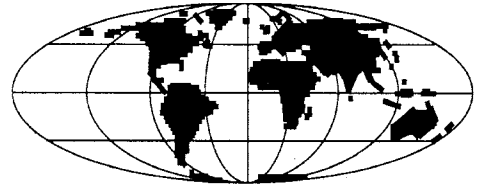


News from the Nations



Iran rebuilds links with Egypt

Iran recently sought to use Gaza's border crisis to increase its influence in the Middle East. Teheran offered to provide Egypt with funds to help with the influx of Palestinians flooding across the frontier. It is the latest sign of improved relations between Cairo and Teheran, which recently saw Ahmadinejad, the Iranian president, telephoning Hosni Mubarak, his Egyptian counterpart, the first contact between the two, according to a report in the Daily Telegraph. Officials in Teheran said that diplomatic relations were close to being restored, almost thirty years after they were cut over Egypt's decision to recognise Israel. This will be closely watched by Israel, which regards Iran as a hostile state, and which monitors closely all attempts by Teheran to influence Palestinian public opinion. Although Hamas, the Palestinian militant Islamist movement that controls the Gaza Strip, is regarded by the West as a terrorist group, it already enjoys diplomatic, military and financial support from Iran. Iran's foreign minister said, "We are on the threshold of establishing official political relations and are waiting for our Egyptian brothers to express their readiness". He also revealed that Teheran had asked Cairo not to seal the border with Gaza, and to allow Iranian-funded aid deliveries to civilian Gazans. Iran is known to use humanitarian aid to further its political aims around the region, most notably in its support of the Shia Arabs of southern Lebanon. Israeli intelligence officials have long accused Iran of providing arms that have been smuggled into Gaza through tunnels dug under the border. Now the border fence has been breached there are fears that the illicit arms traffic could surge with backing from Iran.

Iran takes next step in nuclear programme

According to the *Daily Telegraph*, Iran has taken a significant step forward in its nuclear programme by producing quantities of a gas crucial to the enrichment of uranium. United Nations diplomats revealed that Iran appeared to have overcome technical difficulties and produced small quantities of the gas, which is key to the enrichment process. Of most concern will be whether Iran is closer to linking up its centrifuges into 'cascades'. Iran's underground nuclear facility at Natanz has space for 3,000 centrifuges, and when they are fitted together they will make up eighteen cascades—the crucial number of linked machines needed to make weapons-grade uranium. Russia, which is building Iran's first nuclear power plant, recently completed the shipment of uranium fuel for it, but its representative urged Iran to refrain from taking a defiant posture towards the West.

America supports Israel's missile defence

An American missile ship docked at Haifa Port for three days recently, equipped with an anti-missile defence system that could be deployed in the region in the event of an Iranian missile attack against Israel. The USS San Jacinto is an AEGIS cruiser commissioned in 1988. It carries the most advanced underwater surveillance system available today.

WORLDWIDE THREAT TO JEWS

Senior Israeli intelligence experts have warned that the Israeli Government is failing to help ensure the safety of Jewish Diaspora communities in the event of retaliation for any pre-emptive strike on Iran. They are concerned that the department of the Mossad intelligence agency that deals with the security of Jews around the world has been steadily downgraded over the last few years. "In the past, the Iranians and their allies have proved adept at using proxies for retaliating against targets identified with Israel", a former senior government adviser told the Jewish Chronicle. In the UK some counterterrorism experts believe that Hizbullah has already set up sleeper cells. Also there have been reports of heightened threats against Jews remaining in Iran. The influential Jerusalem-based Jewish People Planning and Policy Institute has highlighted a lack of concern for Jewish safety in Israeli considerations. The Institute has sent out a 'secret' dossier, the product of two years' research, to the heads of Jewish communities worldwide on how to prepare for eventual terror attacks.

Israel to retaliate over rocket attacks

After Hamas dispatched two suicide bombers to Dimona and fired dozens of rockets into Sderot and the Western Negev, a member of Ehud Olmert's inner security cabinet warned that Israel has no alternative but to launch large-scale ground attacks on the Gaza Strip. Welfare Minister Isaac Herzog told the *Jewish Chronicle*, "The situation is very disturbing. It may deteriorate. We are trying to contain the situation. Hamas' actions have led to full-scale activity in Gaza". Israel is pressing Egypt to secure the fourteen-kilometre border between Gaza and Sinai, demolished recently, which opened the way for Hamas to bring in more weapons, money and instructors. It also enabled the Islamist movement to send terrorists into Sinai, from where they can infiltrate the unfenced Negev border (though the Dimona bombers came from Hebron on the West Bank). Israel has accused Cairo of not doing enough to stop the clandestine two-way traffic. Ephraim Sneh, a former Deputy Defence Minister, said, "If the Egyptians do not effectively seal the border, an Israeli ground operation is inevitable". Danny Yatom, a reserve general and former director of the Mossad intelligence agency, said, "Israel must reinforce its patrols along the 230-kilometre Egyptian-Israeli border and use more technology to detect infiltrators". He rejected suggestions by the foreign ministry that Israel should allow Egypt to increase its forces in Sinai beyond the present 750 armed police. He said, "The problem is the lack of will, not the lack of capability. The Egyptians are not firm enough. If they are not firm enough with 700, why will they be firm all of a sudden with 7,000?"

The Testimony, March 2008

Egypt and Hamas

Egypt issued an ultimatum in January to Hamas to pull back dozens of Gazan gunmen who were reported to have crossed into Egypt. Palestinian Authority security officials in Ramallah said 300 to 500 gunmen, most of them belonging to Hamas and Islamic Jihad, were refusing to return to the Gaza Strip. The officials said the gunmen had sought refuge with Bedouin tribes and Egyptian families in a number of places in Sinai. The officials said that the Egyptian authorities had already detained more than 100 armed Palestinians, most of whom were returned to the Gaza Strip after their weapons were confiscated. According to the officials, Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups had succeeded in bringing tons of explosives and various weapons into Gaza over the past weeks. They said tons of drugs had also made their way into the Strip from Sinai. The Egyptians have also foiled an attempt by Hamas members to raise Palestinian and Hamas flags on top of several government institutions in Sinai's Rafah and el-Arish, which is seen by many Egyptians as a serious "provocation". Hassan Issa, a member of the Egyptian parliament, accused Hamas of jeopardising his country's security. "Hamas has violated our sovereignty and this is totally unacceptable—this move poses a real threat to Egypt's national security", he said. It is estimated that around 10,000 Palestinians are still in Sinai. One diplomat told the *Jerusalem Post* that Hamas supporters were trying to create the impression that they had succeeded in 'liberating' Egyptian territory. He said, "The Hamas people apparently forgot that they had invaded Egypt, and not Israel, and the Egyptians are running out of patience". Talks recently in Cairo focused on ending the anarchy along the Gaza-Sinai border. The Egyptians are trying to persuade Hamas to agree to the return of Abbas's forces to the Rafah border crossing, but Hamas has reiterated its opposition to such a move. The Islamist group also opposes the presence of international monitors at the border.

WHAT IF 500,000 GAZANS MARCHED ON ISRAEL?

According to an analysis report in the Jerusalem Post following the destruction of the fence separating Egypt from the Gaza Strip, senior Hamas official Ahmed Youssef warned that "the next time there is a crisis in the Gaza Strip, Israel will have to face half a million Palestinians who will march toward Erez. This is not an imaginary scenario, and many Palestinians would be prepared to sacrifice their lives". Yoram Schweitzer, a senior research fellow at the Jaffee Centre for Strategic Studies, and the director of its Programme on Terrorism and Low Intensity Conflict, said that the "incidents in Egypt may have given an outlet for the pressure" that had been building up in the Gaza Strip as a result of the shortages there. The IDF [Israeli Defence Force] has said in the past that it would respond to such provocations by utilising non-lethal crowd-control methods and maintaining its usual rules of engagement, in which troops would use live fire only if physically threatened. "Hamas knows that the use of civilian protest to pass along a political message can be more effective than shooting bullets. Hamas knows how to use psychological and media warfare to its advantage".