

**IS THE PLO PREPARED TO GOVERN?
SOME FEAR CHAOS AS ISRAELIS WITHDRAW**

By Cynthia Mann

JERUSALEM, May 3 (JTA) -- Israeli and Palestinian skeptics here charge the Palestine Liberation Organization with being unprepared to assume the authority in the Gaza Strip and Jericho that is being relinquished this week by Israel.

They fear internal political chaos, an inability to meet popular Palestinian expectations, a failure to control terrorism and crippling funding shortfalls.

For their part, PLO officials concede they do not yet have the administrative mechanisms in place and they have no money, but they defend their readiness to rule.

Meanwhile, some Israeli analysts say they expect a difficult transition but are confident the new authority will function.

The self-rule agreement expected to be signed this week calls for an orchestrated transfer of power from Israeli to Palestinian hands over what is anticipated to be a period of a few weeks.

But so far, no Palestinian department heads have been named to take over the 38 civilian departments that need to be transferred to Palestinian control.

The Israel Defense Force chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Ehud Barak, reportedly told the Cabinet this week that Israeli soldiers "should get out (of Gaza and Jericho) as soon as possible. There is nobody on the other side with whom to make an orderly transition of authority."

Environment Minister Yossi Sarid also expressed disappointment and worry, saying Israel had urged the Palestinians to step into the territories "ready to start taking over," but "they did not do that."

"I am worried, I am troubled. But the responsibility will be on the Palestinians. That is the idea behind the agreement," Sarid told reporters.

Water Shortages May Occur In Gaza

Even the water commissioner got into the act. Gideon Sur said this week that despite the announcement of the establishment of a Palestinian Water Authority, it has shown no signs of life and the lack of water management might cause a water shortage in Gaza.

"The PLO has been making a lot of plans to assume control but we are not able to take steps on the ground (to implement them) until Israel withdraws," said Maen Areikat, press officer for PLO Fatah leader Faisal Husseini at his Orient House headquarters in east Jerusalem.

"Building our institutions," he said, "will (now) be our priority."

Areikat pointed to the recent establishment by PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat of a new Palestinian National Authority, an interim caretaker council slated to function as a Cabinet under Arafat until elections are held.

But the numbers and composition of the

authority have not been finalized, he noted. Nor have the names of the 38 civilian department heads, he said.

Still, signs of a transfer of authority will be visible immediately. "The police force will start pouring into both areas within 12 to 24 hours after the signing," he said. "They will take over certain responsibilities and fill the gaps."

'We Want To Succeed'

But, "there is anxiety about whether our authority will be ready (and) pass the test" of leadership, he conceded. "We are about to experience something new and we know we'll be watched and monitored and we want to succeed."

Zakaria al Qaq, co-director of the Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information in Jerusalem, is cynical and fearful about the consequences of what he views as a failure of the Palestinians to prepare for their new administration.

"I think there will be a state of chaos," said al Qaq, who said he has seen no "tangible (PLO) preparations" for government except for a "big emphasis on the police."

He also faults the PLO leadership for not properly preparing the public for the difficulties ahead. "It gave them high expectations in order to sell the agreement, so that people expect to get a job, solve their prolonged problems and see prosperity materialize overnight."

"After one month," he said, "people will discover (reality is different) and will be frustrated."

Areikat disputes this. "We are a realistic people," he said. The Palestinians "know that creating a different life will be a long and painful process."

The autonomy agreement will succeed or fail on the question of whether Palestinians can rule the area, Ori Orr, chairman of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, told reporters in his office this week.

"The majority of our intelligence sources think they can take control and rule the area, but this is still the main question," he said. In any case, "after we sign, we'll pull out our troops and let them handle their lives," he said.

Eli Rekhess, an analyst with the Dayan Center for Middle East Research in Tel Aviv, said there is a tendency to exaggerate the unpreparedness of the PLO and it should be resisted.

"There is an agreed-upon process of organized Israeli withdrawal," he said. "There won't be a sudden vacuum."

Rekhess believes the performance of the new administration will not be "monolithic." Rather, it will have its strengths and weaknesses.

"Certain areas will function excellently," such as security, in which Arafat has the biggest stake. "The immediate test for the PLO is control -- to neutralize opposition groups and (impose) law and order inside Gaza and Jericho," said Rekhess.

He also foresees little problems administering health care, where there already is an infrastructure.

But Rekheiss is less optimistic about fiscal management "because it's new."

"The PLO (has) run out of money to support its institutions," said Areikat, and Arafat is seeking \$120 million to run the operations of the new Palestinian entity.

Areikat said he hopes "all the political developments will open the door for" enough of the money that was pledged last fall "to help the Palestinians feel the difference."

Last October, after the signing of the Israeli-PLO declaration of principles, the United States organized a meeting of 40 donor countries, which pledged \$2.4 billion to support the new Palestinian entity. This week, the World Bank announced the first installment of that pledge -- a \$1.2 billion aid package to be distributed over the next three years.

Also this week, a report was released by the Geneva-based International Labor Organization warning that the PLO must create thousands of jobs immediately to ensure social stability or it will jeopardize the autonomy administration.

Rekheiss foresees chaos over what he calls the "very complicated leadership picture," in part because of the tussle for control between the Tunis "outsiders" and the grass-roots local leadership.

But the chaos is an inherent part of the PLO's "difficult transformation from national liberation movement" to a "quasi-state apparatus," he observed.

Rekheiss stressed that in the face of this potential chaos, the significance of the agreement's implementation in and of itself, should not be overlooked.

"After all," he said, "it is withdrawal and a Palestinian takeover of Palestinian territory."

DESPITE APPARENT STALEMATE IN TALKS, ISRAEL AND SYRIA FIND ROOM FOR HOPE
By David Landau

JERUSALEM, May 3 (JTA) -- Despite Syria's announced rejection of an Israeli peace package and Israel's characterization of Syrian counterproposals as "distant," both sides and their middleman -- U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher -- still found grounds for some optimism in their exchanges this week.

That optimism was based in part on the fact that Syria reiterated its readiness for a full peace and normalization of relations with Israel, in return for a full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights.

In conversations with Christopher over the weekend, Syrian President Hafez Assad was understood to have been more specific and detailed regarding the outlines of an eventual Israeli-Syrian peace than he ever has been before.

Assad's specific responses included an unequivocal statement of readiness to enter into full diplomatic relations with the Jewish state.

While Christopher cautiously stressed the great amount of work that needs to be done before any substantive breakthrough can be achieved, American and Israeli sources said they regarded the position enunciated by Assad to the secretary as an opening position, and as such, a basis for further negotiation.

In light of these hopes, it was announced here Tuesday that Christopher will return to the

Middle East within two weeks to continue mediation efforts between Israel and Syria.

Israel's foreign minister, Shimon Peres, has meanwhile told reporters that Jerusalem would be carefully studying the Syrian positions brought there by Christopher. He was apparently implying that Assad and his aides would do well to relate to the Israeli positions in the same way.

Christopher shuttled between Damascus and Jerusalem over the weekend, exchanging positions which both he and the two parties described as the most "substantive" in a long time in the long-stalled Israeli-Syrian negotiations.

The secretary and the Clinton administration have not hidden their desire to latch onto the momentum created by the Israeli-Palestine Liberation Organization agreement for establishing self-rule in the Gaza Strip and West Bank town of Jericho.

Hoping For Momentum

The United States is hoping that the signing of that agreement, which was expected on Wednesday, will build up new momentum on the Israeli-Syrian track.

That track has been effectively idle since the Washington bilateral talks were suspended earlier this year following the Feb. 25 massacre by a Jewish settler of at least 29 Palestinians at a Hebron mosque.

Christopher's visit this week did not produce a firm date for the resumption of those talks. With the announcement of another round of shuttle diplomacy this month, it is likely that the resumption will take place only after that second round.

Israeli sources indicated, moreover, that Assad has thus far shown no signs of responding to Rabin's suggestions that the level of negotiators attending the bilateral dialogue be raised.

While the Israeli proposals transmitted through Christopher have not been officially published, they are widely reported to have included:

- * A phased Israeli withdrawal from the Golan over several years, with the first, small phase to cover the Druse villages in the northern Golan. Each withdrawal phase is to elicit a phase of normalization in relations between the two countries.

- * Security arrangements that would mean demilitarization and limitation of forces across the Golan itself and extending farther towards Damascus. Such provisions would be mutual but not symmetrical -- that is, they would not extend to the same depth on the Israeli side.

- * An Israeli referendum before any territorial withdrawal goes into effect.

- * The extent of the final Israeli withdrawal, to be completed in eight years time, was not specified. Some Israeli ministers have made it clear they are prepared for complete evacuation of the Golan in return for full peace and normalization, after the test period and in the context of security arrangements. Rabin's own position is unclear.

Syria countered with a public and private rejection of the phased withdrawal.

It also rejected the notion that there could be an exchange of ambassadors before full withdrawal from the Golan. Syria is also insisting on full symmetry in security arrangements.

CONSERVATIVE RABBIS ISSUE GUIDELINES FOR SEXUAL RELATIONS

By Larry Yudelson

KIAMESHA LAKE, N.Y., May 3 (JTA) -- Casting aside an unofficial but long-standing policy of "don't ask, don't tell" with regard to all things sexual, a committee of Conservative rabbis hopes to shine a flashlight of Jewish values and teachings into the bedrooms of their congregants.

The hope is embodied in a draft pastoral letter on sexuality issued this week by the Commission on Human Sexuality of the Conservative Rabbinical Assembly. It was released in conjunction with the rabbinical group's annual convention, which is taking place here this week.

The letter was given to the Rabbinical Assembly's authoritative Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, which must approve it for it to become official Conservative policy.

The 35-page letter strongly advocates marriage and calls on Jews to have three or four children.

But it also asserts that even without marriage, committed and loving relationships "can embody a measure of holiness."

The letter also discusses Jewish sexual values within marriage, analyzes Jewish teachings on contraception and delicately sums up the debate over homosexuality that has rocked the movement since 1990.

Also included in the report is what is believed to be the first call on Conservative Jews to consider observing the laws of family purity. These include the biblical prohibition forbidding sex during a woman's menstrual period, followed by the woman immersing herself in the mikvah.

Rabbi Kass Abelson, chairman of the Law Committee, hailed the pastoral letter and accompanying report of the sexuality commission as "a real step into the real life of our community."

Noting that most couples who ask him to perform their wedding ceremonies are already sharing an address, "now I feel I can talk with them on a different level," he said.

Applying Tradition To The Present

Rabbi Elliot Dorff, who drafted the pastoral letter on behalf of the commission, said that the discussion of non-marital sex should not be seen as liberalizing the Jewish ideal of marriage.

Instead, he said, it actually endorses a conservative approach, since it applies traditional values to the situation of many American Jews.

"Even if they are disobeying the Jewish tradition by having sex outside of marriage, they still have to abide by Jewish moral norms. It's not all or nothing," Dorff said in an interview with the Jewish Telegraphic Agency.

The moral norms spelled out in the letter -- which apply to marital relations as well -- include respect for others, modesty, honesty, fidelity, health and safety and maintaining the Jewish quality of the relationship.

The difficulty of following these demands in a non-marital relationship, the letter said, "is a major reason why Judaism understands marriage to be the proper venue for sex in the first place."

In keeping with Jewish law, under which "saving a life is a value of the highest order," the letter requires AIDS prevention measures,

including "full disclosure of each partner's sexual history from 1980 to the present"; "HIV testing for both partners before genital sex is considered"; and "careful and consistent use of condoms until the risk of infection has been definitely ruled out."

While the letter set guides for those in non-marital sexual relationships, the commission posed questions to the Law Committee, asking that committee to address the gap between current practice and halachah, or traditional Jewish law.

Issues raised include the traditional prohibitions on masturbation and on physical contact between unmarried members of the opposite sex, laws central to Orthodox discussions of sexuality but until now little noticed by Conservative Jews, as well as mikvah and family purity.

Regarding homosexuality, it asked the Law Committee to explain how to balance the biblical description of homosexuality as a *toevah*, or abomination, and the calls by the R.A. and the United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism for equal civil rights for homosexuals.

But one member of the Law Committee indicated that he doubted the body would move quickly to reopen that particular can of worms.

When the Commission on Human Sexuality was established by the R.A. in 1992, the move was seen as an effort by the movement's liberal camp to undermine a ruling of the Commission on Jewish Law and Standards affirming traditional Jewish opposition to homosexuality and barring the ordination of gays.

For that reason, the R.A.'s sister Conservative organizations -- the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism -- loudly declined invitations to join the commission on sexuality.

'They Don't Want Judaism To Change'

In fact, JTS Chancellor Ismar Schorsch had ridiculed the commission, saying, "Our laity isn't asking you for advice on infidelity or premarital sex. They know what Judaism says, and they don't want Judaism to change on those issues."

Schorsch was decidedly more upbeat about the commission, praising its report as "an excellent statement, filled with concern for the individual along with love for the tradition.

"It succeeded in defusing an effort that was born in a political storm and turned its energy into a very constructive pastoral letter," he said.

The letter acknowledged the deep split in the Conservative movement over homosexuality and called for no radical changes in policy.

And it did not make any direct statement about the possibility of holiness in homosexual relationships. But it wrote that the concepts and values that Judaism demands for relationships "apply to homosexuals as well."

Rabbi Gerald Zelizer, who this week ended his term as R.A. president and who appointed the commission, said this report reflects "a new sense of self-respect" for the Conservative movement, whose motto is "Tradition and Change."

"On the one hand, it shows we are not fearful any longer of asserting parts of the tradition we shied away from, such as family purity," he said.

"On the other, we are not fearful of confronting difficult sexual realities in our society on which we might not have said anything in the past."

WORLD BANK OFFERS AID PACKAGE TO BOLSTER ECONOMY IN GAZA-JERICHO
By Deborah Kalb

WASHINGTON, May 3 (JTA) -- As Israel and the Palestinians prepared to sign the agreement establishing self-rule in the Gaza Strip and Jericho, the World Bank this week announced a program to send \$1.2 billion in emergency economic assistance for the new autonomous region.

The money, to be distributed over a three-year period expected to begin soon, is part of \$2.1 billion pledged over a five-year period by international donors at a State Department conference last October.

The conference's goal -- supported by both the United States and Israel -- was to improve conditions for Palestinians in the territories in such areas as transportation, water supply, power and telecommunications.

"If the peace process has any hope of success, the Palestinians need to see improvements in their living conditions very quickly," Caio Koch-Weser, the World Bank's vice president for the Middle East and North Africa region, said in a statement.

"The international community is betting that this program can jump-start the Palestinian economy over the next three years. We are optimistic because the Palestinians are enterprising and well-trained," Koch-Weser said.

On Tuesday, the World Bank released a 49-page report called "Emergency Assistance Program for the Occupied Territories," outlining the plan. The report was prepared by World Bank staffers and Palestinian economists. Other donor countries, including Israel, also participated in the drafting.

The funds will be distributed initially through a variety of groups, including a new Palestinian organization called the Palestinian Economic Council for Development and Reconstruction, non-governmental and United Nations organizations and municipalities.

The largest segment of the \$1.2 billion, \$600 million, will finance public investments in transportation, water, solid waste and other areas.

Another \$300 million will support private-sector investments in areas including telecommunications, housing and agriculture.

The remainder of the money will go toward start-up costs and technical assistance.

CLASHES ERUPT AS SETTLERS PROTEST PEACE INITIATIVES
By Dvorah Getzler

JERUSALEM, May 3 (JTA) -- The Jordan Valley north of Jericho erupted Tuesday into clouds of black smoke and the anger of Israeli struggling against Israeli.

Clashes broke out when the Israel Defense Force moved to dismantle giant roadblocks and disperse illegal demonstrations of settlers, who felt threatened by the onset of Palestinian self-rule in Jericho and the Gaza Strip.

Likud Knesset member Ariel Sharon was on hand to support the settlers as they burned tires and resisted IDF calls to clear the road of their huge cement blocks.

He described the demonstrations as "the peaceful, passive expression of opposition to what this government is doing, leading our nation into

the greatest danger it has ever faced."

Sharon had been defense minister under Prime Minister Menachem Begin, when Jews were forcibly removed from the settlement of Yamit in the course of the Likud-led withdrawal from the Sinai following the signing of the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement in 1979.

Some settlers were dragged off by military police, and in the ensuing scuffles four were hurt, allegedly by blows from rifle butts.

"This is a police state!" shouted one protester whose wife had been arrested. "Damn Rabin, we're here to stay!"

Leading rabbis belonging to the National Religious Party have meanwhile stated that the Israeli-Palestinian agreement due to be signed Wednesday violates halachah, or Jewish law.

The rabbis called upon Israelis to resist its implementation "with all their might."

Rabbi Shlomo Goren, a former Israeli chief rabbi, called for "a day of fasting" to protest an "agreement that has no halachic validity."

But on the way to Ben-Gurion Airport on Tuesday, from where he was to fly to Cairo for Wednesday's signing of the Israeli-PLO agreement, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin found time to stop off at a conference of progressive rabbis meeting to help promote tourism.

"The most important thing," he said in response to their applauding his mission to Cairo, "is to further the cause of national unity.

"Jerusalem," he reminded them, "had been destroyed in ancient times because of wanton fratricidal hatred."

ISRAELIS WELCOMED IN QATAR FOR NEGOTIATIONS ON ARMS CONTROL
By Dvorah Getzler

JERUSALEM, May 3 (JTA) -- Amid statements welcoming them to the Persian Gulf emirate, Israeli negotiators took their place among 37 other delegations for the start of multilateral talks on arms control this week in Qatar.

"How good it is to see Israeli and Arab delegates sitting together here. It augurs well for peace," British Parliament member Greville Janner said Tuesday at the start of the meeting.

As the business sessions of the talks got under way, Qatar's foreign minister, Sheikh Hamad al-Dhan, applauded the progress in the Israeli-Palestinian talks. He said the overall aim of the entire region was achieving a just, comprehensive peace that would solve the Palestinian problem.

The solution to that problem, he said, must include the return of Arab lands to their owners, including "conquered Jerusalem."

The foreign minister called for a balancing of Israeli and Arab interests, especially in matters related to Israel's present and future nuclear capability. If this was not done, he stressed, it would result in a new regional arms race.

The Israeli delegation was led by David Ivri, director-general of the Defense Ministry and former air force commander. The delegation was accompanied by a contingent of Israeli journalists.

While the Qatari authorities were eager to make the Israelis' stay an enjoyable one, security surrounding them was very tight.

Israel was one of 13 Middle East countries attending the talks, along with representatives from 25 other states.