

President Zardari's observation on the threats to the country's democratic system is shared by almost all conscious citizens though they may not accept his list of sources of these ...

TOKYO (Xinhua) — Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama's three-day visit to India is to a certain degree, being heralded as a ...

WASHINGTON (AP) — NASA's new planet-hunting telescope has found two mystery objects that are too hot to be planets and ...



### New U.S. plan sees Palestinian state in 2012 but Israel wary

The latest U.S. proposal for Middle East peace envisions a Palestinian state within two years, according to Egyptian officials cited in a report Monday — a goal immediately dismissed by Israel as unrealistic.

The report came amid a flurry of shuttle diplomacy ahead of the visit soon by George Mitchell, U.S. President Barack Obama's special envoy to the Middle East. Mr. Mitchell is expected to push for a restart of stalled talks between Israelis and Palestinians. After a disappointing 2009 the Obama Administration is expected to recommit itself to resolving a conflict that has defied diplomatic solutions for decades.

Egyptian sources gave the Cairo-based daily Al-Ahram details about the U.S. draft proposal, according to the Israeli daily Ha'aretz.

As part of the plan, both Israel and the Palestinians would present written guarantees underlining their obligations prior to the completion of final-status talks, an Egyptian Foreign Ministry spokesperson told Al-Ahram.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas is meeting his Egyptian counterpart, Hosni Mubarak, in the resort town of Sharm el-Sheikh on Monday to discuss Israel's latest offers to renew talks with the Palestinian Authority.

The meeting comes in the wake of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's visit to Cairo last week, where he presented some ideas for jump-starting the diplomatic process.

But the Israeli foreign minister immediately poured cold water on a two-year timetable for a peace deal, saying it was "not a realistic goal," according to Ha'aretz.

"We need to begin direct talks without committing to any timeframe." ... "In the past, timetables were set and not met and this led to violence," (Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor) Lieberman said.

The diplomatic buzz comes as activists mark the one-year anniversary of Israel's invasion of Gaza, which left 1,400 Palestinians and 13 Israeli soldiers dead.

In recent days, the Egyptian government has opened a border crossing to the Gaza Strip, and allowed in more than a hundred foreign pro-Palestinian activists, many from France, Reuters reported.

President Obama trumpeted U.S. re-engagement with the Israeli-Palestinian peace process shortly after taking office just under a year ago. But his diplomats' efforts bore little fruit in 2009.

One sticking point is Israeli settlements. Israel has agreed to a partial freeze of new settlement building. But the Palestinian Authority has said it wants a full freeze, including a stop to construction in disputed East Beit-ul-Moqaddas, before it will return to the negotiating table.

Obama's administration drew criticism for first calling for a halt to all settlement activity, but then appearing to back off that demand by praising Israel's partial freeze.

In late October, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called Israel's "restraint" on settlements "unprecedented," wording that caused dismay in Arab capitals, MSNBC reported, and led Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to threaten to quit.

In an interview in the December 2009 issue of Foreign Policy, former U.S. president Bill Clinton said he thought there was "some chance" that the Israelis and Palestinians might be ready for a deal, because "the long-term trend lines are bad for both sides."

Right now, Hamas is kind of discredited after the Gaza operation, and yet (the Palestinian Authority) is clearly increasing (its) capacity. They are in good shape right now, but if they are not able to deliver sustained economic and political advances, that's not good for them.

The long-term trends for the Israelis are even more stark, because they will soon enough not be a majority. Then they will have to decide at that point whether they will continue to be a democracy and no longer be a Jewish regime, or continue to be a Jewish regime and no longer be a democracy. That's the great spur.

(Source: Christian Science Monitor)

### Turkey has strong position in Persian Gulf countries: Saudi King

Turkey occupies a strong position in the Persian Gulf countries, said Saudi King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz at the meeting with the Foreign Minister of Turkey Ahmet Davutoglu, who is on an official visit to Riyadh.

Touching upon cooperation between Turkey and the region countries with regards to the Palestinian problem, the Syrian-Lebanese relations and the situation around Iraq, the Saudi King mentioned the confidence in the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf towards Turkey.

At the meeting with his Saudi counterpart Saud Al-Faisal, Davutoglu also discussed the bilateral military and economic cooperation, and discussed the expansion of relations between the two countries in the field of cultural exchange.

Regarding the activities of companies in both countries, King Bin Abdulaziz said that "the successful work of Turkish companies in Saudi Arabia is a success for the entire Persian Gulf."

(Source: trend.az)

# Israel wary of U.S.-Arab arms deals

By Barak Ravid

The United States has recently signed major arms deals with several Arab states. Israeli officials have expressed concern at the scope and content of the agreements. Among the recipients of the advanced arms included in the agreements are Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates. The shipments are to include anti-ship and antitank missiles as well as so-called smart and bunker-busting bombs.

In December the Pentagon notified Congress of several arms deals it wanted to carry out. The details of the deals were also posted on the Pentagon website. In its report to Congress the Department of Defense noted that none of the deals would "alter the military balance in the region."

According to the Pentagon report to Congress, no arms deal with Israel have taken place since President Barack Obama took office.

Israel's defense establishment began to be concerned by U.S. arms sales to moderate Arab states during George W. Bush's presidency. In response to criticism the U.S. has argued that providing Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries with arms is part of Washington's efforts to boost the moderate axis in the Middle East and to deter Iran.

Senior Israeli and U.S. officials have said that Israel has been informed about the arms deals.

One of the deals troubling Israel was the sale to Egypt of four batteries of Harpoon Block II anti-ship cruise missiles, in a deal worth \$145 million and containing 20 missiles. The Harpoon II is an advanced, accurate missile, capable of overcoming the countermasures and electronic warfare suites generally available for defense.

The U.S. also sold Egypt four fast missile boats in a deal worth \$1.29 billion. The U.S. administration said the Egyptian navy needs the boats in order to better defend access to the Suez Canal.

Another deal with Egypt, this one to bolster the country's air force, included 450 Hellfire antitank missiles. These missiles are usually launched from Apache attack helicopters. "Egypt needs these missiles in order to protect its borders," the Pentagon explained in its report to Congress.

## Abbas says peace talks depend on Israel ending settlements

CAIRO (AFP) — Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas said on Monday he was open to peace negotiations with Israel, but that as agreed with Egypt talks could only resume when Jewish settlement activity ends.

"There is no objection to returning to the negotiating table or holding any meetings in principle," Abbas told reporters in the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh after talks with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

"We have said, and we will continue to say, that when there is a halt of settlement activity and recognized terms of reference, we are ready to resume negotiations," Abbas said.

He said Egypt agreed with his views, contradicting reports in Israel's Maariv newspaper that Mubarak was to press Abbas to accept a U.S. peace plan to restart the talks immediately.

"President Mubarak has stressed that (the status of) Jerusalem (Beit-ul-Moqaddas) be included in the negotiations, that settlement activity must end and there must be clear terms of reference," Abbas said.

Later at a press conference, Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit said Washington would present him and Egyptian intelligence chief Omar Suleiman with its position when they visit the United States on January 8.

"The process is prolonged and will need patience, rigor and a thought-out position so that the Palestinians are not placed in a difficult position," the official MENA news agency quoted him as saying.

In Israel, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told members of his Likud party that the time was ripe for resuming the peace process.

"Since the formation of this government, I have called for restarting negotiations with the Palestinians without preconditions," he told the Likud members in parliament on Monday.

"I believe the negotiations about entering negotiations have held us up long enough. In recent weeks I got the impression that there is something of a change in the air. I hope there is a ripening



A large arms deal with Saudi Arabia includes the sale of 2,742 TOW-2 antitank missiles. These are advanced missiles, which Israel also has, that are capable of penetrating the armor protection of most tanks. The total value of this deal, which is to benefit the Saudi National Guard, is estimated at \$177 million.

"Restrictions on the use and transfer of the missiles will be part of the deal," according to the Pentagon.

The U.S. will also sell Cairo 156 jet engines for F-16 jets, valued at \$750 million, in the wake of a deal in October for the sale of 24 F-16 C/D fighter aircraft equipped with electronic warfare suites. The total value of the F-16 deal is estimated at \$3 billion.

The F-16s supplied to Egypt are less advanced than the aircraft of similar type in Israel's arsenal.

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In its report to Congress the Pentagon explained that the missiles are part of an effort to upgrade the capabilities of the Saudi National Guard, hinting that the purpose of the deal was to deter Iran and to counter Al-Qaida in Yemen and in Saudi Arabia.

"The sale will improve the capabilities of Saudi Arabia to counter and defeat existing and future threats," the authors of the

report wrote. "Saudi Arabia will use these capabilities to deter regional threats and strengthen security inside the country."

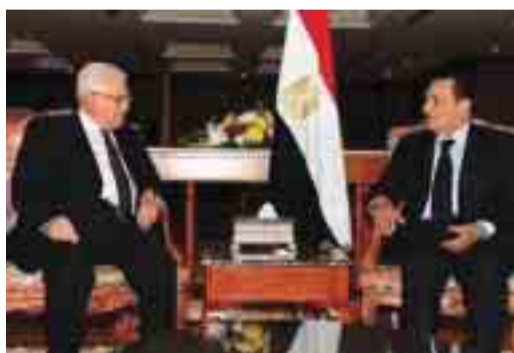
Jordan, too, is the beneficiary of U.S. arms sales. The U.S. will deliver to the Jordanian armed forces 1,808 Javelin antitank missiles with 162 launchers that are equipped with night vision systems. The value of the deal is \$338 million.

The Javelin is an advanced missile, capable of penetrating most tanks available today. In addition, in September 2009 the U.S. signed a \$220 million agreement with Jordan for the delivery of more than 80 advanced rocket launchers, of types that have been sold to Israel in the past.

The U.S. also signed a \$290 million deal with the UAE for ordnance that would be carried by F-16s. These include 1,600 laser-guided "smart" bombs, 800 one-ton bombs, and 400 bunker buster bombs. Washington's desire to build up the UAE against threats from Iran was the main reason used to justify the sale.

Even though the UAE does not pose a threat on Israel and is not considered an enemy state, officials in Jerusalem are concerned about this deal as well.

(Source: haaretz.com)



A handout picture released by the Palestinian Authority's Press Office (PPO) shows Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas (L) during a meeting with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh. Abbas said on Monday he was open to peace negotiations with Israel, but that as agreed with Egypt talks could only resume when Jewish settlement activity ends.

(AFP/PPO/Omar Rashidi)

that will allow the peace process to start," Netanyahu said.

Abbas's visit to Egypt comes almost a week after Netanyahu met Mubarak in Cairo about the stalled peace process and as diplomats said Washington was drafting letters of guarantee for the peace talks.

Meanwhile Jordan's King Abdullah II also arrived Monday in Sharm el-Sheikh where he held talks with Mubarak on "efforts to start serious and effective peace talks between the Israelis and Palestinians," according to a statement from the royal palace in Amman.

Earlier the Israeli paper Maariv said Washington is pushing for final status Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, suspended during the Gaza war a year ago, to resume immediately, adding Mubarak would press Abbas to agree to the deal.

A senior Palestinian official denied they had received any such plan.

"We have not received, neither officially nor in any other form, a plan from the American administration to bring about peace in the region," Nimr Hamad, an aide to Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas, told AFP.

Israel is trying with these media leaks to pressure president Abbas to enter into negotiations without a complete halt to settlements across all the Palestinian territories, including Beit-ul-Moqaddas.

U.S. President Barack Obama has repeatedly called on the two sides to resume peace talks, but the Palestinians have demanded Israel first freeze all settlement activity and commit to a framework for the talks.

The Palestinians have insisted the borders of their promised state encompass all of their land Israel occupied in 1967, including mostly Arab east Beit-ul-Moqaddas — which Israel later annexed in a move not recognized by the international community — as their capital.

Hamas's takeover of Gaza in 2007, which shrank Abbas's powerbase to the West Bank and deepened Palestinian divisions, has also hampered peace talks with Israel.



### Egypt temporarily lifts Gaza border restrictions

More than 200 trucks carrying medical aid have arrived in Egypt, destined for the Gaza Strip. Busloads of people have been crossing in and out of Gaza since Sunday.

The movement is the result of a rare opening by Egypt of the only border Gaza shares with a country other than Israel, which has kept a tight blockade on the Palestinian territory since Hamas took control there more than two years ago.

Egypt's border policy with Gaza is a source of deep frustration and anger in the Arab world, where many say Egypt is not doing enough to help the Palestinians trapped in Gaza. Egypt maintains that it has treaty obligations to live up to, as well as protecting the integrity of its borders.

But Gaza residents such as 79-year-old Youssef Mohammed see the border policy as punishment by their Arab neighbor to the south. He came to Egypt to visit his children and had to wait five months until he could finally get back home to Gaza City Monday.

Sitting in the front row of an idling Egyptian bus set to travel through the Rafah border crossing, he says there is no reason Egypt couldn't make this routine.

"They should just open the border, it's choking us. Look, we're married to Egyptians and Egyptians are married to Gazans. They should open it," he says.

Egyptian police thoroughly check every passenger's documents, and one elderly woman is hustled off the bus, gesturing and complaining to no avail. She stands outside the tall black iron gates of the border, arguing with a guard who wants to see a travel document she doesn't have, while the bus she was just ejected from goes through into the no-man's land dividing Egypt from Gaza.

"You're Egyptian?" asks the guard.

"Yes," says 64-year-old Zeinab Attiya, who got up at 3 a.m. Monday morning to travel from Helwan, south of Cairo, to the border.

"My three children and 11 grandchildren live over there in Gaza," she adds, "and I haven't seen them in seven years."

Palestinian and Egyptian families joined by intermarriage remain divided; parents don't see their children grow up and may never know their grandchildren. And the Palestinian and Egyptian sides of Rafah, sundered by walls, military patrols and Israeli drones, is on one side brutally impoverished, and on the other plagued by a rising criminal class that has grown out of the booming smuggling operations.

When help does arrive for Gaza, it often takes the form of well-meaning international activists who bring in truckloads of aid that is rarely followed by any sustained effort to lift the blockade.

The leaders of the Viva Palestina convoy completed their journey from Britain to the Gaza border Monday after a number of setbacks, chiefly Egypt's refusal to permit the trucks to travel overland across the Sinai Peninsula.

The group's most well-known member, the outspoken Scottish Member of Parliament George Galloway, was diplomatic upon his arrival, thanking Egypt for eventually permitting more than 200 truckloads of aid into Gaza.

He was also realistic enough to point out that the attention generated by this type of humanitarian activism is only really useful if it generates pressure on political leaders to spend more time and effort solving the underlying problem.

(Source: scpr.org)