



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ Israel denied entry to seven American Jews, including Rabbi Abraham Hecht, the Brooklyn, N.Y., rabbi who issued religious justification for killing Israeli leaders willing to hand over land to the Palestinians. The six others were believed to have ties to extremist organizations. [Page 2]

■ U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher announced that next week's Israeli-Syrian peace talks will be held at Wye Plantation on the eastern shore in Maryland. Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres warned a group of ministers involved in the consultations against any leaks to the media.

■ The U.S. House of Representatives extended the Middle East Peace Facilitation Act until March 31. The measure, which must also be approved by the Senate, allows the Palestinian Authority to receive U.S. aid and enables the United States to have contact with the Palestine Liberation Organization.

■ Members of Congress are working on a special Middle East peace process appropriations bill that would fund U.S. foreign aid to Israel, Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority. The \$12.1 billion foreign aid bill, which includes aid to Middle Eastern countries, has stalled in Congress over unrelated abortion issues.

■ Yigal Amir, confessed assassin of Yitzhak Rabin, was placed in solitary confinement in a prison in the south of Israel until the end of his trial. A prison official said Amir was separated from other detainees to protect his life and that prison guards would taste his food before he ate to prevent him from being poisoned.

■ Israeli security agents uncovered a Hamas cell in the West Bank whose members had planned suicide bombings and stabbing attacks against Israeli soldiers and civilians. Some 15 Tulkarm residents were arrested in the operation.

■ An Israeli poll found that public support for the peace process with the Palestinians held steady at 58 percent, the same level expressed in the first days after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Peres confers new role on Syria as key to a comprehensive peace

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA) — In a deliberate departure from long-held positions, Israel is conferring on Syria a new strategic and regional significance that the secularist state never has had.

Not everyone, however, agrees that this approach will work to create the comprehensive peace Israel is seeking.

Syria's new status comes amid a marked change of atmosphere between the two countries since Yitzhak Rabin's assassination and Shimon Peres' accession to the prime ministership.

American officials traveling last week in the region with Secretary of State Warren Christopher said the tone in Damascus was different from anything they had heard before.

A declaration by Syria's foreign minister this week that his country wants to see an end to the violence between Israeli troops and Hezbollah gunmen in southern Lebanon further highlights the changing nature of Israeli-Syrian relations as the two countries prepare for the resumption of their long-stalled peace negotiations.

Those talks, announced during Christopher's visit last week, are scheduled to reopen Dec. 27. On Wednesday, Christopher announced that the talks would be held at Wye Plantation, a private conference center on the eastern shore of Maryland.

Coming after a meeting with Lebanese ministers Tuesday in Beirut, Farouk al-Sharaa's remarks appeared to confirm Peres' own reported assurance to a Knesset committee Monday that the Americans had brokered an "understanding" between Jerusalem and Damascus on Lebanon.

The understanding apparently said the Syrians would try to ensure that the southern Lebanon border region stay quiet as the renewed talks proceed. Israel's security zone in southern Lebanon has seen escalating violence in recent weeks as members of the Islamic fundamentalist Hezbollah have intensified their attacks on Israeli targets.

Israeli officials have often criticized Syria for turning a blind eye and even assisting the militants.

Now, with a new atmosphere emerging, officials in Jerusalem are questioning whether there also will be a new openness and flexibility in the substance of the negotiations with Syria.

Syrian President Hafez Assad abruptly cut off the talks during the summer amid a dispute over future security arrangements on the Golan Heights. In addition, Assad has insisted that Israel declare its willingness to fully withdraw from the strategic plateau before Syria declares its intentions about peace.

In the Middle East, where semantics are as important as substance and atmospherics, there has already been a major change in the semantics of Israeli-Syrian peacemaking.

The key codeword is "comprehensive peace." The phrase has been around for almost as long as the Israeli-Arab conflict itself. However, it always was expressed as an Arab demand. It meant that the Palestinians must achieve a satisfactory form of self-determination before the neighboring Arab states buried their animosity toward Israel.

Closing the 'ring of peace'

The late Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, negotiating what was in effect a separate peace with Israel at Camp David in 1978, took care to conclude a "framework agreement" for Palestinian self-rule, too, insisting that he had thereby fulfilled the requirement of comprehensiveness.

Most of the Arab world rejected that logic at the time, especially when subsequent talks between Israel and Egypt on Palestinian self-rule quickly ran into quicksand.

However, since the breakthrough between Israel and the Palestinians in 1993, and the subsequent Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty, comprehensive peace has come to mean the need for Syria and its dependent, Lebanon, to reach peace with Israel as well.

Without that, Arab officials insisted, the peace agreements already

concluded would remain very fragile. With it, they said, a "ring of peace" would be closed, encompassing Israel and its immediate neighbors, the so-called confrontation states of yesteryear.

During the on-again, off-again Israeli-Syrian direct negotiations since the 1991 Madrid Conference, which launched the Middle East peace process, Syria's territorial demand for the Golan Heights remained unwavering.

Its readiness to enter into a full peace relationship with Israel remained doubtful. Rabin's readiness to do the deal, in the face of massive opposition at home, remained uncertain. Now, along with injecting a sudden urgency into the Israeli-Syrian track, Peres has introduced a new definition of "comprehensive peace."

Meeting with President Clinton last week in Washington, Peres suggested that an Israeli-Syrian peace treaty would — indeed, from Israel's standpoint, must — involve a dozen or more other Arab states.

All their leaders, in Peres' bold scenario, would attend the Israeli-Syrian signing ceremony and would sign their own bilateral peace accords with Israel, either simultaneously or shortly thereafter.

'Bully boys' excluded

Only the "bully boys" of the Muslim world, as Peres calls them — Iran, Iraq, Libya and the Sudan — would be left out, with the United States, Israel, Turkey and the Arab moderates creating a strategic alliance against their regimes.

Under such a scenario, Israel would be prepared to relinquish the Golan. Peres has not yet stated this outright, but it is his clear intention. In return, Israel would receive iron-clad security arrangements supervised by the United States, diplomatic ties between Jerusalem, Damascus and Beirut and open channels for trade and tourism.

It would also realize a truly comprehensive settlement between the Jewish state and the wider Arab and Muslim world. Peres and his top aides insist that the new approach is no mere ploy designed to help sell the land-for-peace accord to the Israeli public, much of which is skeptical about withdrawing from the Golan.

Rather, they see it as a piece of Peres' new Middle East strategy that envisages a radical new reality throughout the region, with economic and human interests superseding old conflicts as the driving motive of regional politics.

However, not all observers here are convinced that this new approach is firmly grounded in the realities of the Arab world. Moreover, it seems to some critics to be lacking in tactical sagacity, because it bestows on Syria unprecedented regional importance and thereby could encourage Syria to jack up its demands in its negotiations with Israel.

Why would the fiercely proud Persian Gulf states or the North African countries sign on to peace with Israel just because Syria was doing so, the critics ask.

If Syria was perceived two decades ago as a powerful force for subversion among the more conservative Arab countries, its potential for such mischief is widely believed to have declined over recent years.

Syria's Ba'athist-led secularist ethos, furthermore, is out of step with the religious spirit that pervades much of the Arab world, rendering it still less of a force to be reckoned with.

As a recent and telling example of Syria's waning influence, these critics point out that Jordan, traditionally apprehensive of Damascus, threw trepidation to the wind last year by making peace with Israel without even informing — let alone consulting — Assad.

Nor did Amman quake when the Syrian leader expressed his ire.

In terms of Peres' new vision for the region, the critics further argue, economically backward Syria is hardly a regional frontrunner and its dictatorial regime is hardly a beacon of regional enlightenment.

At the same time, Israel's legitimation of Syria's permanent occupation of Lebanon — implicit in the comprehensive peace scenario — would not necessarily win plaudits from Arab moderates or from Israel's friends in the West. □

Israel bans seven U.S. Jews from entering the country

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel has banned seven American Jews, including Rabbi Abraham Hecht of New York, from entering the country on the grounds that they pose a threat to public order and national security.

Hecht declared last summer that Jewish law permitted the assassination of Israeli leaders who endangered Jewish lives by giving away land to secure peace.

Wednesday's move by Israel's Interior Ministry appeared to be a pre-emptive one and comes in an atmosphere of high political tension and polarization in the wake of the Nov. 4 assassination of Yitzhak Rabin.

After the killing, the ministry announced that it would bar entry to activists in extremist groups that support violent actions and are outlawed in Israel.

The decision was based on provisions in the Law of Return, which governs the right of Jews to immigrate to Israel and bans those who pose a national security threat.

One American was denied permission to enter last month on that basis.

A ministry statement issued Wednesday said that four of the others barred from entering Israel had been linked to planned illegal activities in Israel.

It said one supported banned extremist groups in Israel and another was an activist with the Jewish Defense League, founded by the late extremist Rabbi Meir Kahane.

Among the four allegedly linked to illegal activities were Marc Bluestein and Howard Friedman, both of Philadelphia. Longtime members of the JDL, they were arrested and detained in Israel in December 1993 on the suspicion of conspiring to carry out attacks against Arabs and arms smuggling.

The ministry statement identified the others allegedly connected to planned illegal activities as Bluestein's brother, Hal Bluestein, also of Philadelphia, and Michelle Benveniste.

It said George Mostanza, a JDL activist from New York, was also denied entry, as was Bezahd Cohen of Los Angeles, on allegedly supporting banned extremist organizations. It was not immediately clear whether any of the seven had sought to enter Israel recently.

In New York, Gad Ben-Ari, the head of the Jewish Agency's delegation in North America, said, "There is a common denominator" to those barred entry.

"All of these people," including Hecht, "have engaged in incitement against Israel and Israeli democracy and in preaching racism and violence."

"It's a very important decision," said Ben-Ari. Those who have engaged in campaigns "to discredit government authority and democratic structures should know very well that the minimum price they will have to pay is they will not be allowed to enter Israel."

Hecht apologized to Rabin for his pronouncements a few weeks before the assassination. Last month, the board of his synagogue, Congregation Shaare Zion, in Brooklyn, N.Y., voted to suspend him. □

(JTA staff writer Cynthia Mann in New York contributed to this report.)

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Austrian Jews express relief over far-right's election scores*By Marta S. Halpert*

VIENNA (JTA) — Austria's Jewish community breathed a sigh of relief at this week's election setback for Jorg Haider, the country's far-right political leader.

"We are satisfied for the time being," said Paul Grosz, who is president of the Austrian Jewish Communities.

There is a clear sense of relief, he added, that "at the moment, the danger of destabilizing the Austrian democracy" seems to have been avoided.

But he expressed concern that if "worst comes to worst," Haider's Freedom Party may yet be part of a governing coalition that could emerge after Sunday's elections.

In Sunday's strong voter turnout — some 83 percent of Austria's 5.7 million eligible voters cast their ballots — 38.3 percent of the voters agreed that the Social Democratic Party, headed by Chancellor Franz Vranitzky, should continue with its policies.

By contrast, Haider's right-wing, anti-immigrant Freedom Party won slightly more than 22 percent of the vote — a slight decline from the 1994 elections, resulting in the loss of one Parliament seat for the party.

Haider could still hold 41 seats in the Parliament out of a total of 183, but he lost between 3 percent and 4 percent of his previous votes.

According to pre-election polls, Haider's party, which has explicitly called for a ban on immigrants, was poised to rise from its origins on the radical fringe to become Austria's second strongest party.

Instead, for the first time since he took control of the party in 1986, Haider failed to increase his share of the vote.

'Clean guy' image tarnished

Despite the setback, Haider still leads the strongest far-right party in Western Europe.

The country's Jews, numbering some 7,500, were clearly concerned about any possible electoral gains by Haider.

According to an American Jewish Committee survey released in May, one in three supporters of the Freedom Party manifests strong anti-Semitic prejudice.

Last week, only days before the elections, a videotape was aired showing Haider addressing a group of former SS officers in October, telling them that they were "decent people with character."

Contributing to Sunday's lackluster performance by Haider's party was a series of pre-election disclosures of fraud and tax evasion involving Haider's friends and co-workers.

The disclosures tarnished the "clean guy" image of Haider that had worked for him until now.

Meanwhile, Austria's conservative People's Party came in second in Sunday's balloting with slightly more than 28 percent of the vote.

Sunday's vote was held after the governing coalition of the Social Democrats and the People's Party collapsed in early October over a budget dispute, forcing new elections.

According to observers here, Wolfgang Schussel, the leader of the People's Party, toppled the government during the budget negotiations because he saw a chance for a turnaround in the Austrian political landscape that he felt could propel him into the chancellorship.

The absence of a stronger showing Sunday by the People's Party is viewed here as a direct result of

Schussel's refusal to rule out explicitly the possibility of forming a coalition with Haider.

Vranitzky, by contrast, consistently adopted the clearest language regarding Haider, saying that he would offer "no cooperation on a governmental level with a man who incites xenophobia and still has the strongest links to right extreme circles."

The two other parties in the election — the liberal Green Alternative, which got 4.9 percent of the votes, and the Liberals, with 5.9 percent — also drew a firm line against having any coalition dealings with Haider.

Since the end of World War II, Austria has been governed by either the Social Democrats or the People's Party, often in a so-called "grand coalition" of the two parties.

Most Austrians, it is widely believed, would like to see another such coalition established in the wake of Sunday's ballot.

But for this to happen, the Social Democrats and People's Party would have to be able to work together again — after their brutal campaign fight.

In his coalition negotiations with Vranitzky, Schussel may threaten to forge an alliance with Haider as a means for getting leverage in the discussions.

With Schussel's party holding 53 parliamentary seats and Haider's Freedom Party holding 41, they could create a slender majority in the Parliament.

But one Social Democratic politician discounted the possibility of a Schussel-Haider coalition, saying that this "could be the end of the People's Party, because half of them do not want" a coalition with Haider. □

Hopes for anti-terror bill dashed by opposition forces*By Matthew Dorf*

WASHINGTON (JTA) — A bipartisan coalition of lawmakers opposed to a pending version of anti-terrorism legislation has dashed hopes that Congress would pass such a measure before the end of the year.

Republican leaders scrubbed plans to bring the measure up for a floor vote this week after nearly 100 House Republicans threatened to oppose the measure, citing concerns over civil liberties.

Senior Democrats on the House Judiciary Committee joined their Republican colleagues in opposing the measure.

The \$2.1 billion package would expand the definition of terrorism, give federal authorities new investigative authority and allow for expedited provisions to deport aliens suspected of terrorist activity.

The Senate passed its version of the measure in June in a vote of 91-8.

Anti-terrorism legislation has been a centerpiece of the legislative agenda for several Jewish organizations since President Clinton proposed anti-terrorism legislation almost a year ago. The measure gained momentum in April, after the Oklahoma City bombing.

But an unusual alliance of conservative and liberal lawmakers concerned about the potential for civil liberties violations have adamantly opposed the measure. Their opposition has led an effort to water down some of the provisions most cherished by the Jewish community.

The original measure would have banned fund raising on American soil by suspected terrorist groups.

In an effort to pass the measure before its summer recess, the Senate stripped that provision from the measure. The House version would not stop fund raising.

The House could take up the measure after the New Year's recess if lawmakers can forge an agreement with the measure's opponents. □



AJCommittee makes first visit of Jewish delegation to Kuwait

By Cynthia Mann

NEW YORK (JTA) — The American Jewish Committee this weekend became the first Jewish group to pay an official visit to Kuwait, said David Harris, the AJCommittee's executive director.

Harris and Jason Isaacson, AJCommittee director of international affairs, met with Foreign Minister Sheik Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah, who expressed Kuwait's support for the Middle East peace process and its wish that international sanctions against neighboring Iraq remain in place.

"They don't want to see a withering of the international consensus against Iraq," Harris said in an interview from Jerusalem. The Kuwaitis' top three foreign policies concerns are "Iraq, Iraq, Iraq," he said.

Harris said the Kuwaiti visit built upon a meeting in New York two months ago between the organization and al-Sabah as well as previous meetings with other Kuwaiti leaders.

"We were not starting from ground zero," said Harris.

"We are an organization that had strongly supported the American response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990," and had credibility in Kuwaiti eyes by "recognizing a central issue in Kuwaiti history — Iraqi aggression."

During the meeting with al-Sabah, he said, "we made it clear a very important part of our mission was to make a small contribution to the peace process and help develop Israel's bilateral relations with countries in the region." Kuwait has no relations with Israel.

For his part, al-Sabah "made clear Kuwait's support for the peace process and his desire for it to succeed."

Harris said the Iraqi aggression and the Israeli policy of restraint during the Gulf War "convulsed old Kuwaiti thinking" and led Kuwaitis "to understand rather clearly that Israel is not the enemy."

At the same time, said Harris, the foreign minister made it clear that his country "feels an obligation to Syria" for its support of the allied forces against Iraq in the Gulf War and "is not likely to get ahead of the pace" of the Israeli-Syrian negotiating track.

He said al-Sabah told them that he was planning a trip to Damascus and he "hoped to use the occasion to help with Syria."

Relations have yet to materialize

Harris noted that Kuwait was the first Arab country to repudiate publicly the secondary and tertiary boycotts of Israel and has strongly condemned Hamas attacks against Israel.

An AJCommittee delegation had earlier met with top leaders in Bulgaria and Greece and afterward visited Tunisia and Israel in a group led by AJCommittee President Robert Rifkind.

Harris described as "very substantive" a lengthy meeting between the group and Tunisian Foreign Minister Habib Ben Yahia. He said it focused on the peace process, Tunisia-Israel bilateral relations, the threat of Islamic fundamentalism, developments in neighboring Libya and Algeria, and U.S.-Tunisia relations.

Formal low-level diplomatic relations had been anticipated about a year ago between Israel and Tunisia but have yet to materialize.

"They [the Tunisians] are keenly aware it's a matter of importance to the United States and to Israel and that it ought to be a matter of importance to them to move forward," Harris said. □

Religious Zionists rally at site of Rabin killing to assert goals

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Tens of thousands of Israelis attended a rally this week in support of religious Zionism at the same Tel Aviv square where Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was slain.

The event was held to reaffirm the religious Zionist movement's goals in the wake of a backlash generated by the assassination of Rabin by a 25-year-old religious law student after a Nov. 4 peace rally.

National Religious Party leader Zevulun Hammer issued a call for national reconciliation without capitulation.

"We will not fold up our flag," Hammer said.

"With the rest of the nation we will examine what can be fixed, but we will not give up our principles," he added.

Police estimated that 70,000 people took part in the Saturday night rally.

Organizers put the figure at 120,000.

The crowd stood in heavy rain, as speaker after speaker took a turn on the stage.

Israel's Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau said the gathering was meant to "expel the darkness."

Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert, a member of the Likud, said bullets should neither bring down the government nor silence legitimate argument.

"May we have good luck in our future battles for the Land of Israel and Jerusalem, its capital," he said.

Throughout the week, members of a number of different streams within the religious Zionist movement debated whether to come to the rally.

Danny Tamari, secretary general of the religious kibbutz movement, said he attended, despite hesitations.

"I do not want to run away, and I do not want to abandon my movement" to "right-wing extremists among us," he said. □

Man accused of war crimes smeared by KGB, lawyer says

By Gil Kezwer

TORONTO (JTA) — The lawyer for an Ontario pensioner accused of war crimes argued here last week that it appeared as though his client was the victim of a KGB smear campaign.

Johann Dueck, 76, was targeted by the paranoid Stalinist regime after World War II, lawyer Don Bayne told a Canadian federal judge Dec. 12.

Bayne said being "against the Soviets" made one "a Nazi collaborator."

In May, the Justice Department initiated denaturalization proceedings against Dueck, a retired mechanic, accusing him of taking part in the killing of Jews and other civilians as a member of the Selidovka district police in German-occupied Ukraine from 1941 to 1943.

The documents allege that Dueck had concealed this information from Canadian immigration officials, thereby obtaining citizenship by "false representation or fraud."

But Dueck's lawyer said he only recently learned that Canadian authorities came to suspect Dueck based on information supplied by the former Soviet Union in 1980.

Bayne asked the court to order the release of all documents relating to the Soviet information and the subsequent Canadian investigation.

If stripped of his Canadian citizenship, Dueck faces a deportation hearing.

In 1995, the Justice Department initiated proceedings against several Canadians accused of war crimes. □