



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **Yasser Arafat refused to commit himself to revoking or amending the Palestine National Covenant.** Israeli officials have said the covenant must be changed in order for the peace process to continue. [Page 1]

■ **The trial of Yigal Amir, the confessed assassin of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, opened in Tel Aviv District Court.** Amir denied that the shooting was a premeditated murder but said he was not sorry he did it. [Page 4]

■ **Syria reportedly expressed hope that peace talks with Israel, resuming in the United States on Wednesday, could have positive results.** Israeli officials said without a breakthrough this round, no agreement would be reached this year. [Page 4]

■ **Advocates of religious pluralism in Israel were taken aback by comments by Israeli Interior Minister Haim Ramon, who said religious pluralism would have to take a back seat to domestic political considerations.** [Page 2]

■ **Israeli officials and the families of the 20 soldiers killed in the Beit Lid suicide bombing gathered at the site of the attack for a memorial service that marked the one-year anniversary of the terrorist act.**

■ **South African Jewish leaders expressed concern about an upcoming visit to South Africa by Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, who requested a meeting with President Nelson Mandela.**

■ **A Shin Bet official who received a letter of warning from the state commission of inquiry into the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin appeared before the panel.** The official, head of the protection unit for the domestic security service, was suspended after an internal investigation into security lapses that allowed the assassin to get close to Rabin.

■ **Lebanese military authorities demanded the death penalty for the chief of the Southern Lebanon Army, which is allied with Israel, on charges of collaborating with the enemy.**

Yasser Arafat refuses to commit to amending Palestinian covenant

By Mitchell Danow

GAZA (JTA) — Days after his election to head the Palestinian Council, Yasser Arafat will not commit himself to revoking or amending those sections of the Palestine National Covenant calling for the destruction of Israel.

“The covenant is like your American Constitution,” he said Tuesday in an interview here with the Jewish Telegraphic Agency. “You do not delete sections of your Constitution; you amend it.”

And in Arafat’s view, the Palestinians “have already amended it.”

Arafat’s stance — apparently adopted either to deal with recalcitrant members of the Palestinian leadership or to present a firm bargaining stance with Israel — could lead to a complete disruption of the peace process.

Since Sunday’s elections, Israeli officials from Prime Minister Shimon Peres on down have insisted that Arafat must now revoke the offending clauses as agreed to under the Israeli-Palestinian peace accords.

Revoking those clauses is considered by Israelis to be an important symbol of reconciliation between the two peoples.

Speaking at the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee on Tuesday, Peres said that if the PLO failed to live up to its obligation under the peace accords, there would be no final-status negotiations, which include the future of Jerusalem and other sensitive issues.

“The train will stop,” Peres said of the peace process. The final-status negotiations are slated to begin in May.

Among the offending clauses of the 1964 Palestinian covenant are:

- “Armed struggle is the only way to liberate Palestine”;
- “The establishment of Israel is fundamentally null and void”;
- Zionism is “a racist and fanatical movement in its formation; aggressive, expansionist and colonialist in its aims”; and
- Other nations should “consider Zionism an illegitimate movement” and “prohibit its existence and activity.”

Failure to revoke or amend the accords could also lead to an end to U.S. aid to the Palestinians.

In Washington, a congressional aide responded to Arafat’s remarks, saying, “This Congress will not approve aid to the PLO if the covenant is not changed. It’s that simple.”

The United States has committed \$500 million to the Palestinians over five years, but that aid is contingent on legislation known as the Middle East Peace Facilitation Act, which expires at the end of March.

According to the accords, the amendment of the charter must occur no later than two months after the inauguration of the new Palestinian government.

But Arafat sees it differently.

‘There is no need to confirm again’

He said that in 1988 and in 1991, the Palestine National Council, the Palestinian parliament in exile, passed declarations that obviated the need to change the covenant.

The 1988 declaration affirmed Israel’s right to exist and renounced terrorism, and in 1991, “we agreed to attend the Madrid peace conference. There is no need to confirm again what has already been confirmed.”

Sitting in a cushioned chair in the official reception room at his Gaza headquarters, he tapped his feet impatiently when the issue was pursued.

It seemed beside the point that he had promised in a September 1993 letter to Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin that the offending passages in the Palestinian covenant be revoked.

Instead, he talked of actions already taken by the PNC, maintaining that they had “de facto and de jure” — by force of fact and law — implied their acceptance of Israel’s right to exist.

“What we have to do is approve the Oslo II accord,” he said, referring to the agreement signed last September in Washington to extend West Bank autonomy.

This, too, he maintained, would reflect official Palestinian acceptance of the Jewish state.

Arafat has given mixed signals in recent years about his intentions on the covenant.

He often has referred to the clause as inoperative or "caduc," the French word for null and void, when trying to justify why revocation is unnecessary.

In his 1993 letter of mutual recognition to Rabin, Arafat reiterated this but went further.

He said the "articles of the Palestinian covenant which deny Israel's right to exist" are "inoperative and no longer valid. Consequently, the [Palestine Liberation Organization] undertakes to submit to the Palestinian National Council" the "necessary changes" for formal approval.

Last October in New York, he told a gathering of American Jews that he would definitely convene the PNC after Palestinian elections to repeal the clause if Israel would let all the members of the council enter the territories to vote.

Peres said this week that he would allow all members of the PNC into the autonomous areas to vote on abrogating the anti-Israel clauses of the charter.

On the future of Jerusalem, the eastern portion of which Arafat has repeatedly claimed as the capital of a future Palestinian state, Arafat confirmed a report that Israeli and Palestinian academics have been meeting to study the issue.

"There have been seminars ... consultations," he said.

But the discussions were not secret government-level talks, he added.

Nonetheless, the talks could prove enormously significant. Similar discussions held in Oslo between academic specialists of the two sides paved the way to the historic 1993 Declaration of Principles that laid out the framework for all that was to follow in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Indeed, the significance of Jerusalem to Arafat could be seen in the decor of his reception room: Directly behind his chair is an oblong photograph of the Old City with the Dome of the Rock looming large in the foreground.

Asked whether he had any vision of a preliminary framework that might settle the Jerusalem question to the satisfaction of both sides, Arafat referred to the Rome-Vatican model he has often spoken of before.

"The details have to be discussed," he said, but he was hopeful that answers could be found.

"Where there's a will, there's a way," he said. "Those who had a way to reach the Oslo agreements will find a way to answer all the issues."

The interview with Arafat took place in the context of a meeting between him and the director for interreligious affairs of the Latin American Jewish Congress.

Brazilian-based Rabbi Henry Sobel presented him with a sculpted dove of peace on the occasion of the Palestinian elections. □

Israeli official to Reform: Pluralism taking a back seat

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — Advocates of religious pluralism in Israel have long regarded Haim Ramon, Labor Party star and Israel's interior minister, as an ally.

So when Ramon made it clear to a visiting group of 55 Reform rabbis this week that he will push aside the cause of religious pluralism if it means that Labor has a better chance of winning the upcoming government election, they were taken aback.

The rabbis met with Ramon, as well as Prime Minister Shimon Peres and Likud opposition leader

Benjamin Netanyahu in separate meetings Sunday, as part of their weeklong trip to Israel and Egypt, which was organized by the Association of Reform Zionists in America.

In what ARZA's executive director, Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, described as "a rather stormy meeting," Ramon emphasized his opposition to efforts to make non-Orthodox conversions and marriages legal in Israel because it would cost the Labor Party the support of the Orthodox parties in the elections.

The religious parties, needed by the Labor Party to win re-election, have made it clear that the price of their support is an end to efforts to legislatively erode Orthodox control over conversion, marriage, divorce and burial.

I will "not support our losing the election over the issue of permitting Reform conversions to Judaism," Ramon was quoted as telling the rabbis.

"If we lose the elections, Netanyahu will be prime minister and then my child may have to fight in Gaza and die there," he said, alluding to the possibility that Netanyahu would reverse the Labor government's peace policies.

"Because you want Reform conversions my child will be killed? I cannot agree to that," he said. "That is my order of priorities and I am ready to pay the price of no Reform conversions for another five to 10 years."

In Hirsch's view, Ramon's statements "indicated a lack of deep understanding of Israel-Diaspora relations. He could use some education about Diaspora Jewry."

Peres told the rabbis that he would establish "some kind of forum where these issues would be negotiated and resolved satisfactorily," though he did not elaborate, Hirsch said.

Severely strained relations

Netanyahu pledged his private, personal support for religious pluralism, said Hirsch, but urged the Reform rabbis to view the process as one of "gradual evolution, not revolution."

Peres and Netanyahu are reportedly getting significant financial support from Reform and Conservative Jews abroad.

Hirsch said that even though Reform Jews would "aggressively support the peace process irrespective of any answer they give us relating to matters of religion and state," his group made clear that "we will oppose you with every fiber of our institutional being if you seek to reopen the 'Who is a Jew' question and create a chasm in the Jewish community."

The "Who is a Jew" debate severely strained Israel-Diaspora relations when the Orthodox establishment in Israel unsuccessfully sought to change the Law of Return to exclude Jews converted abroad by non-Orthodox rabbis.

Public support among politicians for religious pluralism in Israel is "a simple political calculation," said Hirsch, adding that ARZA's plan to introduce into the Knesset a bill that would permit civil marriages in Israel would also be carefully calculated.

Hirsch said Ramon's opposition alone would not kill plans to introduce the bill. But moving the elections forward to the spring as the prime minister has reportedly urged could set back ARZA's plans, he said.

The Reform movement will initiate "a vast public education campaign" and "we're not clear whether the peace issue is so predominant that our message would be drowned out by the sheer volume of the rhetoric if we unleash it now," Hirsch said.

The \$400,000 that ARZA has raised from American Reform Jews to finance the effort "is there," he said. "It's simply a strategic question of when to do it." □

FOCUS ON ISSUES**GOP congressional candidates get bigger share of PAC money**

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — As the 1996 election campaign kicks off, GOP congressional candidates are for the first time receiving a majority of the funds raised by pro-Israel political action committees.

The Republicans' \$23 million exceeded the Democrats' \$12 million in overall PAC receipts during the first six months of 1995 — the latest period for which figures are available — according to the Federal Election Commission.

During that period, pro-Israel PACs contributed nearly \$340,000 to congressional candidates from both parties, as well as another \$30,000 to Republican presidential candidates.

Fully 53 percent of their contributions went to Republican congressional candidates — a dramatic turnaround from the first six months of 1993, when Republicans received only 27 percent of funds raised by pro-Israel PACs.

PAC officials say the shift in funding simply reflects changing political realities. Traditionally, interest groups give where the power is situated.

"Any interest group will normally support people who have the ability to help them," said Morris Amitay, founder and treasurer of the Washington PAC, which has shifted a greater percentage of its funding toward Republicans, but still narrowly favored Democrats.

"With majorities and chairmanships shifting toward the Republicans, it's only natural that you'll see more money going toward the Republicans," he added.

Republicans captured majorities in both the Senate and the House in 1994.

National PAC, the largest pro-Israel PAC — which accounted for nearly one-third of the total pro-Israel contributions tallied in the first-half of 1995 — gave 65 percent of their outlays to Republicans. As the pre-eminent pro-Israel donor, NATPAC's influence is great enough to sway the total pro-Israel PAC contributions in favor of Republican congressional candidates.

Spreading the wealth thinly

Aside from NATPAC, the rest of the pro-Israel PACs slightly favored Democratic congressional candidates over Republicans in their 1995 donations, though the amounts given to GOP candidates represented significant increases over donations made in years past.

Chuck Brooks, executive director of NATPAC, said the group shifted large chunks of funding away from Democrats to Republicans not because of "policy differences," but because of the "practical realities" of Republican power.

Pro-Israel PACs have traditionally been among the largest contributors to congressional campaigns that fall under the category of ideological or single-issue interest groups. Rather than spreading the wealth thinly among dozens of candidates, the pro-Israel PACs tend to concentrate their contributions in a small number of key races, usually in the Senate.

The PACs often encourage Jewish candidates to run, but say they do not necessarily give preference to Jews. Funding decisions are instead based on candidates' records.

Overall fund raising by pro-Israel PACs has dropped off by about 20 percent from the first six months of 1993, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, a nonpartisan research organization that examines money and politics.

Last year's drop follows the sharp decline in giving that began in 1990. Pro-Israel PACs have decreased their contributions from \$6.7 million in 1990 to \$4 million in 1992 and \$2.3 million in 1994.

Moreover, the number of active pro-Israel PACs has declined by more than half since the early '90s — from 56 between 1991 and 1992, to 45 between 1993 and 1994, down to 24 in 1995.

PAC officials say contributions this year will probably fall well short of the totals from past cycles.

Brooks attributes the decline to a sense of "complacency in the community" as the Middle East peace process moves forward. Most Jewish fund raising has traditionally taken place during "emergency situations," but an increasingly secure Israel has removed the "sense of urgency," Brooks said.

Others point to the altered political landscape, in which the administration is viewed as more sympathetic to Israel than Congress — a reversal of the paradigm of previous years. "Now, with love fests between Clinton and the Israeli leadership, it's hard to make the argument that we definitely have to use Congress to get to the administration," Amitay said.

PAC officials, however, caution against complacency. Half of those now serving in Congress, they point out, have been elected during the 1990s — a number that is likely to rise with a record number of incumbents retiring in 1996.

Although pro-Israel groups continue to view Congress and its new leadership as sympathetic to Israel, they see no guarantees about the future.

With the high level of turnover in Congress, "we're going to have a Congress that has very little institutional memory of U.S.-Israel relations," Brooks said. "I think the (Jewish) community is at risk if we neglect the fact that these people need to be educated and cultivated on these issues."

With more open seats and less money to give, PAC officials say they will have to be more selective in deciding which candidate to fund while being careful not to spread their contributions too thin.

PACs can donate a maximum of \$5,000 to each congressional candidate for the primaries and a maximum of \$5,000 for a general election, for a total of \$10,000 per election cycle.

Democrats more in step

Brooks said NATPAC would focus their contributions where it counts — on congressional leaders and key committee members responsible for the flow of foreign aid to Israel. In addition, it intends to support Republican presidential candidates, such as Sens. Bob Dole (R-Kan.), Phil Gramm (R-Texas) and Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), whose records show strong support for Israel, as well as President Bill Clinton.

Although GOP candidates in 1996 will receive substantial sums, as a percentage, their share of money from the pro-Israel PACs remains smaller than when the Democrats held the gavel.

Before the Republican takeover, Democratic candidates were consistently receiving about 70 percent of the total contributions from pro-Israel PACs. Republicans are now taking in 53 percent. PAC officials say a natural bias toward Democrats may account for the discrepancy.

Although support for Israel tends to reach across party lines, Democrats are generally viewed to be more in step with the mainstream Jewish community on social issues such as abortion, prayer in school and preserving the social safety net. For that reason, and as a response to the Republican power shift, the National Jewish Democratic Council has started up an independent, partisan PAC. □

**Confessed assassin tells court:
No remorse for shooting Rabin***By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Yigal Amir has confessed in open court to killing Yitzhak Rabin, saying that he had shot the prime minister for the "glory of God" and did not regret his actions.

At the opening of his trial Tuesday in Tel Aviv District Court, Amir, a 25-year-old religious Jew, denied that the Nov. 4 shooting was premeditated and said he had nothing personal against Rabin.

Wearing a black kippah and a purple and black sweater, Amir was calm as he answered to each of the charges, as required by law, in the indictment sheet before him. In his response to the charges against him, Amir said he had not aimed to kill Rabin, only to seriously injure him to force him out of the political arena.

"My aim was to shoot him in such a way as to end his activity as prime minister, either by paralyzing him or, if there was no choice, by killing him," Amir said before Judge Edmund Levy. Amir said that when he fired the first of three bullets that hit Rabin, he had aimed at the spinal column, not the head.

Amir has denied that he had conspired with his older brother Hagai and a friend, Dror Adani. Those two, along with Amir, face separate conspiracy charges. Amir alone is charged with murder.

Amir also told the court that he had neither sought nor received a rabbi's blessing to kill Rabin.

Earlier, one of Amir's two lawyers, Jonathan Goldberg, wanted to delay the trial in order to wait for the results of a state inquiry into security blunders that led to the assassination. The judge would not grant the delay. The start of the trial had been delayed once in December.

The second attorney, Mordechai Ofri, told the judge Tuesday that he wanted to resign from the case because of a conflict of interest. He offered no additional details.

Some of the police officers involved in Amir's arrest and confession testified Tuesday.

"He was so sure of himself, so proud of the act that he had carried out that he simply told me in detail everything he had done over the last two years in preparing to kill the prime minister," Officer Nissim Daoudi said.

When the judge asked Amir about the confession, Amir said: "I volunteered my confession. I gave it from my own free will."

At the end of the four-hour session Tuesday, the judge adjourned the trial until Sunday to give the defense team time to sort things out. □

**Farrakhan visit to S. Africa
sparks concern among Jews***By Suzanne Belling*

JOHANNESBURG (JTA) — South African Jewish leaders are not happy about an upcoming visit here by Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan.

Farrakhan, notorious for his anti-Semitic and racist comments, has requested a meeting with South African President Nelson Mandela during his visit, which is scheduled to begin Friday.

It is unclear whether Mandela will meet with the American black nationalist Muslim leader.

Farrakhan also has requested meetings with Archbishop Desmond Tutu and other political and religious leaders in South Africa.

"The Jewish community of South Africa knows all about Mr. Farrakhan's anti-Semitic statements," said Mervyn Smith, president of the South African Jewish

Board of Deputies. "Anti-Semitism is a classic form of racism which has no place in the new South Africa. We hope he will not repeat his statements here in South Africa or anywhere else."

Farrakhan has referred to Jews as "bloodsuckers" and Judaism as a "gutter religion."

Farrakhan, who will be accompanied by a delegation of 34 people, including Muslims, Christians and Jews, is scheduled to spend the first three days of his visit in Cape Town. His trip includes other stops in Africa and the Middle East.

Milton Shain, director of the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies at the University of Cape Town, echoed the concerns expressed by many in the Jewish community.

"We can't deny him entry into the country," he said. "Nevertheless, we, as South Africans, are trying to bring people together, whereas Farrakhan is a divisive force.

"I sincerely hope he is not entertained in the upper echelons of government."

Joe Simon, chairman of the South African Zionist Federation, said the Jewish community would "carefully monitor his press statements and interviews."

"Should they in any way attack Jews or the Jewish community, we will react with decisiveness," Simon said.

News of Farrakhan's visit has even prompted reactions from the political arena.

Harry Schwarz, a former parliamentarian and former South African ambassador to the United States, said, "The man has made a number of very serious statements which are racist" and apply to non-Jews as well, he said.

"South Africa has a delicate race relations situation in which we can't afford racist comments from anyone, particularly not from people who come from outside the country," the former ambassador said.

Anyone who "anti-racist should make a stand" against such remarks, he said, adding that nothing could be said in South Africa that could diminish the spirit of reconciliation symbolized by Mandela.

Tony Leon, the leader of the Democratic Party and a member of Parliament, said of Farrakhan, "I doubt if he has anything to teach South Africa about the values of tolerance, mutual respect and freedom of religion." □

Israel, Syria prepare for talks*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — As Israeli and Syrian teams prepared this week for another round of negotiations at the Wye Plantation in eastern Maryland, Syria expressed hope that peace talks could have positive results.

Syria also said it was not against security arrangements that would ensure Israel's safety, according to the Syrian official daily Tishreen.

The central leadership of the National Progressive Front, the ruling coalition in Syria, also was hopeful during a meeting that the talks would lead to peace.

The peace talks, scheduled to resume Wednesday and to be mediated by Dennis Ross, U.S. special Middle East envoy, will include military experts from both Israel and Syria to address the Golan Heights issue.

The current round of talks will also address the issue of water.

Yossi Beilin, Israeli minister without portfolio, said the discussions would be critical in determining whether a peace agreement would be achieved by the end of the year.

If there is no breakthrough in this round, he said before a World Jewish Congress gathering in Jerusalem, "I don't believe we are going to have peace with Syria in 1996." □