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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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Lebanon: Israeli ambassador to US warns of Hezbollah’s rearmament on Israeli border

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MEPP: Direct peace negotiations commence between Israeli and Palestinian leaders; Israeli prime minister calls on Palestinian president to be his “partner for peace” to “overcome the agonising conflict”

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas formally began direct peace negotiations on Thursday (2 September), agreeing at their meeting at the US State Department to a schedule of bi-monthly talks over the forthcoming twelve months. The two leaders will meet again on Tuesday 14 September at the Egyptian resort of Sharm-el-Sheik as a part of the process of striving to resolve all final status issues to achieve a two state solution. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who hosted the four hours of talks, praised the two leaders saying “the decision to sit at this table was not easy... we’ve been here before and we know how difficult the road ahead will be”.

In remarks at the White House the previous evening, Prime Minister Netanyahu declared to President Abbas “you are my partner in peace. It is up to us to overcome the agonising conflict between our peoples and to forge a new beginning”. In addition, in a Jewish New Year video message released by the Israeli prime minister’s office on Tuesday (7 September), Netanyahu described the talks as “an important step in our attempt to advance a peace agreement” and that

Israel was trying to achieve such an agreement “in good faith but not naivety”. He also asserted that “any arrangement between us and the Palestinians will be based on two criteria: security and recognition of Israel as a Jewish state”. However, Netanyahu expressed concern on Monday (6 September) that Abbas may abandon the peace process after the Palestinian leader said that he would not make “even one concession” on borders and Palestinian refugees. In addition, and in a rare recognition of Israel’s freeze in West Bank settlement construction that has been in place over the last ten months, Abbas also said “there is already a freeze. What we fear is that the freeze will be cancelled and they will resume settlement (construction) everywhere”. Israel’s Maariv newspaper has since reported that, in an effort to placate right wing members of the Israeli cabinet, rather than formally extending the freeze, Defense Minister and Labor party leader Ehud Barak will multiply the bureaucratic steps involved in gaining planning applications for West Bank construction in order to create an unofficial freeze.

For comment on whether the Israeli prime minister is in a position to make a deal, please follow these links:

The Independent

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/is-netanyahu-ready-to-make-peace-the-test-is-yet-to-come-2070114.html>

The Washington Post

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/03/AR2010090302209.html>

Gaza: Mortar shell from the Gaza Strip narrowly misses Israeli infant school; Israeli Air Force strikes weapons smuggling tunnels on Gaza border in response to recent attacks

Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip fired a mortar shell into a kibbutz in southern Israel on Wednesday (8 September), narrowly missing an infant school some 30 minutes prior to the children’s arrival. One of the buildings sustained damage and no injuries were reported. In addition, militants in Gaza fired a rocket into the southern Israeli town of Sderot on Sunday (5 September). An Israeli Defense Force spokesperson said that the attack did not cause damage or injury. The rocket attacks from the Hamas-controlled region follows a series of shootings orchestrated by Hamas targeting Israeli civilians in the West Bank since the peace process was re-launched, in which four people have been killed and two injured.

In response to these attacks, the Israeli Air Force targeted a number of weapons smuggling tunnels under the Gaza-Egypt border, killing one man and injuring another. In addition, Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Salam Fayyad said on Monday (6 September) that his forces have arrested hundreds of Hamas members in the West Bank.

Relationship between the EU and Israel: European trade commissioner apologies for saying that all Jews “share the same belief that they are right”

European Commissioner for Trade Karel De Gucht told a Belgian radio station on Thursday (2 September) that there was little point in engaging in rational argument with Jews and suggested that the latest Middle East peace talks were doomed because of the power of the Jewish lobby in Washington. In comments which he has since apologised for and expressed regret, Karel De Gucht said:

“Don’t underestimate the opinion ... of the average Jew outside Israel... There is indeed a belief – it’s difficult to describe it otherwise – among most Jews that they are right. And a belief is something that’s difficult to counter with rational arguments. And it’s not so much whether these are religious Jews or not. Lay Jews also share the same belief that they are right. So it is not easy to have, even with moderate Jews, a rational discussion about what is actually happening in the Middle East.”

"Do not underestimate the Jewish lobby on Capitol Hill. That is the best organised lobby, you shouldn't underestimate the grip it has on American politics – no matter whether it's Republicans or Democrats." (02/09/10)

President of the European Jewish Congress Moshe Kantor said that the trade commissioner's comments were "part of a dangerous trend of incitement against Jews and Israel in Europe that needs to be stamped out immediately".

***Iran:* International Atomic Energy Agency says Iran has enough 20 percent enriched uranium to produce a nuclear warhead and is disrupting the work of UN inspectors; Iranian president threatens "the elimination of the Zionist regime" and Fidel Castro criticises him for failing to recognise why Israelis fear for their existence**

The UN's International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), in a leaked report obtained by the Reuters news agency on Monday (6 September), has said that Iran has stockpiled enough low-enriched uranium, if enriched further, to build a nuclear war-head. The report states that Iran currently has some 2.8 metric tons of low enriched uranium and 22 kilograms of 20 percent enriched uranium. Experts say that these 22 kilograms, if further enriched via a relatively simple process, are already enough to produce a nuclear warhead. The UN agency also pointed out that some of the seals that its inspectors had placed on containers holding Iran's stockpile of low enriched uranium had been broken. The seals are intended to ensure that Iran is not diverting the uranium to its weapons programmes. Furthermore, the report says that the Iranian regime is hampering the work of IAEA inspectors by barring certain personnel with Iran-specific experience from the country. Russia and China have since urged Iran to cooperate with the IAEA.

In a speech in Qatar on Sunday (5 September) Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad asserted that neither the US nor Israel would attack nuclear facilities in Iran as "they know that Iran is ready and has the potential for a decisive and wide-scale response", adding "any measure against Iran would be tantamount to the elimination of the Zionist regime from the political geography (of the region)".

In a recent interview with US journalist Jeffrey Goldberg, former president of Cuba Fidel Castro said that the Iranian leader would better serve the cause of peace by acknowledging the "unique" history of anti-Semitism and trying to understand why Israelis fear for their existence. **To read the full article please follow this link** <http://www.theatlantic.com/jeffrey-goldberg/>

***Lebanon:* Israeli ambassador to US warns of Hezbollah's rearmament on Israeli border**

Israeli Ambassador to Washington Michel Oren warned on Friday (3 September) that the Iranian and Syrian-backed Hezbollah militant organisation has placed 15,000 missiles along the Israeli-Lebanon border, some of which have the range to hit any point across the country. Warning of the threat of future attacks from Hezbollah, Oren said:

"The Syrian-Iranian backed Hezbollah poses a very serious threat to Israel...Hezbollah today now has four times as many rockets as it had during the 2006 Lebanon war. These rockets are longer-range. Every city in Israel is within range right now, including Eilat." (03/09/10)

The Israeli Defense Force (IDF) released footage taken by an unmanned drone over Lebanon on Friday, showing that Hezbollah is using southern Lebanese villages near the Israeli border as weapons depots, in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701. In one filmed incident a series of accidental explosions can be seen occurring in a residential building in the village of Shehabyeh. Following the explosion, the video shows a number of Hezbollah militants close off the street below, prevent soldiers from the Lebanese Armed Forces from approaching the area and then load substantial quantities of munitions on to vehicles for transporting to nearby homes. The IDF have assessed that the munitions have since been taken north of Lebanon's Litani River, beyond the auspices of the UN's peacekeeping mission. This is the third known case of a Hezbollah arms cache accidentally exploding in southern Lebanon in the past 16 months.

To watch the video published by the IDF follow the link below:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rAUzs-4GM8k>

Syria: Damascus refusing to cooperate with UN nuclear inspectors

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said on Monday (6 September) that it has not made any progress in its two-year investigation into alleged illicit nuclear activities in Syria as the regime in Damascus is refusing to cooperate. The US has accused Syria of building a covert nuclear reactor at the remote desert site of Dair Alzour with the help of North Korea, which was allegedly bombed by Israel in September 2007. The IAEA has already said that the building bore some of the characteristics of a nuclear facility and its inspectors have detected “significant” traces of man-made uranium at that site, as yet unexplained by Damascus. Damascus has also refused the IAEA access to three other suspected nuclear sites.