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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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Relationship between the UK and Israel: British government to seek to change law on arrest warrants for alleged war crimes following consultation

Following the issuing of an arrest warrant in December against Israeli MK and opposition leader Tzipi Livni, Prime Minister Gordon Brown announced on Wednesday (3 March) that Britain will “legislate as soon as possible” to prevent people “motivated purely by political gesture” from seeking and gaining arrest warrants against international visitors. Writing in the Telegraph newspaper he said that it is “our moral duty” to prosecute those “suspected of the most serious international crimes” but added that:

“There is a case now... for the evidential basis on which arrest warrants can be allowed to be tougher and for restricting the right to prosecute the narrow range of crimes falling under universal jurisdiction to the Crown Prosecution Service alone.” (03/03/10)

The prime minister explained that the government’s proposals will ensure “the risk of arrest” is brought in “closer alignment with the risk of prosecution” and will therefore “serve to enhance Britain’s status in the eyes of international law, world opinion and history”. He also

asserted that the current system, which allows arrest warrants to be issued by magistrates on the basis of limited “information”, is damaging our “national interest” and our ability to “maintain and extend an influence for good across the globe” by dissuading international political leaders from visiting Britain. However, the prime minister also said that the government is to consult on the proposals to improve the system before legislating. Secretary of State for Justice Jack Straw has since issued a ministerial statement saying that he has asked the Justice Select Committee to conduct the consultation, and make a recommendation by 6 April. Given the limited time available before a general election, the current parliament no longer has time to legislate on the matter. The Conservative Party’s shadow business secretary Ken Clarke and shadow attorney general Edward Garnier have pledged to change the law if they win the election, although shadow home secretary Chris Grayling has said that he is unsure that any changes are necessary.

MEPP: Palestinian leadership acquiesces to US demand for indirect peace negotiations, following Arab League backing; UK foreign secretary “encouraged” by developments

The Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) agreed on Sunday (7 March) to engage in ‘proximity talks’ with Israel, mediated by US Envoy for Middle East Peace Senator George Mitchell. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has refused to engage in direct negotiations with Israel for the past year, calling for a full settlement construction freeze first. The proximity talks are expected to begin in the next few days, taking place in Jerusalem and Ramallah, with Senator Mitchell travelling between the Israeli and Palestinian leaderships’ offices. However, senior PLO official Yasser Abed Rabbo said on Sunday (7 March) that the decision did not mean the Palestinian Authority (PA) has abandoned its precondition of a “complete cessation of settlement construction”. Palestinian officials also warned that they would end the talks if the outlines of a border deal with Israel have not emerged after four months. The Palestinians’ decision was partly a result of Arab League backing for the proposal, announced on Wednesday (3 March) after a meeting of the foreign ministers of the 22 Arab states in Cairo. Israeli government spokesman, Mark Regev, said on Wednesday (3 March) that Prime Minister Netanyahu welcomed the Arab League’s decision. In a statement on 4 March, Foreign Secretary David Miliband said that he was “encouraged that President Abbas is gaining support in the wider Arab world for entering proximity talks with Israel”. Senator Mitchell and US Vice President Joe Biden have both since landed in Israel for talks with the Israeli and Palestinian leaderships.

MEPP: Israeli police clash with Palestinian stone throwers at Temple Mount/Al-Aqsa Mosque two weeks in a row; Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad incite further violence

Violent clashes broke out between Israeli police officers and approximately 300 Palestinians throwing rocks on the Temple Mount/Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in Jerusalem following Friday prayers (5 March). The rock throwing began after Friday’s sermon criticised Israel’s recent decision to designate as “Israeli heritage sites” the Cave of the Patriarchs/Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron and Rachel’s Tomb in Bethlehem. For the second time in a week, Israeli police entered the compound in Jerusalem’s Old City to quell the violence. Fifteen Israeli police officers were lightly hurt and it was reported that “dozens” of Palestinians were injured. Four Israeli policemen and approximately twelve Palestinians were also injured on 28 February, when clashes between Arab rioters and Israeli security forces broke out at the compound. The violence began when some 30 Arab youths barricaded themselves inside the Al-Aqsa Mosque on 27 February and began throwing rocks at a group of Temple Mount visitors the following morning. Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad urged an escalation of the protests on 28 February, with Islamic Jihad leader Muhammad Al-Hindi telling a crowd

in Gaza that Israel “only understands the language of force”. Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhoum called on Palestinians “to continue the intifada”, accusing Israel of “paving the way for the establishment of a Jewish, racist, extremist state”. Jordan’s King Abdullah criticised Israel for allowing its police to enter the compound on 28 February, accusing them of “provocative measures”.

Gaza: Hamas extends British journalist’s period of detention in Gaza; Paul Martin being kept in solitary confinement

Paul Martin, a British journalist arrested by Hamas in the Gaza Strip on 14 February, had his period of detention extended for a further 15 days on 1 March. A spokesperson for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office said on Tuesday (2 March) that they are “extremely concerned” about the development and called for Martin’s “immediate release”. The spokesperson also said that, whilst they have been in regular contact with Martin, “increased restrictions are now being placed on consular access”. Anne Martin, Paul’s wife, said on Tuesday (2 March) that he is being “kept in solitary confinement and interrogated whilst being denied access either to his Gazan lawyer or to official British representatives”. She added that “this is the first time that a foreign press representative has been held by the authorities in Gaza. We are becoming extremely concerned”. Martin was detained as he arrived to testify at the trial of a Palestinian accused of collaborating with Israel. Hamas spokesman Ehab Ghussein said that “we have confessions that the British journalist committed offences against Palestinian law, and that harms the security of the country”. Paul Martin has worked for three decades as a journalist reporting on the Middle East, producing freelance reports for the BBC, al Jazeera International, CNN and Channel Four News.

Gaza: Labour parliamentarians call for a new approach to Hamas, its continuing control of the Gaza Strip and its acts of terrorism

In a panel debate in Parliament on Tuesday (2 March) and via the LFI pamphlet *Handling Hamas: Strategies for Peace and Progress in the Palestinian Territories*, a number of Labour MPs and Peers have called for a new approach to dealing with Hamas’ ongoing control of the Gaza Strip. The debate, which was chaired by former Northern Ireland and Defence minister Rt. Hon Adam Ingram MP, was attended by over 50 MPs, Peers, NGOs and members of the Labour movement. Dr Orit Gal of Chatham House and the Complexity Hub think-tank told the audience that international assistance is required on Gaza’s crossings, to enable them to be opened for aid and trade, in a way which protects Israel security and helps the people of Gaza to become less reliant on Hamas. Leeds University’s Professor Clive Jones alerted the attendees to the centrality of religion in Hamas’ ideology, arguing that, without fundamental reform, Hamas will continue to reject the existence of the State of Israel. The pamphlet, which resulted from a consultation led by Adam Ingram, also drew on the expertise of Dr Brian Brivati, Professor of Human Rights at Kingston University and Professor Alon Ben-Meir of New York University’s Center for Global Affairs. In his chapter, Professor Brivati argues that those who call for political engagement with Hamas wrongly assume that it is a nationalist movement, liable to moderate over time, and disregard its aim of bringing all of the land between the Mediterranean Sea and River Jordan under theocratic control. Later in the pamphlet, Professor Ben-Meir argues that the Arab Peace Initiative could be used to encourage Hamas to undertake the fundamental reforms required to engage with the peace process. In his foreword to the pamphlet, Adam Ingram wrote:

Hamas cannot be wished away; it must be understood in all of its complexity. Judgements about the organisation should not be based on naïve misconceptions. Renewed efforts should be made by regional players and the wider international community to create conditions that reach out to the people of

Palestine and Israel, such that the hold of the ideologues is circumvented and, eventually, they are forced to change direction.

***Iran:* New IAEA Director General cannot guarantee all elements of Iran's nuclear programme are for peaceful purposes; UK, France and Germany issue statement of deep concern over Iran's continued uranium enrichment**

As part of ongoing efforts to deal with Iran's illegal nuclear programme, Foreign Secretary David Miliband met with new International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Yukiya Amano on 23 February in the UK. Yukiya Amano also met with Simon McDonald, Head of Foreign and Defence Policy at No.10 and Lord Hunt, Minister of State for Energy and Climate Change. Yukiya Amano has been taking a tougher line against Iran than his predecessor, Mohammed ElBaradei, telling the IAEA Board of Governors meeting in Vienna on Tuesday (2 March) that "we cannot confirm that all nuclear material in Iran is in peaceful activities because Iran has not provided the agency with the necessary co-operation". At the meeting the following day, the E3 group (UK, France and Germany) expressed their disappointment at Iran's decision to continue enriching its uranium, saying:

"We note with deep concern... the volume of evidence raising "concerns about the possible existence in Iran of past or current undisclosed activities related to the development of a nuclear payload for a missile"... We have seen the revelation of a new enrichment site at Fordow – a site on which it was apparently never Iran's intention that it should be known to the world. We have heard the announcement by Iran of the intention to build ten new enrichment facilities. And we have seen Iran begin to enrich uranium to the 20% level." (3/03/10)

At a meeting of the UN sanctions committee in New York on Thursday (4 March) and referring to Yukiya Amano's statement in Vienna, US Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice said "in light of Iran's continued noncompliance with its obligations, this Council must consider further measures to hold the Government of Iran accountable". Iran's nuclear activities have also been subject to discussion between the US and Israel through a one-day strategic dialogue on 25 February, which focused on the possibility of stronger sanctions against Iran.

***Israeli Labor Party:* Rebel Labor MKs return to party**

Israeli Labor MKs Eitan Cabel and Amir Peretz, who have rebelled against their party's decision to join Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition for nearly a year, announced on Monday (8 March) that they will return to the party rather than trying to form a break-away parliamentary faction. Labor's Knesset chairman, Agriculture Minister Shalom Simhon, said he was "glad they are back... we don't want them to fight us from inside or outside, but to join us in cooperation". However, a source amongst the rebels told the Jerusalem Post newspaper that:

"We are going to be a fifth column inside Labor... We will continue voting against the government on core issues. But since we failed to get our ministers to quit from outside, we decided to try a different strategy." (08/03/10)

Former rebel MK Ophir Pines-Paz announced his resignation from politics in January and on 1 May, rebel MK Yuli Tamir is expected to resign and become head of the Shenkar Design College.

***Syria:* Syria and Turkey discuss mediated talks between Damascus and Jerusalem; Syrian and Iranian Presidents verbally abuse Israel**

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu met in Damascus on Sunday (7 March) to discuss the prospects of resuming indirect talks between Syria and Israel, with Turkish mediation. Davutoglu was reported as telling Assad that Turkey, which has brokered indirect talks between Syria and Israel in the past, is ready to mediate talks provided there is a “political will” on both sides. However, Assad said Israel was not ready for peace “despite the presence of a Turkish honest-broker who has been working with Syria to establish peace and security in the region”. Furthermore, Assad hosted Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in Damascus on 25 February to discuss “the Zionist threat”. Ahmadinejad and Assad issued verbal attacks against Israel, with the Iranian president declaring that Arab nations will usher in a new Middle East “without Zionists and without colonialists”. For his part, the Syrian president said that Israel “is capable of aggression at any point”. In addition, despite recent US offers of increased engagement with Syria, including President Barack Obama announcing the first US ambassador to the country since 2005, Assad criticised the US for attempting to divide his country from Iran.