

**ANALYSTS SEE NO BREAKTHROUGH
IN HAFEZ ASSAD'S PUBLIC REMARKS**
By Deborah Kalb

WASHINGTON, Jan. 18 (JTA) -- Although Sunday's meeting between President Clinton and Syrian President Hafez Assad is being hailed by the U.S. administration as a positive move toward Middle East peace, others here are saying it is too soon to tell.

"I don't think there's a lot to go on from what was said publicly the other day," said Richard Haass, a top Middle East adviser in the Bush administration who is now at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

At a news conference following Sunday's meeting in Geneva, Assad spoke of the possibility of "a new era of security and stability in which normal peaceable relations among all shall dawn on the region."

Assad's use of the word "normal" was trumpeted by Clinton administration officials and others as representing a step forward in the peace process.

After Assad's remarks, Clinton said that the Syrian leader sought "not just an end to war, but the establishment of real and comprehensive peace with Israel that will ensure normal, peaceful relations among good neighbors."

"The key out of Geneva was that Assad succeeded in having President Clinton act as his interpreter, of his interpretation of peace," said Robert Satloff, an analyst with the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Clinton also said at Sunday's news conference that he hoped the Assad statement would "provoke a positive response in Israel."

"The fact that he called on Israel to respond to Assad's statement may contradict the non-interfering role the Americans have adopted," Satloff said.

Satloff pointed out that the success of the Israeli-Palestinian discussions in Norway leading to last September's landmark autonomy agreement was in part due to American restraint from active involvement.

Peace Beyond Non-Belligerency

For his part, Haass said that Assad's words were a possible "indication that Syria may be willing to entertain" a concept of peace reaching beyond non-belligerency.

But he said that if Syria really wanted to send clear signals regarding the peace process, it was more likely to do so "in private and in return for something."

Satloff said that he hoped the administration had received private assurances from Syria that went beyond Assad's public statements, because otherwise, the public statements do not merit the level of success attributed to the meeting.

"It's the quintessential brilliance of the Syrian president," Satloff said. "He succeeded in making American diplomacy stand on its head for using a single adjective."

For months now, negotiations between Israel and Syria have been stalemated over definitions of peace and withdrawal.

Israel wants Syria to define what type of peace it envisions between the two countries. The

Israeli government wants normal relations with Syria, including tourism and trade, not just a state of non-belligerency.

The Syrians, meanwhile, want Israel to commit to total withdrawal from the Golan Heights.

Some say the Syrian leader's record -- including support for terrorism and drug trafficking -- requires a cautious attitude about Assad's future plans.

"I'm skeptical," Daniel Pipes, a Philadelphia-based expert on Syria, said of Assad's comments Sunday. "Maybe it is for real, and if so, it is important, but we don't know."

Assad has been giving only a little at a time, in contrast to the late Egyptian leader Anwar Sadat, who traveled to Jerusalem in order to further prospects for peace with Israel, Pipes said.

Pipes also pointed out that Assad "kept Israeli journalists out of the room" at the news conference Sunday. "There was no grand gesture," he said. "He is giving the minimum."

Discrimination Would Not Be Tolerated

The State Department itself said Tuesday that Syria's attempt to exclude Israeli journalists showed it had a "long ways to go" before it achieved normal relations with Israel.

Department spokesman Mike McCurry also said that U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher had raised the matter with Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa, making it clear that "we could not tolerate a situation in which anyone would be discriminated against."

One member of Congress who is a leader on issues of Jewish concern also expressed caution about the significance of Assad's remarks in a statement released Sunday.

"While it is heartening to hear Assad say publicly he wants peace with Israel, until he lays out the details, whatever Assad has said today has to be listened to with skepticism," said Rep. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.).

Another issue raised by some observers has to do with whether Israel is able to engage in simultaneous land-for-peace negotiations with both the Palestinians and Syria at the same time.

Israel is currently involved in difficult negotiations with the Palestinians to implement the declaration of principles on autonomy that both parties signed last September.

Haass said that Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's pattern in recent months has been to put one negotiating track, either the Syrians or the Palestinians, at the top of his agenda.

In recent months, the Palestinians have taken center stage. But, Haass said, if Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat "proves too frustrating an interlocutor, he may decide it's time to push Syria" to the fore.

Israel and Syria, as well as Lebanon and Jordan, are expected to return to Washington on Jan. 24 for a new set of talks involving only the heads of the various delegations.

Most analysts said the Clinton-Assad meeting was unlikely to cause fundamental changes in the new round of talks. "The meeting had importance as a symbol. It boosts Assad's stature, but it does not change fundamental positions," Pipes said.

NEWS ANALYSIS:**PLAN FOR REFERENDUM ON GOLAN SEEN AS SHREWD POLITICAL MOVE**

By David Landau

JERUSALEM, Jan. 18 (JTA) -- Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's bombshell announcement late Monday that he would hold a national referendum before agreeing to a withdrawal from the Golan Heights came as a surprise even to the members of his own Cabinet.

But political observers here are united in their praise for the move, which they describe as a deft and resourceful tactic likely to shore up Rabin's political strength and reinforce his narrowly based coalition government.

Some observers believe that the referendum will never take place, but that Rabin will prefer to hold general elections further into the present parliamentary term as a means of sidestepping a referendum, a step unprecedented in the Israeli system.

The announcement of a referendum in the meantime serves Rabin's interests in several ways.

It relieves him of political pressure and enables him to negotiate with the Syrians with greater freedom, since whatever is achieved in talks with Damascus can always be put to the people to decide.

Second, a referendum enhances Rabin's credibility with the Golan settlers, as well as with the settlers in the West Bank.

Third, the move ensures the support of the fervently religious Shas party, which Rabin has been trying to woo back to his coalition. The Labor Party leader had pledged a referendum on the Golan when he made his coalition agreement with Shas in 1992.

Rabin said Tuesday that there was no need to make special constitutional or legislative preparations for a referendum at this stage, that the time for these steps would come if and when a referendum became a more immediate prospect.

The prime minister said he wanted to give Israeli citizens the opportunity to participate in the making of an important security decision if the price required for peace with Syria were to prove "higher than what the citizens had expected."

Peres Was Not Informed

During the 1992 election campaign, and in numerous public statements thereafter, Rabin said his government would offer Syria an Israeli withdrawal on the Golan, but not necessarily from the Golan. This wording was meant to indicate that he was not considering a full withdrawal from what many consider a strategically important site.

The announcement of the referendum was made by Deputy Defense Minister Mordechai Gur during a debate in the Knesset. The announcement was made on the explicit instructions of Rabin himself.

Labor Party insiders say that even Foreign Minister Shimon Peres was not informed about the announcement in advance -- and Peres' lukewarm reaction Tuesday seemed to bear this out.

Other Cabinet ministers, among them Environment Minister Yossi Sarid, were also reserved about the idea of a referendum. Tourism Minister Uzi Baram complained that the Cabinet had been kept in the dark until the announcement was made.

Among the opposition parties, opinion was

divided, with some Likud politicians demanding elections rather than a referendum.

But the Golan settlers greeted Rabin's decision with jubilation, presumably anticipating that a majority of the country would vote against a large-scale pullback from the Golan.

In a cable to Gur, the leaders of the Golan settlers wrote, "Your announcement is a great victory for the majority in Israel, which has expressed and demonstrated over this past year its support for (remaining in) the Golan."

But the optimism of the Golan settlers is not shared by independent observers, who think a majority of Israelis will support full withdrawal from the Golan if it can be shown that the move would result in normal relations with Syria.

The referendum announcement, not surprisingly, was criticized by Syrian officials, with Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa saying Israel "had no right to talk about Syrian territory" in a referendum, which he further charged was "against international law and the U.N. charter."

Rabin, meanwhile, gave his reserved support to the outcome of Sunday's meeting between President Clinton and Hafez Assad.

In public comments Tuesday, he said he had "expected more" from the talks, but said he was prepared to "make do with what was said and what was not said." He added that the meeting "opens the possibility for more concrete and practical negotiations."

Rabin spoke after extensive briefings by the U.S. State Department's Middle East peace talks coordinator, Dennis Ross, who was sent here from Geneva right after the Clinton-Assad meeting.

Israeli-Syrian negotiations, which had been suspended for the past four months at the insistence of the Syrians, are scheduled to resume next week in Washington.

ARAB STABS ISRAELI AT GAZA ENTRY

JERUSALEM, Jan. 18 (JTA) -- A 35-year-old Israeli man from Ashkelon was slightly injured when a 16-year-old Arab stabbed him Tuesday at the Erez entry to the Gaza Strip.

The victim managed to summon help from soldiers, who shot the attacker.

The assailant, who was taken to the hospital for treatment, was described as being in moderate condition.

The victim was also treated at the hospital, but was soon released.

UNIFIL RETRACTS CHARGE AGAINST ISRAEL

TEL AVIV, Jan. 18 (JTA) -- A Finnish soldier serving with the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon was slightly wounded when the UNIFIL post north of the southern Lebanon security zone came under shelling Monday.

UNIFIL filed a complaint against Israel but then retracted it when it learned the shell that hit the soldier had been fired by the South Lebanon Army, Israel's ally, but not by the Israel Defense Force.

The attack caused extensive structural damage to the post.

The incident occurred after a roadside bomb attack against an SLA patrol, in which an SLA soldier was slightly wounded.

The Believers Resistance, a radical Shi'ite organization that broke away from the Amal Shi'ite movement some years ago, took responsibility for the attack against the SLA unit.

JEWISH INSTITUTIONS HIT HARD BY EARTHQUAKE IN LOS ANGELES

By Tom Tugend

LOS ANGELES, Jan. 18 (JTA) -- The University of Judaism, several prominent synagogues and Jewish communal facilities suffered severe damage as the Jewish community, along with the rest of Los Angeles, tried to reorder its life after the devastating earthquake that struck early Monday morning.

The epicenter of the quake was Northridge, in the San Fernando Valley, northwest of downtown Los Angeles. Although the quake affected homes, buildings and freeways throughout the metropolitan area, the severest damage was in the Valley, home to 240,000 Jews.

"At this point it is still rather chaotic," said Steven Windmueller, executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Committee. "It's rather unclear as to the total scope of damage, and to the depth of how our community and the larger society has been affected."

While engineers were still assessing the structural damage of the region's buildings, severe damage was reported by the University of Judaism and the adjacent Stephen S. Wise Temple, which closed for the week.

Also hit were the Brandeis-Bardin Institute in Simi Valley, which apparently lost its main and adjoining buildings, and Congregation Valley Beth Shalom, whose rabbi, Harold Schulweis, planned to give a sermon this Friday on "An Act of God?"

The 6-year-old Bernard Milken Community Campus, housing the main Jewish agencies for the western San Fernando Valley, and already closed to correct major construction deficiencies, suffered major water damage.

Jewish Relief Funds Set Up

Water from burst pipes also damaged the Freda Mohr Center of the Jewish Family Service, in West Hollywood, and the agency's western office was badly damaged.

Possible structural damage to the Jewish Community Building in west-central Los Angeles was still being assessed. As in homes and offices throughout the area, floors were littered with papers, crockery, photographs and computers.

Windmueller said several offices were blocked by filing cabinets that had fallen against office doors.

Most Jewish schools reportedly had minor damage, and some were to reopen Wednesday.

The Jewish Federation Council and its agencies reactivated the emergency program put in place during the devastating Los Angeles firestorms of early November, including an emergency hot line and arrangements for providing food and shelter for the homeless.

In New York, the Council of Jewish Federations announced that it was setting up an earthquake emergency fund and would consult with Jewish officials here on needed assistance.

Contributions can be sent to the CJF Earthquake Emergency Fund, 730 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10003.

B'nai B'rith International also announced that contributions could be sent to the B'nai B'rith Disaster Relief Fund at 1640 Rhode Island Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

The Union of American Hebrew Congregations has also established a disaster relief fund.

(Contributing to this report was JTA staff writer Larry Yudelson in New York.)

SEEING FILM ISN'T ALL THEY MUST DO; SKINHEAD PLOTTERS GET PRISON TIME

By Tom Tugend

LOS ANGELES (JTA) -- Two Southern California skinhead leaders who had plotted to start a race war have been sentenced to prison.

The young men, members of the Fourth Reich Skinheads, received prison sentences even after they and juvenile cohorts convicted in the plot underwent a three-day sensitivity program that included viewing the film "Schindler's List."

Christopher Fisher, 20, the group's leader, was sentenced to eight years and one month in prison. His co-defendant, Carl Daniel Boese, 17, received a sentence of four years and nine months. Both had pleaded guilty to reduced charges of making and using explosives for criminal purposes.

The two were arrested in July as part of a widely publicized sweep of white supremacists in Southern California. The sweep also netted a half-dozen members of two other racist groups, the White Aryan Resistance and the Church of the Creator, a pseudo-Christian sect that preaches that blacks, Jews and others are evil.

The subjects were arrested in time to prevent the first part of Fisher's plan, which was to kill Rodney King, the black motorist whose beating by white police officers and the policemen's subsequent acquittals incited mass riots here. The plot also included blowing up a landmark black church and machine-gunning its congregation, and sending letter bombs to prominent Jews in Orange County, south of Los Angeles.

Fisher admitted that he and his followers had vandalized a synagogue in the town of Westminster and bombed two houses and a car. No one was injured in the attacks.

As part of plea bargains by Fisher and Boese, the chief federal prosecutor, Marc Greenberg, proposed that they and 10 teen-age white supremacists be exposed to a three-day program of counseling and discussions, primarily at the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles but also with representatives of the American Jewish Committee.

As part of the program, the skinheads talked with Holocaust survivors, met with rabbis and black ministers, held discussions with teen-agers from minority groups and viewed "Schindler's List," the Steven Spielberg film about the Holocaust.

The skinheads also met with convicted murderers and other inmates at the Men's Central Jail in Los Angeles, an experience that seemed to have made the strongest impression on the group.

Results of the novel experiment, which was reported at length on the front pages of the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times, are not yet apparent or clear-cut.

Some of the youngsters seemed to show genuine contrition, while others remained defiant.

One participant asked if the term "kosher" referred to tainted meat, and questioned how much of the proceeds of a \$1 candy bar would go to Jews.

Evaluating the three-day course, Greenberg said, "I don't know if this will work" but "at least we tried."

Rabbi Abraham Cooper, associate dean of the Wiesenthal Center, said the sentences "sent an important signal to young people who may think it cool to be racists. The signal is that society takes hate crimes very seriously."

ITALY EXTENDS ELECTION DAY HOURS TO ALLOW OBSERVANT JEWS TO VOTE

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME, Jan. 18 (JTA) -- Confronted by widespread protests over its decision to schedule crucial general elections on the first day of Passover, Italy's caretaker government has backtracked and put together an emergency decree that will enable observant Jews to vote.

The decree, which was expected to be enacted after approval by both houses of a parliament that was formally dissolved Sunday, will extend the duration of the elections to two days.

This will allow voters to go to the polls until 10 p.m. on March 28 -- two and a half hours after sundown on the second day of Passover.

Jews and their supporters expressed satisfaction with the latest developments, although the entire affair has left a lingering bad taste.

Rabbi Giuseppe Laras, chief rabbi of Milan, said he was satisfied with the outcome but called the decision process "a typical Italian drama," and said it damaged Italy's image.

Franco Pavoncello, vice president of the Rome Jewish community, said, "If the polling places remain open until the evening of March 28, we will be fully satisfied not only as Jews but as Italian citizens, because in caring for a minority we will see an important guarantee for democracy for everyone."

The decision was made at the last minute. Until Sunday, the government had ignored weeks of protests by Jews and announced that the elections for a new parliament would be held March 27, the first day of Passover.

This was viewed by the Jewish community and others as a flagrant affront to minority rights, as it would have effectively denied observant Jews the right to cast their ballots.

Threats Of A Boycott

Urgent political consultations took place throughout Monday on how to rectify the situation, following bitter protests from Jewish and non-Jewish leaders alike.

There had also been threats issued from some quarters to boycott the elections entirely.

Rabbi Elio Toaff, the chief rabbi of Rome, had threatened to take possible legal recourse.

"Dozens of people phoned me," Toaff told reporters. "And many non-Jews promised not to vote if the date of the election was not changed."

"One journalist even asked me for a yellow star to wear on Election Day. Yes, yet again, the Italians backed us up," said Toaff.

Support for the Jewish community also came from Alessandra Mussolini, the granddaughter of late fascist dictator Benito Mussolini. Alessandra Mussolini is a member of a neo-fascist party, the MSI, and was its unsuccessful candidate in the recent Naples mayoral race.

She described the decision to vote on Passover as "an act of discrimination against the Jewish community, which from now on will feel even more of a minority."

But her expression of support was not totally welcomed in the Jewish community.

Riccardo Pacifici, a member of the board of the Rome Jewish community, described her words as "manipulative."

There are some 40,000 Jews in Italy, 30,000 of whom are of voting age, out of a total population of 58 million.

ISRAEL AND U.S. SIGN AGREEMENT FOR JOINT TECHNOLOGY COMMISSION

By Cynthia Mann

JERUSALEM, Jan. 18 (JTA) -- In a move timed to coincide with the visit here of the U.S. commerce secretary, Israel and the United States have signed an agreement establishing a joint science and technology commission that aims to create high-tech jobs in both countries.

The joint commission fulfills a promise President Clinton made when he met with Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in March 1993.

Representing the United States at the signing ceremony Tuesday was U.S. Commerce Secretary Ron Brown, who was on a seven-day trade mission in the Middle East intended to encourage the peace process.

The technology commission is being seen here as an important reflection of economic cooperation between the two countries, as well as one of the fruits of the regional peace process.

"It is a great day," Rabin said at the signing ceremony, adding that the agreement elevates "the level of cooperation in science and technology between our two countries."

"I believe it will send a signal to those engaged in peace negotiations, that whoever moves toward peace" will gain from cooperation with the United States as well as from "the fruits" of U.S.-Israeli cooperation, he said.

The goals of the new body are to encourage joint high-technology industrial projects; to promote the development of new technologies; and to adapt military technology to civilian use.

A Partnership Between Equals

Present at the signing ceremony along with Rabin and Brown were Israel's industry and trade minister, Micha Harish, as well as members of the commission and its private-sector advisory board.

"In a more peaceful world," said Brown, "we can work together as allies and innovators to help one another become more prosperous, more dynamic and more secure."

He stressed that the new endeavor "is not about aid" to Israel, but is about a partnership "between equals."

This was a key point for Mel Levine, the former congressman from California, who was in Jerusalem as a member of the commission's private-sector advisory board.

He said it is significant that they made the commission part of the Commerce Department. "This way it's part of America's domestic policy agenda rather than a foreign policy or foreign aid program."

The accord therefore can be viewed in the United States as "an opportunity to improve our economy" by tapping the "unique strengths" in Israel's economy for mutual benefit, he said.

Meanwhile, both Harish and Brown said that while the two governments will act as a catalyst, each contributing equally to the commission's budget, the lion's share of investments in the projects spawned by the commission will come from the private sector.

At a news conference following the signing ceremony, Brown said he had spoken out against the Arab boycott, both in Amman, Jordan, and Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, saying it creates a "chilling effect" on U.S. investment, trade and commerce.

Brown was scheduled to meet privately with Palestinian business leaders before leaving for Cairo later this week.