

**OFFICIALS SAY ISRAEL IS PREPARING TO VACATE GAZA AND JERICHO IN MAY**
By David Landau

JERUSALEM, Feb. 23 (JTA) -- With both sides voicing optimism about the progress of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in Cairo, Israel is actively preparing to vacate the Gaza Strip and the Jericho area during the month of May, senior official sources were quoted as saying Wednesday.

Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, while declining to confirm this specific time frame, told reporters Wednesday that he, too, believed the pullback could be completed "within a small number of weeks" after the signing of the accord.

Peres said there had been impressive progress at the negotiations, which were held this week in the Egyptian capital.

Similar expressions of optimism were voiced by the heads of the Israeli and Palestinian delegations on Wednesday, when the week's round of talks in Cairo were concluded.

"I do believe that we are coming closer to conclude our negotiations," said Maj. Gen. Amnon Shahak, deputy chief of staff of the Israel Defense Force, who leads the Israeli team.

And the chief negotiator for the Palestine Liberation Organization, Nabil Sha'ath, also told reporters that significant progress had been made in the talks, adding that concluding the negotiations "will take only two or three weeks at the utmost."

The two sides reported progress on both security issues and on the transfer of civilian authority to the Palestinians.

They also reportedly reached agreement on the deployment and the positioning of the Palestinian police force that will be put in place after the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and Jericho.

But they left the issue of the size of the police force for Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat to decide when they meet to finalize the agreement.

Despite all the buoyant assessments of the talks' progress, a shadow appeared to darken these reports from a different quarter -- Paris -- where Israeli officials participating in separate economic talks with the PLO reported serious erosions in previously agreed-upon terms.

These officials accused the Palestinian side of backing away from earlier understandings.

Top-Level Meeting In Paris

The officials spoke prior to a top-level meeting Wednesday in Paris between the Israeli finance minister, Avraham Shohat, and Ahmed Karia, head of the PLO's economic division.

Shohat suggested after the meeting that the Palestinians' tactics were designed to secure concessions and did not represent a real withdrawal from previous understandings.

He warned that if the Palestinians insisted on having their own taxation and customs system, rather than coordinating with Israel, the consequence would be a total separation between the Jewish state and the Palestinian entity.

CHIEF RABBIS DEFY HIGH COURT ON RELIGIOUS COUNCILS RULING
By Cynthia Mann

JERUSALEM, Feb. 23 (JTA) -- For the second time in about two weeks, Israel's chief rabbis have challenged a ruling by the Supreme Court they believe represents an attack on halachah, or Jewish law, as interpreted by the fervently Orthodox.

Chief Rabbis Yisrael Lau and Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron issued a resolution this week declaring that non-Orthodox Jews should not serve on the country's municipal religious councils.

The declaration flies in the face of a ruling last month by the Supreme Court that Reform and Conservative candidates for the councils may not be rejected because of their religious orientations.

The Reform movement termed it a "hysterical reaction" by the Orthodox rabbinical establishment and a step toward the delegitimation of the Orthodox.

The declaration follows another announcement by the chief rabbis that they would not comply with the Supreme Court's recent ruling calling for the rabbinical courts to apply civil law, rather than halachah, to property settlements in divorce cases.

Civil law applies the principle of common property and equally divides marital assets upon divorce, while Jewish law generally awards property to the title holder, who is often the husband.

The chief rabbis said the rabbinical courts would not recognize this decision because the authority of halachah has supremacy and could not be violated.

An Unprecedented Challenge

Scholars say the court's ruling on the divorce issue was an unprecedented challenge to rabbinical authority in Israel.

This week's resolution by the chief rabbis on religious councils was issued following a special meeting with dozens of Orthodox rabbis, rabbinical court judges and heads of religious councils.

The rabbis declared that the services rendered by religious councils must be administered by those who "believe in halachah, live according to it and accept the authority of the Chief Rabbinate."

The religious councils are funded by the country's Ministry of Religious Affairs and are the only providers of basic religious services to Jewish citizens, including burial and marriage.

The rabbis also called on the Knesset to pass legislation that would prevent the representation of non-Orthodox members on the councils.

Modern Orthodox Rabbi David Hartman called it "a mistake for the rabbinical establishment to set up a confrontational ethos with the Supreme Court."

Hartman, who teaches Jewish philosophy at Hebrew University, said the rabbis were "taking their monopoly and putting a loincloth of halachah around it.

"The issue is not whether halachah is more

supreme than secular law" and the authority of the state, Hartman said.

In fact, the rabbinical courts derive their status from the government and therefore cannot undermine the authority of the government's highest legal body, he said.

If the High Court establishes a ruling, "the rabbis have to find a way to absorb it" within a halachic framework, he said.

In the case of the religious councils, said Hartman, the question is, "do they operate in the name of halachah or are they a civil body (assigned) to provide for the religious needs of society?"

By requiring the councils to admit Reform and Conservative Jews, the Supreme Court "is not making a theological judgment, it's making a decision about the rights of citizens" to serve on a civic body, he said.

Eliav Shochetman, professor of Jewish law at Hebrew University, said the "collision" between the secular and religious establishments is not as hard in the case of the religious councils as in the case of divorce settlements.

"Members of the councils do not have the power to make halachic decisions," he said. "They are only serving as administrators of religious services."

But the decision on property settlements was different and "very dramatic," Shochetman said. For the first time in its history, the Supreme Court turned on its head the understanding that "the only law that governs the rabbinical courts" is halachah, he said.

"The rabbis cannot accept such a dictate," he explained.

Pnina Livni, spokeswoman for Reform's Movement for Progressive Judaism, said the chief rabbis' resolution on the councils was a "hysterical reaction."

The "extremist line of going outside the law" reflects the "frustration and deep desperation" of the rabbis, who seem unable to combine halachah with living in a modern democratic state, she said.

She called the defiance of the law the first step toward the demise of the rabbinical establishment, "which won't have a legitimate base" for its authority.

The rabbis referred in their resolution to Reform Jews as "atheists" and "haters of Israel," noted Livni, who called it "one of the most aggressive attacks against us by the Chief Rabbinate."

The spokesman for the chief rabbis, also the spokesman for the Ministry of Religious Affairs, was unavailable for comment, as was the director of the ministry.

INCREASED INTERNECINE VIOLENCE EXPECTED AMONG PALESTINIAN GROUPS

JERUSALEM, Feb. 23 (JTA) -- Violence among rival Palestinian factions in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank may well increase after Israeli forces start withdrawing from the two areas, according to the Israel Defense Force's chief of staff.

Speaking before the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee on Tuesday, Lt. Gen. Ehud Barak said that there may be increased bloodshed in the Gaza Strip and West Bank areas

apart from Jericho as a result of internecine Palestinian strife.

Barak said there might be a "certain increase in the activity" of the Islamic Jihad and Hamas movements, both of which are opposed to the peace process, once Israel begins its withdrawals under the terms of the self-rule accord signed last September.

He said the IDF is determined to do whatever is necessary to combat a rise in violence.

He also indicated that, even before the accord goes into effect, increased attacks on Israelis might prompt the government to seal off the territories.

Last March, the government ordered the closure of the territories following a series of murderous attacks on Israelis.

"Even now, before the implementation of (the self-rule) agreement, we are facing an increase in the rate of attacks on Israelis inside the Israeli border and if it will continue we will find ourselves compelled to consider closing" off the territories, Barak told reporters after speaking before the Knesset committee.

But, he added, "I hope we will not reach this point."

The same day Barak made his comments there were four separate attacks against Israeli security forces in Gaza.

One soldier was lightly injured by pieces of a grenade in one of the incidents, according to Israel Television.

On Monday, in an incident reflecting Barak's comments about internecine Palestinian strife, a 28-year-old Palestinian suspected collaborator was reportedly shot to death by gunmen in Gaza.

BOUTROS-GHALI WELCOMES ISRAELI PEACEKEEPING ROLE

By Larry Yudelson

UNITED NATIONS, Feb. 23 (JTA) -- An Israeli proposal to establish a field hospital as part of a U.N. peacekeeping force in Africa has been welcomed by Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali.

Possible locations for the field hospital are Angola, Mozambique and Rwanda, said Boutros-Ghali during a Feb. 18 meeting with Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin and Ambassador Gad Ya'acobi.

"We believe it is time to have an international role for Israel," Beilin told the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, shortly before his meeting at the United Nations.

Providing medical services for U.N. activities, said Beilin, takes advantage of Israel's large number of doctors, a result, in part, of the mass immigration from the former Soviet Union.

"I believe this is an important signal to the kind of role Israel will play in the future, when peace prevails," said Beilin.

In his meeting with Boutros-Ghali, Beilin suggested that the United Nations host a session of the ongoing multilateral talks on regional Middle East issues.

Sites for upcoming sessions of the talks, at which Beilin heads the Israeli delegation, include the Persian Gulf states of Oman and Qatar, and the North African nations of Morocco and Tunisia.

AFTER LONG STAYING OUT OF FRAY, NJCRAC PASSES POLLARD RESOLUTION

By Larry Yudelson

NEW ORLEANS, Feb. 23 (JTA) -- After years of staying out of the issue, the National Jewish Communal Relations Advisory Council passed its first resolution regarding clemency for Jonathan Pollard this week, just hours after revelations that a veteran CIA officer spied for Russia catapulted espionage back into the news.

By a 2-to-1 margin, the umbrella Jewish group voted Tuesday to send President Clinton a letter indicating that some in the Jewish community believe Pollard was unjustly sentenced, but falling short of actually recommending clemency for the former Navy analyst who was convicted of spying for Israel.

NJCRAC thereby became one of the last Jewish communal organizations to weigh in on the Pollard case.

The vote was described by NJCRAC Executive Vice Chairman Lawrence Rubin as an effort to "move the issue beyond us."

The group had long been vilified by some Pollard advocates because it was a task force meeting under NJCRAC auspices that first set the tone among Jewish organizations that Pollard was not a matter for their advocacy.

There was no small irony in the fact that NJCRAC's vote on Pollard coincided with file pictures of Pollard being used on television and in newspapers to accompany reports about Aldrich Ames, the CIA officer charged Tuesday with conspiracy to commit espionage.

And in an even greater irony, commentary in the wake of Ames' arrest appeared to signal that a key distinction made by Pollard supporters between spying for Israel, a putative ally, and spying for the Soviet Union, an enemy, seems to have evaporated with the end of the Cold War.

Now the questions swirling around the case of a man arrested for spying first for the former Soviet Union and then for Russia echo those that surrounded Pollard at the time of his arrest in 1985: How can the Russians claim to be our friends while continuing to run spies against us? How will this incident affect U.S. aid to them?

Letter Does Not Plead For Mercy

All this comes as Attorney General Janet Reno is reviewing the Pollard case and considering whether to recommend clemency. It had been expected that Reno would make her recommendation to the president in December, but the file has yet to make its way to the desk of President Clinton, who promised as a candidate to review the sentence.

According to a report in Newsweek magazine, the resignation of Deputy Attorney General Philip Heymann reflected in part a clash over the Pollard issue, with Heymann favoring some form of clemency.

When, or if, Clinton does review Pollard's case, he will find the letter addressed to him by NJCRAC, as approved Tuesday, thin gruel for decision-making.

The letter does not assert the injustice of Pollard's sentence, as have some of NJCRAC's 13 national and 117 community member agencies. Nor does the letter plead for mercy for a man who has already served more than 8 years of a life

sentence, as have other NJCRAC constituents. Instead, the umbrella policy-making body wrote that "substantial elements of the community" express "great concern with respect to the fairness and the prospect of the sentence."

And it adds that if Clinton does find Pollard's sentence improper, that he consider reducing the sentence to time served.

Unstated but implicit in the wording is that if Clinton finds nothing wrong with the sentence, that he then do nothing. The letter was a classic example of NJCRAC's consensus-oriented approach.

The purpose of the proposal, said outgoing NJCRAC Chair Maynard Wishner, was to counter suggestions that NJCRAC's silence on Pollard constituted opposition to clemency.

While the NJCRAC ad hoc Pollard committee established and continued to reassert that the case did not reflect anti-Semitism, support for Pollard began to spread through Jewish organizations beginning in 1991.

By last year, even organizations not sympathetic to Pollard had adopted the neutral language of the current NJCRAC letter, if only to escape the pressure of Pollard supporters.

Both Sides Less Emotional Now

But NJCRAC failed to approve such a measure last year, in part because of the unwillingness of Pollard advocates to adopt the bland consensus language, and in part because of deep-felt anger among many delegates toward some Pollard advocates. This year, however, both sides were less emotional.

Pollard advocates have received several blows recently, even as more and more of NJCRAC's constituents came on board the cause.

As the case was being considered in the Justice Department late last year, opponents of Pollard's release in the intelligence community went to the press, leaking details of the damage assessment and charging that Pollard had included classified information in his letters from jail.

At the same time, Pollard supporters publicly debated whether he really meant a sentence in a letter in which he declared his actions "repugnant" to God, Torah and natural law.

While this debate surfaced in the deliberations prior to the NJCRAC vote, the discussion focused less on the question of what Pollard did than on how NJCRAC would be perceived.

Alan Ronkin, of the Seattle Jewish Community Relations Council, argued that the NJCRAC letter was a mistake. "We will have left a wrong impression that last year our silence meant something," he said.

"We will leave a wrong impression this year that our letter favors something. This form of a letter, saying to the president, 'do the right thing,' is obviously gratuitous."

Another delegate agreed that "the proposition has meaning to us only because we're invested in the matter but argued that "voting for the proposition is the right thing for us to do because (the people) want us to. We keep forgetting that this is not a constituency of chairmen." "Amcha (the grass roots) has spoken."

While this delegate personally opposed appealing for clemency, "when my federation considered the case, they commanded me to support commutation. Therefore, if we should vote, better we should vote for it now and get it behind us."

**HOUSE VOTES TO CONDEMN
SPEECH BY FARRAKHAN AIDE**
By Deborah Kalb

WASHINGTON, Feb. 23 (JTA) -- After a delay, the House of Representatives weighed in this week with an overwhelming vote to condemn a recent controversial speech by the Nation of Islam's Khalid Abdul Muhammad.

The House voted 361-34 Wednesday to pass a resolution condemning Muhammad's Nov. 29 speech, which was widely viewed as racist and anti-Semitic. Muhammad was a top aide of Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan.

During the debate on the House floor preceding the vote, a number of members spoke out against Muhammad's words.

"Once in the past we ignored hateful language because it came from a nut," said Rep. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.), referring to Adolf Hitler. "We have vowed that we should never ignore this again. We have a historic lesson. We've lived through it," Schumer added.

"I have no doubt that, in the end, Mr. Muhammad's words will join all the others like it: the Nuremberg Laws, the Apartheid Codes, the Jim Crow Statutes. Lies can never sustain themselves," said Rep. Nita Lowey (D-N.Y.).

One member, Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.), said that while he supported the resolution, he was concerned that it and other condemnations "may miss their true mark: the leader of the Nation of Islam, Minister Louis Farrakhan."

Nadler added, "It was Louis Farrakhan who implied that the Holocaust was a punishment the Jews had earned -- and perhaps deserved again."

The congressman then quoted from what Farrakhan had said he told a group of rabbis: "Instead of talking about Hitler so much, you should ask: Why did God permit that to happen? Was there a lesson to be learned, and have you learned it yet? Or maybe the lesson should be repeated?"

The resolution condemning Muhammad, introduced by Rep. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.), had originally been headed for a floor vote almost two weeks earlier.

However, after an emotional debate among House Democrats, the House leadership decided Feb. 10 that the resolution itself was controversial and should be detoured to a committee instead.

The leadership then decided to bring the resolution to the floor this week following last week's Congressional recess.

The Senate, for its part, voted unanimously on Feb. 2 to condemn Muhammad's speech.

Speaker of the House Thomas Foley (D-Wash.) said Wednesday that because the Senate resolution was part of legislation that would be heading toward a House-Senate conference, the House leadership had decided to bring the House resolution to the floor prior to the conference.

Sources also said that Schumer had discussed quick action on the resolution with Foley.

The resolution condemns Muhammad's speech as "outrageous hatemongering of the most vicious and vile kind; and condemns all manifestations and expressions of racism, anti-Catholicism, anti-Semitism and ethnic or religious intolerance."

Among the co-sponsors of the resolution were several African American members.

Some members of Congress, both black and white, had questioned the resolution on free speech grounds and wondered what sort of precedent it would set. The House does not normally condemn people's speech.

Some of these members repeated their objections on the House floor Wednesday.

Muhammad's speech at Kean College in New Jersey last November included verbal attacks on Jews, Catholics, whites, and gays.

At a Feb. 3 news conference, Farrakhan said he was disciplining his aide for his manner of speaking but not for his "truths."

DINE NOW IN TOP POSITION AT U.S. AGENCY
By Deborah Kalb

WASHINGTON (JTA) -- The same day that officers of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee were selecting his successor as AIPAC's executive director, Tom Dine was confirmed by the Senate to a top position at the U.S. Agency for International Development.

On Feb. 10, the Senate confirmed Dine by voice vote to be assistant administrator for Europe of the agency known as U.S. AID.

Dine stepped down last June from his long-time position at the powerful pro-Israel lobbying group after making published remarks perceived as derogatory toward Orthodox Jews.

Dine's was one of several controversial departures rocking AIPAC over the past couple of years.

Also on Feb. 10, Neal Sher, who had been serving as director of the Justice Department's Office of Special Investigations, was chosen to fill AIPAC's executive director position.

Howard Kohr, another possible choice to succeed Dine, had been serving as AIPAC's acting executive director since Dine's departure.

PELLETREAU NOW HEADS NEAR EAST BUREAU
By Deborah Kalb

WASHINGTON (JTA) -- Robert Pelletreau Jr. has been sworn to head the State Department's Near East bureau, which plays a key role in U.S. policies toward Israel.

The career diplomat took his oath of office as assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs on Feb. 11, one day after being confirmed by a Senate voice vote.

Pelletreau succeeds Edward Djerejian, who is now serving as U.S. ambassador to Israel.

State Department spokesman Mike McCurry said last Friday that Pelletreau "is beginning to engage very fully in the work of the (Middle East) peace team."

McCurry added that Pelletreau's responsibilities go "well beyond the peace process itself."

In testimony Feb. 7 before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Pelletreau said he hoped to see "Israel at peace with its neighbors."

Born in 1935, Pelletreau entered the foreign service in 1962. His diplomatic service includes postings as U.S. ambassador to Egypt, Tunisia and Bahrain.

As ambassador to Tunisia in 1988, Pelletreau was asked by the State Department to conduct the United States' first official dialogue with the Palestine Liberation Organization.