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Key issues is a weekly update looking at the Middle East peace process, regional developments, domestic Israeli and Palestinian affairs and primary issues affecting UK policy on Israel.

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MEPP: Prime Minister meets Palestinian President at Downing Street; EU Middle East envoy calls for mediated ‘proximity talks’; Israeli National Security Adviser blames Abbas’ ‘policy of refusal’ for stalled peace talks

Iran: US to deploy further defensive missiles in the Middle East to protect its allies from Iran; Iranian Supreme Leader predicts the “annihilation of the Zionist regime”; Siemens cuts ties with Iran whilst Russia refuses to cease arms trading with the regime

Gaza: Israel releases details of ongoing investigations into Operation Cast Lead; two senior Israeli officers disciplined for misuse of white phosphorous

The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs released details on Friday (29 January) of the over 150 investigations launched so far by the Israeli military into its conduct during the three-week operation in the Gaza Strip last winter, including all 34 specific allegations made in the UN Human Rights Council Fact-Finding Report (Goldstone Report). Many of these investigations are still ongoing. In November, the UN General Assembly gave both Israel and Hamas until 5 February to respond to the allegations raised by the Goldstone Report. The Israeli report of the investigations states that 36 separate incidents have so far been referred for criminal investigation by the Military Advocate General, who is responsible for enforcing the rule of law throughout the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) and is legally independent of it. These investigations have taken evidence from almost 100 Palestinian complainants and witnesses and approximately 500 IDF soldiers and commanders. As additional oversight, Israel’s Attorney General and Supreme Court have the power to review, either through appeals or exercising judicial review, any of the Military Advocate General’s decisions. Amongst the specific incidents detailed in Friday’s (29 January) report, Israel revealed that two senior army officers have been disciplined for ordering white phosphorus shells to be fired towards a United Nations relief compound on 15 January 2009, judging them as guilty of “exceeding their authority in a manner that jeopardised the lives of others”.

According to Israel’s Jerusalem Post newspaper on Monday (1 February), Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Ehud Barak are also currently discussing

whether to initiate an entirely independent enquiry, not involving the Military Advocate General or the Military Police Criminal Investigation Division. The Labor party's Welfare and Social Services Minister Isaac Herzog and Minorities Affairs Minister Avishay Braverman have come out in favour of an independent enquiry, as have former Attorney General Menahem Mazuz, Justice Minister Yaakov Neeman and Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman.

Gaza: Hamas claims that Israeli civilian deaths resulting from rocket fire are accidental; Human Rights Watch refutes claim

Human Rights Watch described Hamas on Thursday (28 January) as “factually and legally wrong” for claiming that its rocket and mortar attacks against Israelis are not war crimes. In a report for submission to the UN, ahead of the General Assembly's 5 February deadline for responding to allegations of war crimes, Hamas leader Mohammed al-Ghoul claimed on Wednesday (27 January) that Hamas' over 9,000 rocket and mortar attacks against Israel since 2001 were all aimed at military targets and only landed in civilian areas as they are unguided. The Israeli town of Sderot near the Gaza Strip border, which receives the majority of Hamas' attacks, has no military bases. Joe Stork, deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch said on Thursday (28 January) that:

“Hamas can spin the story and deny the evidence, but hundreds of rockets rained down on civilian areas in Israel [during last winter's 3-week conflict] where no military installations were located... Hamas leaders at the time indicated they were intending to harm civilians.” (28/01/10)

During the December 2008 – January 2009 fighting, rockets launched from Gaza killed three Israeli civilians and wounded dozens. Hamas' armed wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, claimed responsibility for all three fatal attacks. Two Palestinian girls also died when a Palestinian rocket struck inside Gaza. A spokesman for the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, identifying himself as Abu Obeida, said on 5 January 2009 that “continuing the incursion will only make us increase our rocket range... We will double the number of Israelis under fire”.

MEPP: Prime Minister meets Palestinian President at Downing Street; EU Middle East envoy calls for mediated ‘proximity talks’; Israeli National Security Adviser blames Abbas’ ‘policy of refusal’ for stalled peace talks

UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown met with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas on Friday (29 January) in Downing Street. A Number 10 spokesperson said that the pair “focussed their discussions on the need to renew efforts towards a lasting peace agreement”, adding that:

“The Prime Minister expressed continued support for the Arab Peace Initiative as the framework for a just and comprehensive agreement which would ensure a secure Israel alongside a viable and secure Palestine. They also discussed efforts to revitalise the Palestinian economy.” (29/01/10)

Meanwhile, Marc Otte, the EU's Middle East envoy called on Sunday (31 January) for Abbas to enter “proximity” talks with the Israelis, mediated by US Envoy for Middle East Peace George Mitchell. Otte suggested that such talks would allow the two parties to detail their own definitions of an acceptable two state solution. Meanwhile Abbas continues to refuse renewed direct talks with the Israelis unless Israel expands upon its current partial West Bank settlement construction freeze to include East Jerusalem and public buildings. Israeli National Security Adviser Uzi Arad said on Sunday (31 January) that there was a great deal of “potential” in the diplomatic process but that it was Abbas' continuing “policy of refusal”

that was halting talks. Arad also made reference to Abbas' rejection, 18 months ago, of a "generous" two state offer by then-Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. Amr Moussa, chair of the Arab League, warned on Wednesday (27 January) that if a Palestinian state is not established soon there will be a single state for Israelis and Palestinians. Speaking at a panel at the World Economic Forum he stated that "now is the moment of truth" for peace.

Iran: US to deploy further defensive missiles in the Middle East to protect its allies from Iran; Iranian Supreme Leader predicts the "annihilation of the Zionist regime"; Siemens cuts ties with Iran whilst Russia refuses to cease arms trading with the regime

US defence officials told media sources on Sunday (31 January) that the Pentagon has expedited a number of anti-missile defence systems sales to its allies in the Middle East, to protect against possible Iranian attacks. In addition, Head of US Central Command General David Petraeus told the US Institute for the Study of War on 22 January that over the last two years the US had stationed eight additional Patriot missile defence batteries, capable of shooting down short-range missiles, in four unspecified Gulf countries. The US will also keep Aegis cruisers, which can shoot down medium-range missiles, on patrol in the Gulf. These developments follow Iran's refusal to engage diplomatically with the US over its illegal nuclear programme, as well as its rejection of an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and E3+3 (Britain, France, Germany, Russia, the US and China) proposal to end the nuclear crisis. In his inaugural State of the Union Address on Wednesday (27 January), US President Barack Obama promised that Iran will face "growing consequences" and become "more isolated" over its illegal uranium enrichment programme. Furthermore, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei said on Wednesday (27 January) that the Middle East "will witness the annihilation of the Zionist regime one day" and that this depends on the "function of the Islamic countries and Muslim nations".

In related news, German technology firm Siemens announced at its annual stockholder meeting on Tuesday (26 January) that it is cutting all ties with Iran from "the middle of this year" after mounting pressure from the Stop the Bomb campaign. Siemens, in collaboration with the Finnish firm Nokia, provided the Iranian state telecoms company in 2008 with technology allowing it to intercept the internet communications of its citizens. Meanwhile, on Thursday (28 January), Anatoly Isaikin, the head of Russia's state arms export monopoly, said that "nothing is blocking the continuation of military-technical cooperation". This was widely taken as a reference to Russia's 2007 contract to supply Iran with S-300 anti-aircraft missiles.