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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.*

## Key Issues

**update: 01 September 2010**

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**MEPP:** Direct peace talks between Israeli and Palestinian leaders to commence on Wednesday evening; Hamas launches deadly attack on Israeli civilians in West Bank in attempt to derail the process

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is scheduled to hold a meeting with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in Washington on Wednesday (1 September), ahead of the formal re-launch of direct Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations on Thursday (2 September) – the first such direct talks in 20 months. This will take place at a ceremony at the State Department. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, Jordanian King Abdullah II and Quartet Representative Tony Blair are also arriving in the US on Wednesday for the talks.

Prime Minister Netanyahu told his cabinet on Sunday (29 August) that he is seeking "a peace based on recognition, security, stability and economic prosperity between the two peoples that will endure for us and our children". Referring to the one-year deadline that has been agreed upon for the talks, Mahmoud Abbas said that it would be possible to reach an agreement within this time as "one year is very long". Israeli Defence Minister and Labor party leader Ehud Barak spoke optimistically about the prospect of peace, telling journalists that Netanyahu has "a

chance” as “a significant number of rightist ministers will stand with him”. He also suggested that a deal over the sharing of Jerusalem with the Palestinians is possible. Barak’s comments on the city contrast sharply with those of Palestinian Authority Minister of Religious Affairs Mahmoud Al-Habbash, who delivered a sermon on Friday (27 August) threatening that “Jerusalem can ignite a thousand and one wars”. Mahmoud Abbas was present at this sermon which broadcast on the PA’s television channel.

Hamas gunmen killed four Israelis, including a pregnant woman, in the southern West Bank on Tuesday (31 August) in an attempt to derail the upcoming negotiations. The shooting, which was the deadliest attack on Israelis in the West Bank in four years, occurred near Kiryat Arba on the outskirts of Hebron. Hamas’ Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades claimed “full responsibility” of the attack which it branded “heroic”. Speaking on Wednesday, Benjamin Netanyahu asserted that “we will not let the blood of Israeli civilians go unpunished”. Speaking from a West Bank army base, Ehud Barak promised that the “IDF (Israeli Defense Force) will do everything possible to quickly bring the perpetrators to justice” and called for restraint for the sake of the peace talks. Israeli President Shimon Peres expressed his condolences to the families of the four Israelis. Referring to Hamas’ attempt to derail the talks he asserted that “the terrorists will not triumph”. Both Mahmoud Abbas and Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad have also condemned the killings. According to unnamed Palestinian officials, the Palestinian Authority’s security forces have since arrested over 300 people associated with Hamas.

**If you are interested in reading further, please follow this link to a recent piece by former US ambassador to Israel Martin Indyk in the New York Times**

[http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/27/opinion/27indyk.html?\\_r=1&scp=1&sq=martin%20indyk&st=cse](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/27/opinion/27indyk.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=martin%20indyk&st=cse)

***Relationship between the UK and Israel:* Fabian Hamilton MP calls for action against judge who told jury that Israeli protestors on trial for criminal damage should receive George Cross**

Labour MP for Leeds North East, Fabian Hamilton, has called for action to be taken against Judge George Bathurst-Norman who suggested to a jury in July that a group of anti-Israel protestors, who had caused £180,000 worth of damage to an EDO MBM factory, should be awarded the George Cross. The seven protestors were found not guilty by the jury after the judge, in his summing up, also told the Hove Crown Court jury: “You may well think that hell on earth would not be an understatement of what the Gazans suffered at that time”, referring to Israel’s Operation Cast Lead. Furthermore, Bathurst Norman compared the events in Gaza as “scenes which one would rather have hoped to have disappeared with the Nazi regimes of the last war”. The protestors successfully argued as their defence that they were preventing the EDO MBM from supplying hardware which could be used to commit war crimes against the Palestinians. Fabian Hamilton, a member of the Labour Friends of Israel Parliamentary Executive, has recently written to the Attorney-General to complain about the judge’s conduct. He told the Jewish Chronicle that:

“What makes this trial most disturbing is the way in which the judge used his summary to promote his own political views about Israel... What is to stop any group of pro-Palestinian or anti-Zionist protestors from attacking any business they deem to be supportive of the state of Israel?”

***Israeli Affairs:* Israelis mark Gilad Shalit’s fifth birthday in captivity; UK renews call for Hamas to release the kidnapped soldier**

Thousands of Israelis demonstrated in Jerusalem on Saturday (28 August) on the 24<sup>th</sup> birthday of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, kidnapped from Israeli soil into Gaza by Hamas in June 2006. Since being incarcerated, Shalit has not been allowed any contact with the International Committee of the Red Cross and his health condition is unknown. Shalit’s mother, Aviva, called on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to do everything he could to secure her son’s freedom. The Shalit family has been living in a protest tent across from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s home in Jerusalem since the fourth anniversary of his kidnapping.

Hamas is demanding that Israel release 1,000 prisoners, including 450 directly involved in terrorist attacks, in return for Shalit's release. However, Israel refuses to allow those involved in terrorism, responsible for the deaths of over 600 Israelis and the injury of over 1,500 more, to be released into the West Bank for fear they will resume terror-related activity and undermine the Palestinian Authority. Israel estimates that 63 percent of Hamas militants released under previous deals have returned to terrorist activity.

The Foreign Office released a statement on Saturday calling for Gilad Shalit's "unconditional release" and asserting that Hamas' continuing detention of the soldier is "is unjustifiable and unacceptable".

***Israeli Affairs:* Hand in Hand bilingual Hebrew and Arabic schools prepare for first year of high school graduates**

Hand in Hand, the network of four award-winning bilingual Arabic and Hebrew schools, that teach Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel together, has hailed another successful year. In October the Education Authority for Jerusalem granted official status to Hand in Hand's already operational high school meaning that, in June 2011, Hand in Hand's first students will graduate high school with most of them having started their education with Hand in Hand as five year olds. Furthermore, at the beginning of this academic year, Israeli Minister of Minorities and Labor party MK Avishai Braverman visited the Hand in Hand Wadi Ara School to express support for bilingual, multicultural, integrated schools.

**For more information about Hand in Hand, please visit <http://www.handinhand12.org/>**

***Lebanon:* UN investigation finds Lebanese army's deadly attack on Israeli soldiers unprovoked; Syria and Hezbollah reportedly sign defence pact**

The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) reported on 25 August that the Lebanese army's recent attack on the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) was entirely unprovoked. An Israeli soldier was shot and killed by a Lebanese sniper on 3 August whilst cutting down a tree on the Israeli side of the Israel-Lebanon border. The shooting sparked a fire fight in which two Lebanese soldiers and one Lebanese journalist were killed. The incident was the most serious to take place on the Israeli-Lebanese border since the Second Lebanon War in 2006. The UNIFIL investigation also supported the IDF contention that Israel had informed UNIFIL in advance of the work it intended to carry out. A statement from the body said both the Lebanese Army and the Israeli Army "fully cooperated with the UNIFIL team during the investigation".

In related news, the United Nations Security Council voted unanimously on Monday (30 August) to renew the mandate of UNIFIL for another year. UNIFIL currently has 11,492 military personnel deployed in Lebanon south of the Litani River in an effort to prevent Hezbollah's military activity there. Concerns about the Iranian-backed militant organisation were further raised this week when Kuwaiti newspaper al-Rai reported that Syria and Hezbollah have signed a defence pact that includes broad-based "field understandings". The report claims that cooperation has been agreed in intelligence-gathering and the exchange of data concerning a "bank of Israeli targets" in the event of a future conflict.

***Iran:* Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad dismisses Israeli-Palestinian peace talks and the "legitimacy of the Zionist regime"**

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad dismissed on Wednesday (1 September) the holding of direct peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians, asserting that the negotiations are doomed to fail to resolve conflict in the Middle East. Ahmadinejad told Iran's Arabic-language Al-Alam television channel that "talks and even signing reconciliation treaties cannot gain legitimacy for the Zionist regime and resolve the Palestinian question". The Iranian regime is a staunch supporter of Hamas, which also rejects the notion of talks and Israel's right to exist.