



ISRAEL MATTERS!

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U.S., Israel: Syria Arming Hezbollah with Missiles

Israel to Join Paris-Based Economic Group

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, a 31-country group often seen as an exclusive club of rich countries, recently voted unanimously to admit Israel. Previously, Israel's policies toward the Palestinians, and its war in Gaza in late 2008, had drawn strong criticisms from a number of European members, raising the possibility of delays or blocks to its admission to the group, an association of market-oriented democracies that promotes international trade. The decision to accept Israel came despite a letter by the Palestinian Authority asking the O.E.C.D. not to admit Israel.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called a news conference to hail the acceptance as a "seal of approval," saying it would "open doors and provide access to many fields" and boost foreign investment in Israel. Israel's economy was on the verge of collapse in the 1980s, but due to a series of difficult market-oriented changes it has grown into a technological powerhouse with an annual per capita gross domestic product approaching \$30,000, not far from that of Germany.

In a statement issued from its Paris headquarters, the O.E.C.D. announced the acceptance of three countries: Israel, Estonia and Slovenia. In saluting their strengths, the statement said that "Israel's scientific and technological policies have produced outstanding outcomes on a world scale."

U.S. and Israeli defense ministers recently accused Syria of arming Lebanese Hezbollah guerrillas with increasingly powerful missiles, but Israel said it did not intend to provoke a conflict over the buildup. The comments by U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Israel's Ehud Barak stopped short of identifying what type of missiles were being supplied to Hezbollah, after reports that the group had obtained long-range Scud missiles capable of hitting targets across Israel.



Gates (2009 photo, at right), who spoke alongside Barak (photo, left) after a meeting at the Pentagon, said Syria as well as Iran was providing Hezbollah with weapons of "ever increasing capability." "We are at a point now where Hezbollah has far more rockets and missiles than most governments in the world," Gates said, noting that Washington was following the matter closely.

Barak said the missiles could "disrupt the very delicate balance in Lebanon." But he played down the chances of a conflict over the transfers, which have grabbed headlines since the Scud allegations surfaced in a Kuwaiti media report on April 10 and were endorsed by Israel's head of state, Shimon Peres. "We do not intend to provoke any kind of major collision in Lebanon, or vis-à-vis Syria ... but we are watching closely these developments and think that they do not contribute to stability in the region," Barak said.

Hezbollah fired thousands of the mostly short-range Katyusha rockets into Israel in 2006 and it is worried the guerrillas have replenished their arsenal to strike on Iran's behalf if its nuclear sites come under attack. A Pentagon report on Iran released recently said that Hezbollah had rearmed itself to beyond the levels seen before the 2006 war, despite U.N.-backed efforts to curb weapon shipments to the group. In addition to arms, Iran provides about \$100 million to \$200 million per year to support Hezbollah, it said.

The missile allegations involving Syria have complicated President Barack Obama's efforts to forge a rapprochement with Damascus, which his administration sees as crucial to Middle East peace efforts and to stabilize the nascent democracy in neighboring Iraq. Obama aims to return an ambassador to Damascus after a five-year absence. But the designated envoy, Robert Ford, is still awaiting confirmation by the full Senate.

Meeting With Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro - The Subject: Israel

On May 3rd, I was part of a group of representatives from the New Haven area who were invited to meet with Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro. On the agenda was a discussion of Representative DeLauro's views of the current state of relations between the United States and Israel.

By: Ed Berns, Co-Chair, TBS Israel Affairs Committee

On March 26th more than 300 members of Congress signed the Hoyer-Cantor letter that reaffirmed Congress' "commitment to the unbreakable bond that exists between our country and the State of Israel." Congresswoman DeLauro did not sign that letter and the absence of her signature raised concern that it might have signaled a change in her long record for support of Israel. In response, a meeting was requested with the Congresswoman to discuss her views on the subject of the US-Israel relationship.



With respect to the Hoyer-Cantor letter, Congresswoman DeLauro defended her action because of her belief that Israel had slighted Vice President Biden when it announced its plan for additional building in East Jerusalem while he was visiting the country. She chose not to sign the letter because she felt its contents were overly critical of the Obama administration's public response to the announcement.

In an exchange of views from those present - who represented the broad political spectrum of Israel's supporters - Congresswoman DeLauro passionately advocated that she had not changed her historically strong position supporting the relationship between the US and Israel. When challenged that her failure to endorse the Hoyer-Cantor letter, taken together with the Obama administration's diplomatically punitive actions toward Prime Minister Netanyahu when he was recently in Washington, seemed to signal a change in the US-Israel relationship the Congresswoman insisted that not only was that not the case but the relationship between the two countries was as strong as ever. In fact, she noted that recent actions and statements by both countries signaled the two had moved past their disagreements and were moving forward on the bigger issue of restarting the peace dialogue between Israel and the Palestinians.

Congresswoman DeLauro reiterated her view that the most pressing issue concerning Israel was its security and the need to restrict the progress of Iran toward its goal of acquiring nuclear capability. She maintained that her position and that of the Obama administration remained unchanged - that Iran must be prevented from acquiring nuclear weapons.

Hamas Releases Cartoon About Captured Israeli Soldier Gilad Shalit

Hamas has released an animated film bearing a grisly message for Israel: If it doesn't meet the Islamic militant group's demands, an Israeli soldier it has held for nearly four years could return home in a coffin. The short but sophisticated cartoon - which depicts Sgt. Gilad Shalit's aging father wandering empty streets with a picture of his son and ends with the words "There is still hope" - is the latest product of Hamas' growing media machine.

TV and radio stations controlled by the group continuously broadcast Hamas-produced songs and music videos threatening the Jewish state and rallying the group's militant Islamic base.

A scene from the animated film (left) shows an image of Noam Shalit, the father of Israeli captured soldier Gilad Shalit, looking at a board carrying the portrait of former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. The caption reads: "I promise you will know the future of Gilad Shalit."



The latest cartoon - which was widely broadcast on Israeli TV - was remarkable for the personal and callous nature of the appeal on an issue that has profound emotional resonance for many Israelis: The fate of Shalit, who was captured by Gaza militants in June 2006. The website of Hamas' armed wing, which posted the video, said it was intended to pressure Israelis to accept demands for a prisoner swap and warns the Israeli government it could regret not making a deal quickly.

Shalit's father, who has become a recognizable face in Israel, is the main character of the three-minute, 20-second short film, in Hebrew with English and Arabic subtitles. Noam Shalit is normally clean-shaven, but he appears in the film's later scenes with a cane and scraggly gray beard, suggesting he has grown old while awaiting his son's release.

The soundtrack includes clips of his son's voice taken from a Hamas video released last October to prove the soldier was still alive. That video came amid talks aimed at trading Shalit for about 1,000 Palestinians prisoners. Negotiations have since stalled.

Toward the end of the film, screen text in Hebrew and Arabic informs viewers that the Israeli government's efforts to clinch a prisoner swap deal succeeded. Noam Shalit sits near Israel's Erez border crossing with Gaza, where a black van unloads a coffin draped in an Israeli flag. The father screams, then wakes up, finding himself sitting at a bus stop.

A screen text reads: "There is still hope."

Israel Rejects Turkish Request to Buy Arms

Israel has declined a request by Turkey to purchase several different military systems, including an anti-tank guided weapon and a missile system for its navy. The move is seen as a response to Turkey's increasing anti-Israel rhetoric and the pro-Islamic leanings in its foreign and domestic policies.

An Israeli defense official was quoted by the UK-based Jane's Defence Weekly as saying, "Ties with Turkey will never be the way they once were. We are being very careful which systems we sell them, due to the growing Islamic trends in the country."

Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan harshly criticized Israel during and following its counter-terrorism Operation Cast Lead in Gaza, which ran from December 28, 2008 to January 20, 2009. Since that time, relations between the two countries have steadily deteriorated, a trend reflected in Turkey's decision in October 2009 to bar Israel's Air Force from participating in the since-cancelled joint exercises with the US and Italy.

As a result, Israel has also been searching for new air space in which to conduct long-range training exercises, since Turkey has refused the IAF use of its air space. Israel has been exploring the possibility of renewing a 2006 agreement to deploy IAF fighter jets in Romania.

Netanyahu Recalls Ethiopian Aliyah

Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu issued a heartfelt greeting on the eve of Ethiopian Immigrant Day, calling the story of the community's desire to return to Jerusalem "the essence of our people's dreams and prayers."

"Decades ago, Ethiopian Jews left their homes in the dead of night. They went to the Land of Israel. They went to Jerusalem. They organized secretly, in small groups, left all their belongings behind and began their own exodus to Jerusalem," he said. "They marched for long weeks, sometimes longer, with babies on their backs, children holding their grandparents' hands. They went north, toward the horizon, in the direction of the Land of Israel. They suffered from hunger. They were robbed and attacked. Four thousand members of the community were unable to realize their dream and were buried along the way to the Land of the Patriarchs." Netanyahu called it "a marvelous story" that expresses the "longing of generations of Jews."

The prime minister pledged to continue to act to reduce and overcome the difficulties in the Ethiopian community.

UK Bans Kotel from Israel Tourism Ad

Images of the Western Wall are no longer allowed in Israeli tourism ads in the UK, after regulators deemed it misleading, as it is in the "occupied territories of the West Bank." The Advertising Standard Agency ruled recently following a complaint that a tourism ad containing a picture of the Western Wall with the Dome of the Rock in the background misleadingly implied that east Jerusalem was part of the State of Israel, resulting in false advertising.

"We noted the ad stated, 'You can travel the entire length of Israel in 6 hours. Imagine what you can experience in 4 days,' and, 'Visit... now for more itineraries in Israel,' and considered that readers were likely to understand that the places featured in the itinerary were all within the State of Israel," the Advertising Standard Agency said in its ruling. "We understood, however, that the status of the occupied territory of the West Bank was the subject of much international dispute, and because we considered that the ad implied that the part of east Jerusalem featured in the image was part of the State of Israel, we concluded that the ad was likely to mislead," the ruling continued.

The Israel Government Tourist Office advertisement was held to have breached the Advertising Standard Agency's guidelines on truthfulness. The Israeli Tourism Ministry wrote in response that "the ad provided basic, accurate information to a prospective UK traveler who wanted to know what to expect in Israel."

Tourism Minister Stas Meseznikov rejected the Advertising Standard Agency's decision. "These statements join the list of repeated attempts by anti-Israel organizations to discredit Israel's standing using absurd claims. The ministry will continue to promote marketing and advertising campaigns that make use of historic and religious sites in order to increase tourism to Israel. Jerusalem and its many religious and historic sites is Israel's central tourism anchor that draws millions of tourists of all religions every year, regardless of political views," he said.

"The Tourism Ministry brands Israel as the Holy Land with Jerusalem at its heart, which beyond being the City of Peace, is the united capital of Israel," Meseznikov said. "It is obvious to any thinking person that the Western Wall is one of Israel's inalienable assets and as such it will continue to appear in the ministry's campaigns. Just as nobody would dare interfere in the discretion of British state authorities on the matter of marketing Britain, the attempt to do so to Israel is illegitimate and nonnegotiable."

Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat also had harsh words for the Advertising Standard Agency, saying in a statement, "The Kotel is the heart of the nation and State of Israel, and it will remain as such forever." "The Jerusalem Municipality and the State of Israel will continue to publicize the important sites in Jerusalem, be they east, west or in the center of the Western Wall," the mayor said.