

Political

update: The Foreign Secretary visits the Middle East; and the Israeli President visits the UK – 21 November

Key points:

- **Foreign Secretary visits Israel and the West Bank to pledge his support for the Annapolis Peace Process**
 - **Foreign Secretary also visits Syria and Lebanon and condemns support for Hezbollah**
 - **Israeli President visits UK, receives knighthood and pledges support for peace**
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Latest development

- The Foreign Secretary, David Miliband, visited Israel, the Palestinian Territories, Syria and Lebanon between 16 and 19 November to pledge his support for the Annapolis Peace Process and to strengthen UK-Israel relations.
- The Foreign Secretary met acting Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Foreign Minister and Chairwoman of Kadima, Tzipi Livni and the Leader of Likud, Benjamin Netanyahu.
- The Foreign Secretary visited the Israeli town of Sderot which since the beginning of this month has seen an increase in rocket fire from Hamas-controlled Gaza. Over 200 rockets have been fired at Israel's southern communities since the truce began on 19 June 2008. Whilst in Sderot, Miliband said:

“I'm here today because Sderot has become the front line of Israel's security. It's very important that countries like mine and others show solidarity with the people of Sderot and that's what I'm doing today... The Israeli people need to know that the British people know of Sderot, and we know of the tragedy they are facing, and we stand with them.” (17/11/08)

- Immediately after Miliband's visit, two Qassam rockets were fired from Gaza into southern Israel. No injuries were reported, but a greenhouse was damaged in the Eshkol Regional Council area.
- Miliband also visited the Hand-in-Hand school for Arab and Jewish children.
- The Foreign Secretary visited Ramallah on 17 November where he held meetings with Palestinian President Abbas and Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad. The Foreign Secretary pledged his support for the Palestinian people and highlighted the strong bilateral relationship which exists. The Foreign Secretary also emphasised the work the UK Government is doing to strengthen the Palestinian economy and security.
- The Foreign Secretary's visit to Syria was the first by any Cabinet Minister since Tony Blair visited as Prime Minister in 2001. The Foreign Secretary met Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem. Speaking at a joint press conference with al-Assad, Miliband said he was confident that Syria could play a “constructive role” in the region, pushing the President to cease funding of Hezbollah in south Lebanon and prevent foreign fighters from crossing Syria's

border into Iraq. The UK and Syria agreed to re-establish high-level intelligence links.

- The Foreign Secretary met Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora in Beirut where he discussed Hezbollah, making clear that it was “time to push for a comprehensive resolution” to the region’s troubles. Miliband also stated that:

“It is the year of change globally because there is a new American president, there will be a new Israeli government, there will be elections in Lebanon and ... in Iran as well.” (19/11/08)

- Israeli President Shimon Peres arrived in the UK on 17 November for a four day visit at the invitation of the Government. During his visit he met with the Prime Minister, the Rt Hon Gordon Brown MP and the Foreign Secretary. Peres also met HM The Queen on 20 November where he received an honorary knighthood.
- President Peres spoke at Mansion House on 18 November where he received an honorary doctorate from London’s Kings College University. Peres then travelled to Oxford University to launch a five-year series of lectures named in his honour. Responding to questions about whether or not Israel was ready to return to pre June 1967 borders, Peres said:

“We have an agreement that was already achieved in the Camp David conference [in July 2000] and that is to concentrate all of our settlers in three locations, which may take away from the Palestinians 3% or 4% or 5% of their land. We suggested they swap so that they will not lose land and that can become a solution.” (18/11/08)

- President Peres also addressed a joint meeting in the Houses of Parliament on 19 November. He spoke about the deteriorating security situation in southern Israel as well as the threat posed by Hezbollah and Iran. Talking about Hamas he said:

“Hamas violently rejects compromises. It continues to fire rockets at Israeli civilians. We can understand the call for ‘land for peace’, but we cannot accept land promised for rockets and missiles.” (19/11/08)

- Peres’ meeting with the Foreign Secretary focussed on the latter’s recent visit to the Middle East. They also discussed Peres’ views on the Arab Peace Initiative.

Background

- The Foreign Secretary last visited Israel in November 2007, prior to the Annapolis Conference later that month. Miliband’s visit, in which he pledged his support for the Annapolis Peace Process, followed a meeting between the Quartet and Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas on 9 November in Egypt. Livni and Abbas presented the Quartet with several agreements on how they intend to proceed with the Peace Process in 2009. Livni said that whilst a peace deal is yet to be reached, both sides are determined to continue talks in 2009 and that both she and Abbas see the “need for continuous, uninterrupted, direct bilateral negotiations.”
- President Peres’ visit to the UK follows Gordon Brown’s visit to Israel in July 2008, in celebration of Israel’s 60th Anniversary. During his visit Gordon Brown became the first British Prime Minister to address the Israeli Knesset (21 July). The Prime Minister used the opportunity to make clear his Government’s opposition to any academic boycotts of Israel. The Prime Minister also condemned Iranian threats to wipe out Israel as ‘abhorrent’ and vowed that Britain would lead in “taking firmer

sanctions” against Iran unless the country suspended its nuclear programme and accepted the international community’s offer of negotiations. Brown also gave his full support to the Peace Process. The Prime minister congratulated Israel on its achievements since its founding, stating that “no other country has accomplished as much in such a short time.”

- President Peres’ visit to the UK followed an interfaith conference at the UN in New York on 12 November, in which he repeated his support for the Arab Peace Initiative (API): “these expressions in the Arab peace initiative are inspirational and promising - a serious opening for real progress.” The API offers a comprehensive peace between Israel and the Arab world in exchange for lands captured by Israel in 1967.
- The Foreign Secretary’s visit to Syria follows the visit of Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem to the UK on 27 October 2008.
- Syria has been isolated by most of the international community since the killing of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005 where there has been alleged Syrian involvement. UK – Syrian relations have gradually improved since Syria withdrew its troops from Lebanon in April 2005 following its decision to re-establish diplomatic relations with Lebanon on 14 October 2008.