



## News from the Nations

**Turkey poses conundrum for EU**  
 According to a Times report, European leaders must soon decide on the matter of whether to start the process which may lead to Turkey joining the EC. The report says: "It is fortunate for Turkey that the Netherlands takes over the presidency of the European Union's rotating presidency. The Dutch are Atlanticists—so any of their foreign policy decisions will always have that special empathy with Washington. Since Turkey is a vital NATO and US ally, it helps to have a likeminded country holding the EU presidency during such a crucial time. In December, EU leaders will decide if they should start accession negotiations with Ankara. If they do, the EU's borders will eventually stretch to Iraq and Syria. For the moment, the omens for Turkey look moderately good, partly because Turkey has speeded up its reforms spanning judicial, ethnic, civil and social issues".

### France against NATO role in Iraq

Jacques Chirac, the French president, recently held out against NATO playing any role in Iraq, in a move that could tear apart a modest, if vague, agreement forged by the twenty-six-member alliance to train the Iraqi security forces. In a statement that made no reference to the early hand-over of sovereignty to the interim government, NATO leaders said they had decided to offer assistance "to the government of Iraq with the training of its security forces. We encourage nations to contribute to the training". The US had wanted NATO ambassadors to start work on 21 July.

### Turkey criticises Israel

Turkish Prime Minister Recip Erdogan has slammed Israel's policies towards the Palestinians, saying they were fanning anti-Semitism in the world. Addressing the Turkish Parliament recently, Mr Erdogan, who has criticised Israel several times this month, said that while Ankara agreed with Israel "on most issues", it thought "differently on one or two matters". He continued: "We don't have a problem with Israeli people but unfortunately, the Israeli administration's current actions are increasing anti-Semitism in the world. While the Palestinians are using stones and light weapons to fight the Israeli Army, the Israelis are using helicopter gunships and bombing raids". Earlier this month Turkey, in recent years a fine supporter of Israel in the Middle East, briefly recalled its ambassador in Tel Aviv for consultations. Israel has rejected the Turkish criticism, declaring that it is "inappropriate and only reinforces those wishing to harm the Jewish people". A senior member of the AKP, Turkey's ruling party, said: "This government is no different from the previous government in its relationship with Israel. Turkey does not want to reconsider its relationship with Israel, but at the same time, recent attacks against the Palestinians by the government of Israel makes the Turkish government's position a lot more difficult". With several conflicts now resolved and relations with its Arab neighbours improving, Turkey may no longer see its relationship with Israel to be as strategic as it was before, says Istanbul-based political analyst Cengiz Candar.

### NATO-Israel ties upgraded

NATO leaders have upgraded the organisation's relations with seven Mediterranean and Middle Eastern nations to what they describe as "a genuine partnership". The leaders, who met recently in Istanbul, decided that Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia would benefit from the move, which they said would "contribute to regional security and stability by promoting greater practical cooperation". The shift means that there will be more military cooperation, joint exercises and seminars on practical issues, such as tackling terrorism. NATO Secretary-General Jaap Scheffer said: "We will make our Mediterranean Dialogue more practical, more focused on substantial cooperation. We will also make an offer to open a security dialogue with interested countries of the broader region of the Middle East." The dialogue, begun in 1994 by the North Atlantic Council, reflects the Alliance's view that security in Europe is closely related to issues of security and stability around the Mediterranean.

**Egyptian-Israeli border cooperation**

Egypt and Israel are working to increase Egyptian forces along the border with the Gaza Strip as part of preparations for an Israeli withdrawal from the territory. Security following a withdrawal, not scheduled for at least ten months, was the focus of talks between Hosni Mubarak, Egyptian president, and Silvan Shalom, Israeli foreign minister. Egypt is playing an increasingly high-profile role in resolving the Gaza issue. The Egyptian foreign minister has said that all sides should maintain the timetable and momentum of the international 'road map', which envisages a Palestinian state by 2005. The Egyptian Government is cooperating with Israel because it does not want to see Islamic militancy spill over the Gaza border into its territory. Mr Shalom said Israel would agree to Egypt stationing an additional 130 security personnel on the border to help uncover tunnels used to smuggle weapons and other contraband into the Gaza Strip. Egypt gave Yassir Arafat until mid-June to reform his security services to ensure law and order if and when Israel withdraws. There were reports from Ramallah recently that Mr Arafat had written to President Mubarak agreeing to reforms. Mr Arafat's agreement would pave the way for Egypt to send military experts into the Gaza Strip to train Palestinian security forces.

**Palestinians oppose role for Egypt and Jordan**

Palestinian factions meeting in Damascus have condemned proposed Egyptian and Jordanian involvement in the Gaza Strip and West Bank after an Israeli withdrawal. Omar Suleiman, Egyptian intelligence chief, visited Israel and the West Bank to coordinate efforts to ensure security when the Israelis pull out. The Damascus statement, signed by representatives of Arafat's Fatah, Hamas and other militant groups, had the hallmarks of a Syrian-supported spoiler to disrupt the Egyptian security plan. Syria, unlike Egypt and Jordan, does not have a peace treaty with Israel. It also hosts radical groups, in spite of US demands that their offices in Damascus be shut. The minority government of Ariel Sharon, Israeli prime minister, has set next March as the deadline for a cabinet vote on withdrawing Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip and part of the West Bank.

**INTERFAITH TALKS IN GULF**

A Vatican-led conference in Qatar on Christian-Muslim relations ended recently with Arab clerics rejecting a move by the Gulf state's emir to broaden the initiative to include Jews. Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, the Qatari emir, opened the seminar by telling senior Muslim and Christian religious leaders that Jews should also take part. "Perhaps it would be worthwhile widening next year's seminar to an Islamic-Christian-Jewish dialogue", said a statement reportedly read out on his behalf. A number of Arab clerics rejected the idea, saying that Israel must first end its occupation of Palestinian land, asking, "Can there be a dialogue with Jews while they still occupy Palestinian land? Would that not consecrate the occupation?". A Syrian representative of the Greek Orthodox Church agreed.

**TENSION ON ISRAEL'S NORTHERN BORDER**

The state of alert along the northern border of Israel was elevated after Hizbullah pounded IDF positions in the Mount Dov area with mortar shells and antitank rockets. The IDF responded with heavy artillery fire. Israel sent a letter to UN General Secretary Kofi Annan and the president of the Security Council protesting against aggressive actions emanating from Lebanon. Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz said the air strike was a clear signal to the Lebanese Government that "Israel will not accept attacks on its sovereignty or territory. Israel sees the Lebanese Government as responsible for attacks initiated from within its borders and will continue to be unequivocal regarding attempts to harm its citizens or soldiers". Deputy Chief of General Staff Major General Ashkenazy said that while Israel is not seeking to escalate the situation in the North, Damascus should not expect to go without penalty.

**US reform plan worries Arab rulers**

The US plan to promote reform in the Middle East, endorsed by G8 leaders at the recent summit at Sea Island, Georgia, has evoked a mixed reaction in the region. Jordan welcomed the plan as "reflective of the priorities of the region" but warned that reform imposed by outsiders could backfire, saying, "Opponents of political and social reform will conveniently label reform efforts as a mere implementation of a Western agenda against the interests of the Arab world and probably get away with it". According to a report, the initiative, targeting the broader Middle East and North Africa, is a diluted version of an earlier US plan that angered Arabs because it was drawn up without consulting them and made no mention of resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict.