



News from the Nations

EU-Syria treaty stalls

European concern over Syrian programmes for weapons of mass destruction, and support for terrorists, have held up the conclusion of an EU-Syria treaty covering trade and diplomatic ties. According to the *Jewish Chronicle*, "A European spokesman told the *Jewish Chronicle* that Brussels was 'very concerned' about Syria's weapons programme, and stressed the EU's determination to bring the development of weapons of mass destruction under control. An Israeli official said Jerusalem was keeping a close eye on the talks. He said Syria's backing of terrorists and its development of a non-conventional arsenal should be as much a matter of concern for the EU as it is for us". EU member states decided in May last to urge Syria to strengthen efforts against the proliferation of banned weapons as part of the proposed association deal, similar to the treaty between the EU and Israel. It would give Syrian produce low-tariff access to the European market, as well as broader diplomatic contacts. A British Foreign Office spokesperson said the latest European proposals had been sent to Damascus but that so far there had been no response. A Syrian official said his country was working with the EU "to find a formula which preserves the interests of Syria".

CLASH OVER IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAMME

The US Administration is gaining European support for a diplomatic showdown with Iran over its nuclear programme, as a first step towards imposing sanctions. US officials and European diplomats said momentum was building after a bad-tempered meeting in Paris last month between Iran and France, Germany and the UK—the three governments that negotiated a nuclear deal with Iran last October. Iran was warned that if it continued to move in the wrong direction it could not avoid the issue being referred to the United Nations Security Council. Iran insists it has cooperated fully with the IAEA, but the rhetoric in Teheran has hardened since the Paris talks.

New Iranian missile

Iran has successfully test-fired a new version of its ballistic Shihab-3 missile recently. It is capable of reaching US forces in the Middle East and was produced in response to Israeli efforts to improve its own missile power. The Shihab-3, which Iran last successfully tested in 2002, is the country's longest-range ballistic missile, with a range of 1,296 kilometres (805 miles). Israel has jointly developed with the United States the Arrow antiballistic missile system in response to the Shihab-3 threat. The commander of the elite Revolutionary Guards, General Safavi, warned that Iran will crush Israel if it attacks Iran.

Saudi oil money and nuclear Pakistan

A Financial Times reporter asks, "Is a secret nuclear deal at the heart of an enduring friendship?". A week before Pakistan's first nuclear tests in May 1998, then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif told a hurriedly organised meeting of senior officials that a Saudi Arabian representative had offered up to 50,000 barrels of oil a day to Pakistan for an indefinite period on deferred payment terms. This would allow Pakistan to overcome the impact of punitive Western sanctions expected after the tests. According to a news report the Saudi message was delivered on behalf of Crown Prince Abdullah, the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia, who once again bailed out Pakistan at a difficult moment. According to The Times, Nawaf Obeid, a Saudi security consultant close to the government, suggested that the kingdom enjoys Pakistan's security umbrella without any formal agreement. "We gave money and they dealt with it as they saw fit", he says of the Pakistanis. "There is no documentation but there is an implicit understanding that on everything to do with security and military issues, Pakistan would be there for Saudi Arabia". According to the report, the relationship has been thrown into focus recently with the uncovering of a clandestine nuclear network led by disgraced Pakistani scientist Abdul Khan. This sent investigators in search of the so-called 'fourth customer', beyond the three to which Mr Khan confessed supplying: Libya, Iran and North Korea.

Concern over Iran/South Africa nuclear link

British officials recently expressed concern after Iran and South Africa signed a memo of understanding which might include Pretoria selling uranium to Teheran. The memo was signed by South African Defence Minister Mosiuoa Lekota and his Iranian counterpart, Rear-Admiral Ali Shamkhani, in Teheran. It was the first such visit by a South African defence minister to Teheran since the 1979 Islamic revolution. The signing came just days after Iranian officials warned that its Shihab-3 missile could reach any target in Israel, and that Iran would use its missile if Israel launched a pre-emptive strike against its nuclear facilities.

WARNING ABOUT RUSSIA

The following is an extract from an interview with former Russian oligarch Boris Berezovsky reported in the *Jerusalem Post*: "For a man once described as the Godfather and King-maker of Russia's politics, Boris Berezovsky is an inconspicuous figure in the offices of the *Jerusalem Post*. He now lives in London with his family. Britain granted him political asylum in September after resisting extradition to Russia. He is doing what he can to warn against Russian President Vladimir Putin. 'Putin is dangerous for Russia, and Putin's Russia is dangerous for Israel', he says. He cites Russia's ties to Saddam Hussein which it maintained 'almost right up until the last minute', as well as those it continues to have with Iran. 'Russia supports terror—the Soviet Union created it in the Middle East'. Putin's strategy has been to create what Berezovsky calls 'verticals of power' in politics, in the media, in business—all of which answer to the Kremlin. So far, the strategy is on track and even ahead of schedule, helped by a pliant Bush Administration".

Filling the vacuum in Jerusalem

Islam is on the rise in East Jerusalem as the influence of the Palestinian Authority and the old élite families declines. According to a cover story in the *Jerusalem Report*, "The Palestinian population of East Jerusalem now numbers up to 250,000 out of the city's total population of 692,000. Granted permanent resident status in 1967 when the city was reunited, they hold Israeli ID cards, though most are not citizens. An Israeli official who specialises in East Jerusalem describes a Palestinian population that is not impressed with the Palestinian Authority and its corrupt officers, and points out that the PA is getting weaker in the city, partly due to a strict Israeli ban on its activities in the capital. In the vacuum, Islamic elements are on the rise. There is hardly any trace of the old, aristocratic families who once ran Arab Jerusalem. In their place, the less educated 'villagers' of Sur Baher, Silwan and other areas are gaining influence. So far, the Islamic awakening is not being felt in threatening ways in Jerusalem—it is expressed in the growing attendance at mosques, and in the building of new mosques. PASSIA's Mahdi Abdul Hadi is planning a seminar for later this year that will be entitled 'Islam in Palestine 2004' to examine various questions. The topics, he says, will include Islamic institutions, trends, the interface between the Islamic Movement and the national movement, Muslim-Christian relations and the options for Islam, Islamism and Israel, ranging from dialogue and coexistence to confrontation. 'It started with the first intifada and the rise of Hamas', he says, 'and it has grown since'".

Hizbullah's arsenal

According to the *Jerusalem Post*, "Syria is trying to fit medium-range rockets with chemical warheads, and there are some indications Hizbullah is involved in these tests. Hizbullah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah admitted publicly for the first time recently that his organisation is active in the Palestinian territories. Hizbullah's arsenal includes some 13,000 short-range rockets, some 500 medium-range rockets, and a few dozen long-range rockets, with a range of between 115 and 215 kilometres".

Israeli firms tender for EU security fence

According to the *Jewish Chronicle*, "The European Union has denied claims that Israeli firms are to help create separation fences along the EU's eastern border to keep out immigrants. Israeli financial news service Globes Online reported recently that Israeli companies Magal Security Systems and El-Far Electronics were involved in tenders for constructing fences along the borders of new EU members Poland and Hungary. EU member states with an external border are required to ensure they can adequately control the influx of people from nonmember countries. Globes reported that Israeli firms would help set up hundreds of kilometres of fences and high-tech security systems to restrict the movement across the borders with Russia, Belarus and Ukraine".