

# Significance of Indian PM's Afghanistan visit

BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

forced to deny allegations of incompetence and complicity.

The two leaders held discussions about regional stability, counter-terrorism and the India-Afghanistan strategic partnership, built on what correspondents say is largely a shared mistrust of Pakistan.

Mr Singh addressed a joint session of parliament on 13th May in what correspondents

nated by a Taliban-influenced government friendly towards its arch-rival Pakistan.

Singh said that he and Karzai had an "exchange views on developments in the region and our common fight against the scourge of terrorism".

"The quest of the Afghan people for peace, stability and reconciliation needs the full support of all countries in the

It's unusual for the trio of Pakistan's power elite to visit Karzai at the same time. The visit is very significant in terms of Afghan-Pakistan relations which have been plagued by mutual distrust and suspicion. The talks are about forging a new chapter in Afghan-Pakistan relations after years of tension.

On 12th May, the Indian PM was making his first two-day visit to Kabul in six years. The timing is significant because Pakistan's international reputation was damaged after the killing of Osama Bin Laden in Pakistan, and New Delhi may see an opportunity to nudge Kabul closer to its side.

Karzai has visited India 10 times since 2002, and was educated for a time in the Indian hill station of Simla. Singh last visited Afghanistan in 2005.

Both Mr Singh and Mr Karzai feel vindicated that Bin Laden was discovered in Pakistan as they have long accused Islamabad of upsetting regional stability by harbouring militants.

Pakistan has been deeply embarrassed by the May 2 killing of bin Laden by US Special Forces in the garrison city of Abbottabad, just two hours' drive from Islamabad,

say was a rare honour.

Singh's visit also comes at a time when the region is preparing for the first drawdown by US troops from July. The question that will continue to be debated is whether Osama's death will have an impact on the withdrawal timetable. Official sources here seemed to suggest that the US would not up and leave just yet.

US Major General John Campbell, who commands NATO-led forces in the East, told reporters this week that the death could encourage Afghan insurgents to lay down their weapons and spur a possible peace settlement to end the war.

Any rapid reduction of US presence in Afghanistan would cause India concern, as it fears the country could become domi-

region and the international community," he said in a statement before leaving New Delhi.

The Indian prime minister also said he strongly backs the Afghan government's efforts to reconcile with the Taliban. The BBC's Quentin Sommerville says President Karzai's desire for talks with the Taliban has not in the past sat easy with India. But standing by President Karzai, Manmohan Singh said he now strongly supported those discussions.

"We wish to see a peaceful, stable, democratic, pluralistic Afghanistan. We strongly support Afghan people's quest at peace and reconciliation," Mr Singh said. "India supports firmly the unity, integrity and prosperity of Afghanistan."

Analysts say that India may

now accept that the Taliban has to be part of any political resolution to the war in Afghanistan. But it also dearly does not want its arch-rival Pakistan leading any reconciliation process.

After more than two decades without sway in Kabul, India swiftly established diplomatic ties with the new government after the 2001 US-led invasion deposed the extremist Taliban.

India has since committed 1.3 billion dollars to Afghanistan for projects ranging from new roads and electricity lines to constructing a new parliament. "India's [total] development assistance commitment is approximately \$1.5bn, but there are still gaps,"

Mr Singh told a joint press conference with President Hamid Karzai. "We now have a better idea of where we can do more... We have made a fresh commitment of \$500m over the next few years."

The money will be spent on agriculture, schools and roads. India is already building the new parliament in Kabul - at a cost of \$19m.

Correspondents say India's promise of more money is likely to raise Pakistani fears about Delhi's influence in Afghanistan. India is the biggest regional donor to the country.

India is also pushing a regional role in helping Afghanistan's development needs. But the lead for that has been taken by Turkey, which organized a meeting of regional donors in Istanbul. India was represented by foreign secretary Nirupama Rao. Turkey will hold a larger conference in November in the run-up to the second Bonn conference.

The US is negotiating a Strategic Partnership Declaration with Afghanistan, which includes a status-of-forces-agreement -- it will see more US bases in Afghanistan.

This will not go down well with either Pakistan or China. But sources said India would push for countries like Iran, Russia, central Asian republics to play a larger role in Afghanistan, to balance out Pakistan's actions, which India believes would only be Taliban-oriented.

Both India and Afghanistan have troubled relationships with Pakistan, accusing it of supporting and sheltering militant leaders who orchestrated attacks in the region.

The growing closeness between the two countries has infuriated Islamabad, which also wants to increase its influence in Afghanistan.

But the Afghan-Indian relationship has raised hackles in Islamabad, where the government and military establishment has long considered Afghanistan its own strategic asset to offset the perceived threat from India in the east.

Analysts say India's tussle with Pakistan for influence in Afghanistan could sharpen as the United States begins cutting troop numbers from July with the aim of all foreign forces exiting the country by the end of 2014.

President Karzai must strike a balance in dealing with his demanding neighbours - he needs Pakistan's help in reconciling with the Taliban and at the same time he needs India to counter the influence of Pakistan in his country.

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## Israel disconcerted by Palestinian unity



NEWS of the rapprochement between Fatah and Hamas has not been welcomed by Israel. Mahmoud Abbas and Ismail Haniyeh working together will prove to be the very antithesis of peace, according to the government in Tel Aviv.

"As long as Hamas is committed to violence, and violence only, we don't see how the Palestinian government can play any constructive role, and we will have to take our precautions," was the opinion voiced by Yigal Palmor from the Israeli Foreign Ministry.

Israel has already taken what it says are precautionary measures. Sixty million euros in customs duties and tax revenue should have been transferred to the Palestinian Authority. But Israel has withheld it, out of fears, it says, that the money would go towards financing Hamas.

However, the real drama is likely to play out on the international stage. The Palestinians hope to have their right to an independent state recognised by the UN in September. Israel and the United States are vehemently opposed to the idea. The Israeli government says this is akin to opening the door and inviting Iran in.

"What needs to be done is to prevent those efforts of the Palestinians to get the recognition in the UN Assembly to have a new Palestinian state, because if we will give them the recognition it will help the Iranians to build one more front base here within the Middle-East," said Vice Prime Minister, Silvan Shalom.

There are those who say this new partnership between the Palestinians will make kick-starting peace negotiations even harder. The talks foundered last September, after Israel refused to extend its 10-month moratorium on settlement construction in the West Bank.

Source: euronews



FACUNDO ARRIZABALAGA/REUTERS

## Israeli troops fire on marchers

ETHAN BRONNER

WITH an unprecedented wave of coordinated protests, the popular uprisings that have swept the region touched Israel directly for the first time. Like those other protests, plans for this one spread over social media, including Facebook, but there were also signs of official support in Lebanon and Syria, where analysts said leaders were using the Palestinian cause to deflect attention from internal problems.

At the Lebanese border, Israeli troops shot at hundreds of Palestinians trying to force their way across. The Lebanese military said 10 protesters were killed and more than 100 were wounded. Israel said it was investigating the casualties.

In the Golan Heights, about 100 Palestinians living in Syria breached a border fence and crowded into the village of Majdal Shams, waving Palestinian flags. Troops fired on the crowd, killing four people. The border unrest could represent a new phase in the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad of Syria.

In the West Bank, about 1,000 protesters carrying Palestinian flags and throwing stones and occasional firecrackers and gasoline bombs fought with Israeli riot troops near the military checkpoint between Ramallah and Israel. Scores were injured, local medical officials said.

In Gaza, when marchers crossed a security zone near the border, Israeli troops fired into the crowd, wounding dozens. In Jordan and Egypt, government security forces thwarted protesters headed to the border.

Every year in mid-May, many Palestinians observe what they call "the nakba," or catastrophe, the anniversary of Israel's declaration of independence in 1948 and the war in which hundreds of thousands of Palestinians lost their homes through expulsion and flight. But this was the first year that Palestinian refugees and their sup-

porters in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt, inspired by the recent protests around the Arab world, tried to breach Israel's military border from all sides.

"The Palestinians are not less rebellious than other Arab peoples," said Ali Baraka, a Hamas representative in Lebanon. At day's end, as a tense calm returned to the country's borders, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel said

fatalities was not spilled in vain," he said. "They died for the Palestinian people's rights and freedom."

Officials and analysts have argued that with peace talks broken down and plans to request the United Nations to declare Palestinian statehood in September, violence could return to define this conflict, relatively quiet for the past two years.

"This is war," said Amjad Abu Taha, a 16-year-old from Bethlehem

and killed by Israeli troops when, the Israeli military says, he was trying to plant an explosive.

At the Syrian border, an Israeli military spokesman said, troops fired only at infiltrators trying to damage the security barrier and equipment there. Some 13 Israeli soldiers were lightly wounded from thrown rocks.

The chief Israeli military spokesman, Brig. Gen. Yoav Mordechai, said on Israel Radio that he saw Iran's

media's attention from what is happening inside Syria," he added. There were also signs of grass-roots support for the protests.

Palestinian activists have called on the Internet for a mass uprising against Israel to begin on May 15. A Facebook page calling for a third Palestinian intifada, or uprising, had gathered more than 300,000 members before it was taken down in March after complaints that comments posted to it advocated violence.

In Egypt, political organizers worked for weeks to rally Egyptians around the idea of a third intifada. In Lebanon, activists had urged Palestinians to protest at the border town of Maroun al-Ras. Posters went up on Lebanese highways reading, "People want to return to Palestine," playing on the slogan made famous in Egypt and Tunisia, "People want the fall of the regime."

Israel declared its independence on May 14, 1948. Israelis celebrate the anniversary according to the Hebrew calendar, which this year was last Tuesday. The day's troubles began when an Israeli Arab truck driver rammed his truck into cars, a bus and pedestrians in Tel Aviv, killing one man and injuring more than a dozen in what the police described as a terrorist attack.

Later, hundreds of Lebanese joined by Palestinians from more than nine refugee camps in Lebanon headed toward Maroun al-Ras, scene of some of the worst fighting in the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah. Though the Lebanese Army tried to block them from arriving at the border fence, some reached it. They placed Palestinian flags at the fence, and after Israeli troops fired on them, some threw rocks at the soldiers, witnesses said.

In Egypt, too, the government tried to prevent an international confrontation, sending troops to the border in anticipation of a planned march there from Cairo.

About 250 people were stopped at El Arish, in the northern Sinai, where they were demonstrating for Egypt to



GETTY

Palestinians breached the Israeli-Syrian border on May 15, 2011 near Majdal Shams. Israeli troops fired on the crowd.

the protests had been aimed at destroying Israel, not creating a Palestinian state alongside it.

"The leaders of these violent demonstrations, their struggle is not over the 1967 borders but over the very existence of Israel, which they describe as a catastrophe that must be resolved," he said. "It is important that we look with open eyes at the reality and be aware of whom we are dealing with and what we are dealing with."

Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority, saluted the protesters in a televised speech, referring to the dead as martyrs. "The blood of the nakba

who joined the protesters in Ramallah, a rock in one hand and a cigarette in the other. "We're defending our country."

Nearby, hundreds of Israeli troops roamed the area, using stun guns and tear gas. In Gaza, the Hamas police stopped buses carrying protesters near the main crossing into Israel, but dozens of demonstrators continued on foot, arriving at a point closer to the Israeli border than they had reached in years and drawing Israeli fire.

Later, in a separate episode, an 18-year-old Gazan near another part of the border fence was shot

fingerprints in the coordinated confrontations, although he offered no evidence. Syria has a close alliance with Iran, as does Hezbollah, which controls southern Lebanon, and Hamas, which rules in Gaza.

Yoni Ben-Menachem, Israel Radio's chief Arab affairs analyst, said it seemed likely that President Assad of Syria was seeking to divert attention from his crackdown on the popular uprisings there by allowing confrontations in the Golan Heights for the first time in decades.

"This way Syria makes its contribution to the Nakba Day cause, and Assad wins points by deflecting the

open the border with Gaza, expel the Israeli ambassador and stop selling natural gas to Israel. About 30 activists made it around military checkpoints to stage a small demonstration at the border crossing.

Several thousand Egyptians protested in front of the Israeli Embassy in Cairo, waving Palestinian flags, clapping and chanting "Down with Israel." After midnight some protesters tried to storm the embassy and were repelled by Egyptian Army guards, witnesses reported.

In Jordan, 800 Palestinians were bused to the border, but security officials and local residents prevented them from going further. During the clashes that resulted, 14 demonstrators and three police officers were hurt, one critically, according to Jordan's public security office.

The fact that protesters made it to the border in Lebanon and Syria raised questions about whether those governments had endorsed the actions. Protesters in Lebanon said they received permission from the army to enter the border area near Maroun al-Ras, classified as a militarily sensitive region.

Hezbollah was believed to have helped coordinate the march. A field hospital affiliated with the group, the Martyr Salah Ghandour Hospital, which operates in Bint Jbeil, a large town in southern Lebanon, was at the scene.

In Syria, dozens of checkpoints safeguard the border area, which has been relatively peaceful since a truce in 1974. The arrival of hundreds, if not thousands, would require government permission, or at least official acquiescence.

A Syrian dissident, citing accounts from Damascus residents, said pro-government Palestinian groups began busing people to the border on Saturday night.

Reporting was contributed by Nada Bakri and Hwaida Saad from Beirut, Fares Akram from Gaza, Ranya Kadri from Amman, Jordan, and David D. Kirkpatrick and Liam Stack from Cairo.

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