground troops. Russia, which insists that the missile shield is a plot to undermine its nuclear deterrence, has already said that Iskander missiles could be deployed in the Baltic enclave of Kaliningrad, which is surrounded by EU territory. President Putin has also threatened to retrain Russia's nuclear arsenal on targets within Europe. The creation of a second launch pad in Belarus would allow Russia to place "tactical and psychological" pressure on neighbouring Poland, where public support for the proposed shield is low. Washington claims that the shield is aimed not at Russia but at states such as Iran, which it accuses of seeking to develop nuclear weapons that could one day strike the West.

Kosovo on the brink as talks fail

Serb and ethnic Albanian leaders have faced each other over the negotiating table for the last time before the December deadline for a settlement on the future of the disputed province of Kosovo. Without an agreement at the meeting, which is taking place in the town of Baden, near Vienna, the Balkans will face renewed confrontation and the possibility of more bloodshed.

2008 decisive for stopping Iran

Israeli Transportation Minister Shaul Mofaz said recently, "Iran's nuclear programme is proceeding like an express train. The diplomatic efforts to thwart Iran are like a slow train. If we cannot derail the Iranian train, we are on the verge of a nuclear era that will totally alter the regional reality". According to the *Jewish Chronicle*, this was said by the former defence minister and Israel Defence Force chief of staff to the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish organisations in New York. Another warning that time is running out came in November from Brigadier-General Yossi Baidatz, head of the Israeli Military Intelligence's research bureau, who told the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee that if Iran's nuclear programme went unchecked, the Islamic Republic could have nuclear weapons by the end of 2009.

Earthquake tremors in Israel may be wake-up call

The *International Jerusalem Post* has recorded that two tremors rocked Israel, particularly the area from Jerusalem eastward, on 20 November, with no casualties or damage. They are a reminder of the potential for major seismic activity in Israel and of the degree to which the country is unprepared for it. One quake was measured at 3.0 on the Richter scale, and the second, which followed around ten minutes later, was measured at 4.2, with an epicentre in the northern part of the Dead Sea. Residents as far north as Haifa and as far south as Beersheba reported feeling the two tremors. Tel Aviv University's Dr Shmuel Marco noted that the Syrian-African Rift is a high-risk location for earthquakes and that a major earthquake in the region was long overdue. The last substantial quake in the area occurred in February 2004.