



News from the Nations

Churches to be agents for the EU

The ecumenical churches of the EU are allowed to meet the incoming EU Presidents. So the Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban received a delegation of European church representatives in January in Budapest. Orban acknowledged the difficulties of the European Institutions in getting closer to the citizens. He encouraged the churches to maintain their important role as bridge-builders, because churches are organised on the local, national and regional level and could therefore bring the "voice of the people" to the Institutions, reported the *British Church Newspaper* in February.

Egypt/Israel peace treaty

According to the Jerusalem Post, Egyptian opposition leader Mohamed ElBaradei has reassured Israel that their peace treaty with Egypt is "rock solid." Gabi Ashkenazi, former IDF chief of General Staff, in his first public appearance as a civilian, gave voice to some of Israel's doubts, remarking that it is important to retain Egypt as an ally, but that Israel has contingency plans in case Cairo rescinds its peace treaty with Jerusalem: "Mubarak, with all the criticism over the last three decades, was an anchor of stability in the region—we should admit it, and I hope that would be the case in Egypt. There is a weakening of the moderate camp." The Muslim Brotherhood and other opponents of the Mubarak régime have spoken of the need to revise the treaty, meaning that Israel must be prepared for any eventuality.

Russia goes on arms spending spree

Russia has unveiled the biggest rearmament programme since the fall of the Soviet Union, according to a report in the *Daily Telegraph*. They say "they intend to buy 600 planes, 100 ships and 1,000 helicopters. The planes will mostly be Sukhoi 34 and 35 fighters and the helicopters will include Mi-8 gunships and the bigger Mi-26 heavy-lift cargo craft. Russia's fearsome TU-160 strategic nuclear bombers, which have begun to probe the limits of Britain's airspace in recent years, will also be modernised. Their ambitious overhaul will cost the equivalent of £406 billion and comes at a time when other countries such as Britain are cutting their defence spending to try to balance their national budgets. But with oil prices rising, Russia, the world's biggest energy exporter, feels confident it can afford to upgrade its dilapidated Soviet-era military and believes it urgently needs to do so to confirm its self-proclaimed status as a leading world power. Vladimir Popovkin, Russia's deputy defence minister, said the rearmament programme would be sweeping: '... the main task is the modernisation of the armed forces—we are not interested in purchasing any foreign weapons or military equipment, apart from two new vessels which will be French-built Mistral class helicopter carriers.' Russia would build a further two new Mistrals at its own shipyards. The sale by France is controversial among some of Russia's neighbours such as the Baltic States and Georgia: the vessels can carry 16 helicopters and dozens of armoured vehicles, giving Russia the ability to land hundreds of troops quickly on foreign soil. Mr Popovkin said the shopping spree would reshape the Russian navy, giving it 35 new corvettes, 15 new frigates and 20 new submarines, eight of which would be nuclear-powered and -armed. In total, he estimated that the navy, which is badly trailing the US navy in terms of modern ships, would take delivery of 100 vessels before 2020."

HAMAS STARTS NEW GAZA FIGHT

The Jewish Chronicle reports that fighting has intensified recently around the Gaza Strip in what Israeli defence sources believe is an attempt by Palestinian organisations to test the boundaries and return Gaza to the agenda despite the tide of revolution sweeping the Arab countries. The hostilities began at the beginning of March, when three Grad rockets hit the city of Be'er Sheva, the first time the capital of the Negev has been targeted for two years. No one was hurt, but the Israeli Air Force attacked a number of Hamas targets in retaliation. Security sources believe that the Palestinians are "testing the boundaries" now that Israel is about to deploy the Iron Dome defence system against short-range missiles, as well as attempting to put Gaza back on the international agenda.

Iran tests temperature as ships transit Suez Canal

Two Iranian Navy warships crossed the Suez Canal on 22 February for the first time in over thirty years, in a belligerent move that the Israeli Government says is an attempt by the Islamic Republic to project its power throughout the Middle East. Defence officials said the vessels did not pose a threat to the Israeli Navy, which would be watching them from a distance and would not engage them. The Iranian ships passed Israel at a distance as they made their way to Syria, where they are expected to dock for several months. "This is a major provocation," a senior Israeli defence official said. "We will keep an eye on the ships." It is the first time Iranian military vessels have sailed into the Mediterranean since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The ships reportedly paid about \$300,000 in fees for the passage through the Suez Canal. Israeli Vice Prime Minister Silvan Shalom told reporters for the International Jerusalem Post that "the move is part of an Iranian struggle against the West for hegemony and control in the Middle East . . . Iran's goal is to show the Arab world who the new leader is in the Middle East."

Brotherhood would review peace treaty

According to the *Jewish Chronicle*, "If the Muslim Brotherhood takes power in Egypt, its first move could be to review the peace process with Israel. The Islamic group was banned under President Mubarak, but has just a quarter of Egyptian voters, although they were called into talks on the country's future." The Brotherhood official told *The Times*, "the position on Israel will be decided by the people according to the free choice of parliament—our call is for a comprehensive peace and the building of a Palestinian state, which could mean the abandonment of the 1979 peace treaty."

Hague gets blunt with Netanyahu

The *Jewish Chronicle* reports on British Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary William Hague's intervention in the Middle East peace process in February, saying that he could not have spoken more plainly in his criticism of Netanyahu when he said, "This is not the time for belligerent language. It's time to inject greater urgency into the Middle East peace process." Tzipi Livni, leader of the Israeli Kadima party, told the *Jewish Chronicle* that "we need to embrace peace and the idea of two states even more urgently. We have to decide if we are willing to pay the price of peace."

NEW SECURITY REALITY FOR ISRAEL

The ongoing demonstrations in Egypt could force Israel to adapt to a new security reality in the Middle East, IDF Chief of General Staff Lieutenant-General Gabi Ashkenazi told the Jerusalem Report. He said, "The quiet is fragile and the security reality can easily change . . . It is enough to look at what is happening in Egypt to understand this. The IDF has yet to make any changes to its force deployment throughout the country, but has allowed, as reported first in the Post in January, for Egyptian forces to deploy in the Sinai in violation of the peace treaty between the countries."

UK pushes for two states by September

The UK is holding Israel responsible for the deadlock in the Middle East peace process and is demanding a Palestinian state by September. A statement by the UK's ambassador Sir Mark Grant said, "Our goal remains an agreement on all final status issues . . . by September 2011." Prime Minister David Cameron visited Egypt and other Arab countries and said that there was an urgent need to "push forward"; the result should be two states, with Jerusalem as the future capital of both and a fair settlement for refugees.

PIPELINE SABOTAGE

Egyptian state media and local government officials said they suspect sabotage in the pipeline explosion in early February at a gas terminal in Egypt's northern Sinai Peninsula. Gas flow was temporarily shut down. Egypt supplies about forty per cent of Israel's natural gas, most of which is used in power stations. The Infrastructure Ministry spokesman said to the Jerusalem Report that the goal was to have gas from Israel's Tamar field flowing by 2013. The explosion in Egypt "just proves" the need to do so.

Refugee request by Palestinian Authority to Israel

Israel is considering a request to permit hundreds of Palestinians who live in Libya to move to the West Bank, amid growing violence in the North African country. The request was submitted to the office of the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories by Palestinian Authority Civil Affairs Minister Hussein A-Sheikh in February. The request did not specify numbers, but defence officials said it was likely to be several hundred. Israeli officials said that the Libyan Palestinians would need to be approved individually by the relevant Israeli security authorities.