



News from the Nations

Israel's new spy satellite

Israel strengthened its foothold in space in June by successfully launching a spy satellite that defence officials said provided the Israeli Defence Force with “unprecedented operational capabilities”, according to a report in the *Jerusalem Post*. The Ofek (Horizon) 7 satellite, however, would take several days of system tests before it could be declared operational. The Ofek 7's elliptical orbit reportedly takes it over Iran, Iraq and Syria every 90 minutes. Weighing 300 kilograms, the Ofek 7 will orbit at up to 600 kilometres above the earth and will downlink its images to a ground station. Defence officials said the Ofek 7 was by far the most advanced satellite Israel had ever launched, superior to the Eros B satellite—sent up in 2006—which can spot images on the ground as small as 70 centimetres in size. Israel currently operates the Ofek 5 spy satellite, successfully launched in 2002.

Syria builds up its military

A high-ranking Israeli Defence Force officer said that the IDF had noticed a military buildup within Syria as well as preparations by Damascus for the possibility of war with Israel. Syria recently decided to move up its annual military exercise and set June as the cut-off date for the completion of military preparations for war. The officer stressed, however, that Syrian President Assad's “strategic decision” was to try and make peace with Israel, but he was at the same time preparing for a regional escalation over the summer.

Banned for being Israeli

More than a million Britons were told recently to boycott Israeli goods, artists, academics and athletes, as the Boycott Israel campaign received a massive boost from the country's biggest union. Delegates representing Unison's 1.3 million members voted at their annual conference in Brighton recently to support a “concerted and sustained” embargo on Israel with an “economic, cultural, academic and sporting boycott”, which is a move to end the occupation. This followed earlier pro-boycott resolutions by UCU, the academics' union, and the National Union of Journalists. In Washington, the American Jewish Committee executive director David Harris told the *Jewish Chronicle*: “British trade unions have become the nerve centre of the movement to demonise Israel”. Anti-boycott figures suggest that the campaign has been fuelled by a well-organised mix of far-left activists and Islamic organisations. In reality, the main proponents are a loosely knit collection of academics and trade unionists linked to groups such as the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, Jews for the Boycotting of Israeli Goods, and Bricup, the British Committee for Universities of Palestine.

HAMAS MAN WORKS FOR BBC

According to a report in the Jewish Chronicle, “A BBC journalist said to have Hamas associations had been allowed by Israel to enter the Gaza Strip in a bid to expedite the release of kidnapped journalist Alan Johnston. Explaining Israel's dilemma, Shlomo Dror, the spokesman for the Israeli Defence Force Co-ordinator of Activities in the Territories, told the Jewish Chronicle: ‘Although we did not think this journalist could help to free Mr Johnston, the BBC asked that we let him go through. If it would have helped, that would have been great. If we had not let him through and then something had happened to Johnston, we would have been blamed for not helping’. BBC spokesmen insisted there was no truth in allegations that the corporation has hired members of Hamas, an illegal organisation in Britain under the Terrorism Act. However, Mr Dror said that the unnamed journalist was on a list of people forbidden entry into Israel by the secret service, Shin Bet, for being considered a threat to security. ‘The BBC say he is close to Hamas. We think he is more than that’”.

BBC apologises over Jerusalem

The BBC apologised recently for referring to Jerusalem as Israel's capital and “historic soul”, and promised not to repeat the ‘mistake’, following a complaint by four British organisations: the Arab Media Watch, the Muslim Public Affairs Committee, the Friends of Al-Aksa and the Institute of Islamic Political Thought, who sent a joint complaint to the BBC.

Golan to be returned for peace deal?

According to a report in the Daily Telegraph, the Israeli prime minister has offered to return the Golan Heights to Syria in exchange for peace. In a communiqué in the nation's press report, Olmert demanded that, in exchange for the return of the strategic highlands, Syria dissolve its alliances with Iran, Hizbullah and Palestinian militant factions who maintain headquarters in Damascus. Syria, under the régime of Bashar al Assad, is a key supporter of the Lebanese Shia Hizbullah militia. Were Syria to abandon its Shia allies in Lebanon and Iran in exchange for peace with the Jewish state, it would seriously weaken Israel's most potent foes. "I am your partner for making peace between our countries", Mr Olmert told Damascus through German and Turkish mediators. "I know that a peace agreement with Syria requires me to return the Golan Heights to Syrian sovereignty. I am willing to fulfil my part in this deal".

Syria's view on the Golan

Syria's ambassador to the UK told an audience in June that Israeli residents of the Golan Heights might prefer to remain under Syrian sovereignty if the area were returned to Syria. Dr Sami Khiyami spoke at a conference entitled, "The Golan: Ending Occupation, Establishing Peace", held at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies and hosted by the Syrian Media Centre in London. In his address, Khiyami stressed how important it was to Syria to recover "its most precious occupied territory". Former Syrian information minister Mahdi Dakhllallah said in June that if a war broke out with Israel it would be a war of resistance and not a conventional war that Israel was accustomed to winning. The Syrian official's remarks confirmed fears in the Israeli defence establishment that Syria was preparing to use Hizbullah-like guerilla warfare tactics in a future conflict.

VENEZUELA'S DEAL WITH RUSSIA

President Chávez of Venezuela is about to buy at least five submarines from Russia in a £500 million deal that will alarm the White House and confirms Venezuela as a growing military power in the region. Mr Chávez was expected to sign the deal during a trip to Moscow. According to a report in the Guardian, Venezuela has agreed an initial contract to buy five Project 636 diesel submarines, and four Project 637 Amur submarines at a later date. Mr Chávez wants to use the submarines to thwart any possible future trade embargo by the US and to defend its oil-rich underwater shelf, the paper reported. Last year he bought twenty-four Russian Sukhoi 30 two-seater attack aircraft, thirty-four helicopters and 100,000 Kalashnikov machine guns. The deal is worth £1.9 billion. Venezuela—which has a defence pact with Cuba—is now the world's second biggest purchaser of Russian military hardware after Algeria. If the full submarine deal goes ahead, Venezuela will have the largest submarine fleet in Latin America. Russia earlier supplied five similar submarines to China under a contract estimated to be worth £900 million. Moscow has also angered the US by selling weapons to Syria and Iran. Russian defence officials have confirmed that negotiations with Venezuela are at an advanced stage.

Israel says Syria is preparing to attack

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert convened Israel's security cabinet following military intelligence reports that Syria was upgrading its forces and weaponry on its side of the Golan Heights. "Israel does not want war with Syria; we must avoid miscalculations that are liable to lead to a security deterioration", Mr Olmert said, using diplomatic channels to deliver this message to Syria. The Israeli Defence Forces have been holding large-scale training exercises in the southern Negev desert. According to military intelligence reports, Syria has stepped up its purchase of anti-aircraft missiles and rockets from Russia, using Iranian money. Some analysts have suggested that the Syrians and Iranians are building up the possibility of a second front, should the US attack Iran's nuclear sites. Another scenario is that Syrian forces would launch a surprise attack on a small area of the Golan, and that Hizbullah would shell northern Israel, to force Israel into negotiations over the future of the Golan Heights. Major General Amos Yadlin, the head of military intelligence, told the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee that Syria was "more than ever in the past ready for war".

Radiation drill in Israel

The first ever radiation drill in an Israeli hospital was held in May, at Rambam Medical Centre in Haifa. The drill, organised in cooperation with the Home Front Command and the Health Ministry, was based on a fictional scenario that terrorists use radioactive materials to create a 'dirty bomb' that comes as a surprise to the hospital authorities, who have to cope with radioactive particles without preparation.