

ARENS SAYS OFFICIAL ACCEPTANCE OF CONFERENCE MERE 'FORMALITY'

By David Friedman

WASHINGTON, July 28 (JTA) -- While Jerusalem has yet to make it official, Israel's acceptance of U.S. proposals for a Middle East peace conference is a mere "formality," Defense Minister Moshe Arens said on a nationally televised news program Sunday.

"I think we are very close to an agreement that would allow the initial meeting to take place and then break up into bilateral talks," the Israeli defense chief said on ABC-TV's "This Week With David Brinkley."

"At this stage of the game, I consider it to be no more than a formality," Arens said.

It was uncertain, however, if Jerusalem would make a formal announcement before President Bush and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev begin their summit meeting in Moscow on Tuesday.

The Bush administration had expressed hope that the Israeli decision would come before the Moscow summit. Nevertheless, "there is not a deadline," Brent Scowcroft, the president's national security adviser, told reporters Friday.

"We are just hoping for some kind of word before the summit," he said.

Scowcroft said the administration still has the option of having the summit partners invite Israel and the Arab countries to a conference whether or not they have agreed in advance to attend.

But he admitted that the administration would be reluctant to do so because the result would be that participants would not "come with the psychological attitude to make the conference a success.

"They come already feeling like they made concessions to get there, and that's not the best attitude to make the conference a success."

But Arens maintained Sunday that Israel does not "really feel we are being pushed" by the United States.

"It is now clear that after 43 years, the Syrian leader, Hafez Assad, is ready to sit down and negotiate directly with Israel," Arens said. "I consider that to be a significant step forward."

'This Unprecedented Situation'

Arens also said that the United States and Israel have agreed that the Palestinian representatives in the joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation not include any members of the Palestine Liberation Organization or residents of Jerusalem.

But the Palestinians have so far refused this condition.

Bush last Thursday called on both Israel and the Palestinians to agree to the conference despite their reservations.

He urged the Palestinians to "do everything possible to take advantage of this unprecedented situation to attain their legitimate rights, and at the same time further the cause of peace."

Arens said the conference would be a one- or two-day affair, which would be followed by "direct, bilateral negotiations" between Israel and Syria, Israel and Lebanon, and Israel and the

Jordanian-Palestinian delegation.

Arens refused to repeat the position enunciated by Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir last week that Israel will never withdraw from any of the territory taken in 1967.

The Israeli government's position has always been "we are ready to sit down and negotiate without preconditions," Arens said.

"I think it should be everybody's position that we should not preempt the negotiations and try to determine right now what their outcome should be."

Arens expressed the belief that through direct negotiations, an agreement could be reached with Syria. He refused to comment on whether Israel would be ready to give up any part of the Golan Heights.

'Pearl Harbor-Type Attacks'

But he noted that Israel has legitimate security concerns about the Golan Heights.

The Syrians "want to forget that for many years they terrorized the Israeli settlements in the Jordan Valley, didn't let people go to work, didn't let children go to school," the defense minister said.

He added that in 1967 and 1973, Syria used the Golan Heights to launch "Pearl Harbor-type attacks on Israel."

Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who also appeared on the ABC program, said that Israel could withdraw from part or all of the Golan Heights "if a proper security system could be set up."

He said this could be done by demilitarizing the Golan under United Nations supervision.

But Assad, in an interview with the Washington Post and Newsweek, said peace requires Israel to withdraw from all territories taken in 1967. "The occupied lands should be returned to their owners, be they Syrians, Palestinians or Lebanese," Assad said.

He said that for the Arabs to agree to anything less would be capitulation.

"If Israel is not going to quit the occupied land, why then should we want peace?" he asked.

'A Reliable Negotiator'

Assad said that the United States has not given Syria any assurances on the Golan Heights. "It only reaffirmed its commitment" to U.N. Security Council resolutions 242 and 338.

Kissinger said Sunday he did not expect a Syrian reconciliation with Israel.

"I don't think that even translates into Arabic for him (Assad)," he said.

But Kissinger, who conducted long negotiations with Assad, emphasized that "if one makes an agreement with him that is based on a mutual interest and a balance of forces, then he will keep it as long as the balance of forces is maintained.

"I found him a reliable negotiator."

Kissinger also cautioned against putting all the "onus on Israel for the success or failure of the peace process.

"They are in a very difficult position," he explained. "They are surrounded by 100 million Arabs that have not accepted them up to now. They cannot afford a single mistake."

NEWS ANALYSIS:

LIKUD WARMS TO PEACE TALK PROSPECTS AS SHAMIR DEFUSES BREAKAWAY THREATS

By David Landau

JERUSALEM, July 28 (JTA) -- With Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir having successfully defused secessionist threats by his right-wing coalition partners over the weekend, the Likud government warmed visibly to prospects for peace talks with Syria.

Syrian President Hafez Assad, long an object of distrust here, is now seen as serious and sincere in his assent to direct talks with Israel.

The Cabinet was told at its weekly meeting Sunday that Israel has independently confirmed that assessment, offered by U.S. Secretary of State James Baker after his latest meeting with the Syrian leader.

Israeli spokesmen, Defense Minister Moshe Arens and Deputy Foreign Minister Binyamin Netanyahu among them, went out of their way to underscore the significance of Syria's readiness to discuss peace with Israel, without preconditions.

While Arens told the closing session of the 77th National Convention of Hadassah that Israel would never relinquish the Golan Heights, he and Netanyahu stressed to the Women's Zionist Organization of America delegates, gathered at Jerusalem's Binyanei Ha'uma convention center, that Assad is not demanding prior commitments from Israel.

The Syrian leader has long insisted publicly that there could be no peace unless Israel withdraws from all the territory it seized in 1967, including the Golan Heights and East Jerusalem.

Israel's own position on this issue is equally "well known," Netanyahu said. What is important is that neither side is insisting its position must be a precondition of negotiations, he stressed.

The Israelis also pointed with satisfaction to Assad's latest interview, published in Newsweek and the Washington Post. In it he insisted that he has not gotten secret assurances from the United States that it would support demands for Israeli withdrawal, apart from its continued support of U.N. Security Council Resolution 242 of 1967, which it has endorsed for 25 years.

The resolution enshrines the concept of trading land for peace.

Threats From The Right

Fear that the Likud government would somehow bargain away the Golan Heights, which it annexed in 1980, resulted in threats from the far right.

The Tchiya, Tsomet and Moledet leadership all threatened to bolt Shamir's coalition government, taking a bloc of seven Knesset votes with them.

Tchiya's three-member Knesset faction recommended to the party's secretariat last week that it quit.

But Tchiya's leader, Minister of Science and Energy Yuval Ne'eman, voiced confidence last week in Shamir's determination not to give away territory for peace.

Nevertheless, the party's secretariat has to act this week on the recommendation of its Knesset caucus.

The Moledet Party leader, Minister Without Portfolio Rehavam Ze'evi, also gave Shamir a vote of confidence over the weekend, as did Agriculture Minister Rafael Eitan, leader of the Tsomet party.

The three right-wing parties said they detected no signs that Shamir will relent on territorial compromise. But they warned that any concessions on the Golan would result in their immediate departure from the government.

Tchiya and Moledet extended the threat to include any attempt to give Palestinians autonomy in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, a plan floated by Shamir in 1989.

It came to nought then because Israel refused to talk to Palestinians who lived outside the territories, especially in East Jerusalem.

That same issue is delaying Israel's formal agreement now to attend the regional peace conference Baker has been trying to organize since the end of the Persian Gulf War.

The government says it is waiting for "clarification" of the issue of Palestinian representation.

Meanwhile, Israeli sources held out the prospect of negotiations with Syria alone if the Palestinians refuse to agree to an American compromise.

The compromise proposed by Baker would have them accept the Israeli restrictions in the first stages of peace talks.

PERES READY TO MEET WITH EAST JERUSALEM PALESTINIANS By Michel Di Paz

PARIS, July 28 (JTA) -- Shimon Peres, leader of the Labor opposition in Israel, differs sharply from the Likud-led government on the key issue of Palestinian representation in peace talks.

He also believes President Hafez Assad of Syria is serious about negotiating directly with Israel for pragmatic reasons.

Palestinians "living or working in East Jerusalem" would be acceptable to the Labor Party as negotiating partners, Peres told the Paris weekly *Le Journal du Dimanche* in an interview published Sunday.

He rejected the Likud view that the presence of an East Jerusalem Palestinian at negotiations would compromise Israel's claim to sovereignty over its own capital.

"If an American votes in Paris for the president of the United States, this doesn't imply that Paris is or will become the capital city of the United States," Peres said.

"The Palestinians of Jerusalem hold Jordanian passports and their participation in a Palestinian delegation would not predetermine the future of the city," he said.

Asked if he thought Assad could be trusted, Peres said, "It is not a matter of sincerity but a matter of interest" for the Syrian leader to seek peace with Israel.

"I think that Assad understands fairly well that there is no more Soviet option in the Middle East, and that to choose war would introduce very complicated problems," Peres said. "The cost of modern military technology is very high."

Therefore, he said, to Syria no less than to Israel and other countries in the region, "peace has become an essential necessity. Strategic logic makes peace inevitable."

Peres thought the Syrian change of attitude did not happen overnight but is "the result of processes started some time ago."

"I think it began with Syria's participation in the coalition against Iraq. I think that Assad believes he can win over the United States, and has already had an important success," Peres said.

PLIGHT OF REFUSENIKS WILL BE ON SUMMIT AGENDA

By David Friedman

WASHINGTON, July 28 (JTA) -- President Bush is expected to raise the difficulties Jews in the Soviet Union continue to undergo when he meets with Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev in Moscow this week.

Brent Scowcroft, Bush's national security adviser, assured a group of Jewish leaders at the White House on Friday that Bush will raise the issue as he has in the past, said Shoshana Cardin, head of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry.

Other groups represented at the meeting were the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee, and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

Cardin, who led the delegation, said the group thanked the Bush administration for its "unwavering support and advocacy for Soviet Jewry" which has led to thousands of Soviet Jews emigrating to Israel.

But she told Scowcroft there are still more than 200 families that have been denied exit visas. She said that the time limit for the possession of "state secrets" is still not limited to five years and that there are still insufficient mechanisms in place to appeal the denial of exit visas based either on "state secrets" grounds or under the "poor relative" provision.

The latter provision allows for an exit-visa application to be denied if an applicant's relative fails to sign a financial obligation waiver.

In addition, the group pointed out that OVIR, the Soviet emigration office, is understaffed and only 18,000 Jews have been able to emigrate to the United States during the current fiscal year which ends Sept. 30, although U.S. law allows 40,000 to enter the United States annually.

Cardin said the group also complained that Gorbachev has publicly denounced increasing anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union.

The delegation also pointed out that the Vaad, the new Soviet Jewish umbrella organization, has not been officially registered by the Kremlin. It has been applying since March 1990.

The Jewish leaders also urged that when Bush goes to Kiev, the capital of the Ukraine, he visit Babi Yar, the site outside the city where 33,000 Jews were murdered by the German army 50 years ago.

Cardin, who is also chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, said the group urged the administration to support, as a humanitarian gesture, Israel's request for a U.S. guarantee of a \$10 billion loan over five years to help settle Soviet and Ethiopian Jews. She said Scowcroft expressed sympathy but gave no indication whether the administration would approve it when Israel officially requests the guarantee in September.

On another matter, Scowcroft expressed appreciation for the support by the National Conference on Soviet Jewry for a one-year waiver of the Jackson-Vanik Amendment which links U.S. most-favored-nation trade benefits for the Soviet Union with increased emigration.

Cardin stressed that the National Conference will continue to monitor the Soviet Union's compliance with emigration procedures.

Before Bush can waive Jackson-Vanik, Congress must ratify the trade agreement signed by Bush and Gorbachev at their summit in Washington in June 1990.

HARDENED INTIFADA ACTIVISTS RESORT TO DEADLIER WEAPONS

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM, July 28 (JTA) -- As most Palestinians in the administered territories become increasingly disenchanted with the intifada, hard-core activists are resorting to deadlier weapons.

Stones and home-made gasoline bombs are being replaced by firearms and high explosives.

The latest escalation occurred Saturday, when an explosive charge blasted a home in the Jewish settlement of Otniel, in the southern Hebron hills.

While no one was hurt -- there was no one home at the time -- the attack marked the first penetration of a settlement by intifada activists bent on attacking residents.

Last week, a barrage of eight gasoline bombs simultaneously hit the Gaza police station. By sheer chance, no one was hurt.

The use of firearms is also proliferating in the Gaza Strip.

Defense Minister Moshe Arens instructed Israel Defense Force Chief of Staff Ehud Barak to devise new tactics to cope with the steep rise in the use of firearms.

That phenomenon harks back to the pre-intifada period, when only a small minority of the population in the territories participated in anti-Israel acts.

The intifada, which began in December 1987, differed from previous unrest, inasmuch as it was characterized by mass civil disobedience, stone-throwing mobs and widespread rioting.

According to security sources, the masses are no longer enthusiastic about the uprising aimed against the Israeli presence in the territories. They are, in fact, disgusted by the internecine mayhem of recent years.

Arabs are killing Arabs whom they suspect of collaborating with the Israelis, often using that as a pretext to settle personal scores. An estimated 400 Palestinians have been murdered by fellow Arabs in the name of the intifada.

"To tell you the truth, people are sick and tired of the intifada, they are just sick and tired," an influential Palestinian confided to an Israeli companion at the American Colony Hotel in East Jerusalem this week.

Another reason for the increasing appearance of firearms is the low status to which the mainstream Palestine Liberation Organization has fallen in the international community since PLO chief Yasir Arafat supported Saddam Hussein of Iraq in the Persian Gulf War.

The PLO ran the so-called "white intifada," which benefitted from the public image of stones thrown by Palestinian youths against live or even plastic bullets fired by Israeli soldiers and police.

For a time, that policy won the PLO a dialogue with the United States and Western European countries and seemed to bring it closer to the negotiating table as an equal.

But after the Gulf war fiasco, Arafat's relatively moderate Al Fatah was shoved aside by hard-core rejectionists who favor deadly force.

The guidelines the rejectionists are circulating to their supporters in the territories call for return to the classic "armed struggle."

Leaflets distributed by the radical Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Moslem fundamentalist Hamas movement urge escalated violence against the Israelis.

CONCERN OVER COURT NOMINEE'S FARRAKHAN SPEECH IS SUBSIDING

By David Friedman

WASHINGTON, July 28 (JTA) -- Concern appears to be lessening among Jewish organizations that Clarence Thomas, the black conservative nominated by President Bush to take over Thurgood Marshall's seat on the U.S. Supreme Court, is a supporter of the anti-Semitic views of Black Muslim leader Louis Farrakhan.

This concern was raised when it was revealed earlier this month that Thomas, in a 1983 speech, had praised Farrakhan for his espousal of black economic self-help.

Henry Siegman, executive director of the American Jewish Congress, said at the time that if Thomas had expressed admiration for Farrakhan "he has disqualified himself from service on the Supreme Court."

But Siegman said Thursday that he has since received numerous letters from Jews who have worked with Thomas and speak very warmly about him and his opposition to Farrakhan.

They have said that he is sensitive to the issue and is the last person to condone anti-Semitism or any other bigotry, Siegman said, adding that while the AJCongress is still concerned about Thomas' views on many issues, the testimonies to his lack of anti-Semitism are "reassuring."

Other Jewish organizations have reportedly been receiving similar assurances from Jews who know Thomas.

Agudath Israel of America, the only national Jewish organization to have endorsed Thomas so far, also said that it was reassured by Jews who worked with Thomas that he does not share Farrakhan's anti-Semitism.

When his 1983 remarks on Farrakhan were revealed, Thomas immediately issued a statement declaring that "I am, and always have been, unalterably and adamantly opposed to anti-Semitism and bigotry of any kind, including by Louis Farrakhan."

Supporters of Thomas, argued that Farrakhan's anti-Semitism was not as well-known in 1983 as it became in 1984, when the Black Muslim leader received national attention during the Rev. Jesse Jackson's first campaign for the presidency.

But some Jewish leaders maintained that Farrakhan's diatribes against Israel, Jews and Judaism were known for more than a decade.

Compared Farrakhan To Skinheads

Thomas' supporters point to a 1989 interview in a national Catholic weekly in which the nominee compared Farrakhan to neo-Nazi groups like the Skinheads.

"You never want to have hate groups in your society, whether it is Farrakhan or the Skinheads," Thomas told the Los Angeles-based Catholic Twin Circle.

Thomas was responding to a question about the Skinheads, and it was he who injected the comparison with Farrakhan.

The interview is being reprinted in the newspaper's July 28 edition because of the new interest in Thomas, said Lori Sayer, the newspaper's editor, who made a copy available to the Jewish Telegraphic Agency.

In his remarks on the Skinheads, Thomas played down their importance. "You don't see any politicians embracing Skinheads and surviving," he said.

"It will scare me when people begin to say, 'Well, I can understand where the Skinheads are coming from,' when they begin to get some moral sanction from our legal institutions," he added.

Thomas also said that while there are still individuals who are as racist as others were in the past, "the difference is now they don't have the overall moral sanction of society."

The Senate Judiciary Committee will begin confirmation hearings for Thomas on Sept. 10. He is expected to be questioned closely on his views about Farrakhan, affirmative action, abortion, and his record as chairman of the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission from 1982 to 1989.

In his 1989 interview, Thomas said the commission for the three prior years had filed 500 cases annually, more than any previous commission. He said that during his tenure, the commission also collected a billion dollars in relief for persons claiming discrimination.

But he charged that the commission was "hampered by Congress which, every year, guts the budget for EEOC" proposed by the president.

"They just don't want the EEOC to be successful during a Republican administration," Thomas said.

Thomas also said that he did not believe the civil rights movement will grow because the issues today are tougher and harder to dramatize than desegregating a lunch counter.

"The issues today are much harder," Thomas said.

IRAQ HOSTED INTERNATIONAL COLLECTION OF JEW-HATERS

By Michel Di Paz

PARIS, July 28 (JTA) -- Iraq played host to a gaggle of French neo-Nazis and Holocaust revisionists from several countries, according to a July 24 interview published in the daily Liberation here.

Michel Faci, 35, who says he was secretary general of an extreme right-wing anti-Semitic group at the time, boasts that he and about 20 others were invited to Iraq by a government-sponsored organization called "Friendship, Peace and Solidarity with Iraq."

He described the "thrill" of being able to walk around in a "genuine" SS uniform in the Al Aras tourist city about five miles from Baghdad.

According to Faci, the French neo-Nazis were received by the Iraqi information minister, Abdel Lateef Jassem, who was surprised that the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" is outlawed in France.

The 19th-century anti-Semitic forgery that originated in Czarist Russia is a best-seller in Iraq, Faci claimed.

He said the Holocaust deniers on the plane to Iraq included an American, William Brown, who was personally received by Saddam Hussein, and Michel Sergeant, a Frenchman whom the Iraqis employed as a lecturer at Baghdad University.

"In the streets of Baghdad, we saw in a newspaper stand the portrait of Uncle Adolf (Hitler) with a swastika. The Iraqis are fiercely anti-Zionist," Faci was quoted as saying. "They agree Hitler was right to fight against the Jews in World War II. To them, Israel is really the incarnation of the devil."

Faci said that after doing propaganda work on Iraqi television, he and his companions left on the last plane to Jordan in mid-January -- following the first night of Allied bombing of Baghdad.