



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Israel had intelligence information about additional terrorist attacks.** Speaking after talks in Jordan with King Hussein, Netanyahu also said Israel would be willing to ease sanctions on the self-rule areas if the Palestinian Authority took action to fight terrorism. [Page 3]

■ **Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu assumed the powers of the Religious Affairs Ministry in order to comply with a court ruling ordering that a Reform Jewish woman be appointed to the Netanya religious council.** Religious Affairs Minister Eli Suissa, who was ousted from the position after refusing to comply with the court's request, was expected to be asked back to serve in the position. In less than two weeks, the position will rotate to the National Religious Party.

■ **Israeli police are searching for a driver who killed a British hitchhiker and wounded another after picking them up near Eilat.** Police were considering the possibility that the gunman had fled to Egypt. [Page 4]

■ **An Israeli military court ruled that a soldier who wounded seven Arabs in Hebron in January is now fit to stand trial.** The soldier had been confined to a military hospital. Psychiatrists determined that the woman accused of pasting posters on West Bank storefronts depicting the Islamic prophet Mohammed as a pig is also fit to stand trial. [Page 4]

■ **The Jerusalem municipality demolished five illegally built Arab structures in a refugee camp in eastern Jerusalem.** One order was suspended after an Arab family whose son was wounded in the July 30 twin bombing in Jerusalem's Mahane Yehuda market petitioned the court to halt the demolition. [Page 4]

■ **The Texas parties to a Supreme Court case that led to the invalidation of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act have reached an agreement.** The City Council of Boerne approved an agreement with the archdiocese that preserves most of a local church while allowing the congregation to expand.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Israeli Arab sojourn to Syria: Once blessed, now it is cursed

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM (JTA) — It seemed like an event that might serve as a tentative "bridge to peace" with Syria.

But soon after a delegation of 42 Israeli Arabs arrived in Damascus, the official blessing that the Israeli government initially had bestowed on the visit changed to something more akin to a curse.

The delegation set off last Friday for the second visit by leading Israeli Arabs to Damascus since the signing of the Oslo accords in 1993.

The previous visit took place three years ago, when the Israeli-Palestinian peace process was ripe with promise and there were hopes for a similar Israeli-Syrian rapprochement.

Since then, however, the Israeli-Syrian relationship has soured.

The previous Labor government had been engaged in thorny negotiations with Syria that focused on at least a partial return of the Golan Heights in exchange for the start of normalization between the two countries.

But U.S.-sponsored talks that began in December 1995 at the Wye Plantation near Washington, D.C., came to an abrupt halt in March of the following year after Syrian President Hafez Assad failed to condemn a series of suicide bomb attacks that hit Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

Matters deteriorated further last year after the election of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The two sides could not agree on a basis for resuming negotiations, and both engaged in saber rattling that only lessened the chances for an eventual return to the bargaining table.

Syria maintains that Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin agreed in principle to withdraw from the Golan Heights, which Israel captured from Syria in 1967. Netanyahu has said that he would not honor any verbal understandings reached between Syria and the previous Labor government.

Moshe Katzav, the minister in charge of Arab affairs, recently gave the go-ahead for the trip to Syria after Israeli Druse poet Samih al-Kassem arranged, with the help of a Syrian Druse, an invitation from Assad.

Katzav and other Israeli officials had apparently believed that the visit might revive Israeli-Syrian dialogue at a time when the situation looked hopeless.

He approved the trip even though no Israeli Jews participated and even though all Israelis are legally banned from visiting countries that are at war with Israel.

Katzav may be regretting his decision.

When the delegation arrived in Damascus, the Syrian media gave extensive coverage to the visit. But they did not make clear the fact that this was an Israeli delegation that included five Arab Knesset members and several journalists whose work appears in the Israeli media.

Netanyahu called a 'strange,' vacillating man

The Syrian media referred to the delegates as representatives of the "1948 Arabs" — a term used to describe those Arabs who did not flee Israel during the Israeli War of Independence and subsequently became Israeli citizens.

Members of the delegation were reported as saying after meeting with Assad that he called Netanyahu a "strange," vacillating man. They said Assad also praised the Rabin and Peres governments for the progress made in the peace talks when they were in power.

None of this came as a surprise to Israeli officials. But they were caught off guard when members of the delegation began bending over backward to please their Syrian hosts.

The delegates played down their Israeli identity. Knesset members introduced themselves as members of parliament, without even mentioning which parliament. Moderates like Ibrahim Nimer Hussein, the mayor of Shfaram and the chairman of the umbrella organization of Arab municipalities in Israel, declared that they fully sided with Syria's "peace strategy" — which calls for a full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan in return for peace — and warned of the "dangerous" Netanyahu government.

Kassem, a poet and the editor of an Arab weekly newspaper from

Nazareth, said after a visit to a military cemetery that "a nation which had made so much sacrifice would overcome all its enemies."

He was not referring to Israel.

Kassem was received like a hero Sunday, when he and other members of the delegation visited the "Martyrs' Cemetery" at the Palestinian Al-Yarmuk refugee camp outside Damascus.

At the cemetery, the burial place of Palestinians killed in battles against Israel, Kassem kissed the grave of Khalil Ibrahim Al-Wazir.

Also known as Abu Jihad — "Father of the Struggle" — Wazir was Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat's second-in-command and heir apparent before he was killed in a 1988 Israeli commando raid in the capital of Tunisia.

One member of the delegation, Knesset Member Abdel Wahab Darawshe of the United Arab List, raised Israeli hackles when he spoke before 20,000 Palestinians at the refugee camp.

"I swear to you in Allah's name that you will return to Palestine," he told the cheering audience.

"If not you, then your children and grandchildren."

Nearly 350,000 Palestinians live in Syria.

Granting the right of return to Palestinians who fled during the War of Independence is politically anathema to almost all Israeli officials.

Labor Knesset Member Saleh Tareef, a Druse retired army captain, was the sole member of the delegation who did not visit the refugee camp.

In a telephone interview from Damascus, Tareef distanced himself from Darawshe's comments, saying they were misleading.

The delegation also presented the Syrian president with a message from Labor Party head Ehud Barak. The Likud Party criticized the opposition party for sending a message via a delegation whose members made extremist remarks.

Officials in Israel on all sides of the political spectrum were critical of the delegation's actions and remarks.

Even arch-dove Yossi Sarid, a member of Knesset from the Meretz Party, said the delegation had caused him "frustration and anger."

Sarid said he was particularly disturbed by the fact that the delegates did not identify themselves as Israelis, "as if they were coming from an unidentified place."

Sarid also lashed out at Darawshe.

"There is no serious person who believes that the Palestinians have the right to return to their places of before 1948," Sarid said.

The reaction among conservative Israeli politicians was even stronger.

Likud Knesset Member Reuven Rivlin said he would propose lifting Darawshe's parliamentary immunity so that charges could be brought against him.

When the delegates return to Israel next week, they are likely to face a very cold reception indeed. □

Prime minister denies report that stance on Syria changed

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Aides to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu are denying a newspaper report that the premier has agreed to a partial withdrawal from the Golan Heights in exchange for concessions on security arrangements from Syria.

The Israeli daily Yediot Achronot reported Wednesday that Netanyahu had recently conveyed a

message to Syrian President Hafez Assad in which he proposed a formula for determining the extent of the withdrawal.

Netanyahu spokesman Shai Bazak denied the report.

"Our position remains unchanged. We are ready to enter negotiations with the Syrians without prior conditions. The prime minister's view on the importance of the Golan Heights is known," Bazak told Israel Radio.

The previous Labor government had agreed in principle to a withdrawal on the Golan that would be commensurate with the extent of peace Syria was willing to forge with the Jewish state.

But Netanyahu has stated that he would not honor any verbal agreements that may have been given by the Peres and Rabin governments regarding a Golan withdrawal.

Negotiations between Israel and Syria were halted in March 1996 after Assad failed to condemn a series of suicide bombings that Hamas terrorists launched against Israeli targets.

Since taking office last year, Netanyahu has said he is willing to renew negotiations without any prior conditions.

But Israel and Syria have been unable to agree on the terms of the starting point for such talks.

Meanwhile, the latest proposal attributed to Netanyahu drew criticism from Labor Party leader Ehud Barak.

"He is making it a matter of fact that we are ready to give up our demands without any content or depth of peace which should be part of any equation," he told Israel Radio.

Barak, in turn, was sharply criticized by coalition members this week for sending a message of his own to Assad via a delegation of Israeli Arabs currently visiting Damascus.

Barak defended his actions, saying he had conveyed his message via respectable Labor Knesset members that were part of the delegation.

Members of the visiting Israeli Arab delegation said that in their meeting with Assad, the Syrian leader had expressed interest in peace as well as concern about the present situation.

Assad said he hoped there would not be war with Israel, but that he had not ruled out any options, according to members of the delegation. □

Expiration of MEPFA forces symbolic suspension for PLO

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The State Department leveled a symbolic slap at the Palestinians this week when the expiration of a U.S. law forced the Palestine Liberation Organization to "suspend operations" at its Washington office.

However, U.S. aid to the Palestinians will continue and the office can stay open under a different name, officials said.

State Department officials plan to ask Congress to renew the measure, known as the Middle East Peace Facilitation Act, when lawmakers return from their August recess.

Key members of Congress have said they will prevent MEPFA from coming to a vote until the White House agrees that the Palestinians have complied with their accords with Israel.

For the first time since the Oslo accords were signed on the White House lawn and MEPFA became law in 1993, President Clinton has determined that the Palestinian Authority is violating the accords. □

Ross wraps up Mideast mission as Netanyahu travels to Jordan

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — As U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross extended his shuttle mission here this week, it remained unclear exactly how much he had achieved in his meetings with Israeli and Palestinian officials.

As a result of those meetings, CIA officials will participate in a three-way panel aimed at increasing security cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

American officials said the panel reflected an increased U.S. commitment to renewing long-dormant Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

But Palestinians see the development as a reflection of how far the once-healthy peace process with Israel had deteriorated.

The Palestinians insisted on the American presence in the security meetings "because we wanted a witness among us and a judge, because of the lack of trust between us," said Palestinian negotiator Nabil Sha'ath.

Ross, who was expected to return to Washington later this week, continued his shuttle mission Wednesday, saying his efforts this week had "moved things a lot" toward re-establishing Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation.

All such cooperation, along with the negotiations themselves, came to a halt in mid-March, when Israel began building a Jewish neighborhood in Har Homa in southeastern Jerusalem.

Hamas terrorists launched two suicide attacks against Israel after the construction began.

The attacks brought the peace process to an all-but-complete stalemate.

The latest attack, which killed 14 Israelis July 30 in Jerusalem's Mahane Yehuda market, prompted Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to demand that the Palestinians crack down on terrorism before the two sides return to negotiations.

'This is not a political test of strength'

He repeated that message Wednesday, when he met with Jordan's King Hussein in Aqaba.

"The ability to continue the process of negotiations and peace will be seriously impaired if proper action against additional terrorist attacks is not taken," he said at a news conference after the meeting.

"This is not a political test of strength. It is a question of the lives that are at stake," the prime minister added.

He also stated that Israel had information regarding plans for additional terror attacks.

Netanyahu repeated his pledge that Israel would ease the sanctions it imposed on the Palestinian Authority after the July 30 attack if the Palestinians took meaningful steps against terrorism.

"What we would like to see is the fulfillment of the commitment to battle the terrorists.

"When we see action taken in that direction we will adjust and change our measures accordingly," Netanyahu said.

Hussein warned that the peace process was currently at a very dangerous point.

"I tell everyone concerned that there is the need for us to ensure that we pass this dangerous stage, and do whatever can be done to prevent further bloodshed and destruction," Hussein said.

The Jordanian monarch admitted that his talks with Netanyahu had achieved no breakthroughs.

"I did not expect that this meeting would resolve problems in a very dramatic way.

"I conveyed my concerns and he conveyed his," Hussein said.

Netanyahu was accompanied to Aqaba by Foreign Minister David Levy and National Infrastructure Minister Ariel Sharon.

Netanyahu later flew back to Jerusalem for a meeting with Ross, who was scheduled to hold yet another session later in the day with Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat. □

Congress, activists reject official reasons for delaying terrorist list

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON (JTA) — U.S. law enforcement authorities will have to wait at least until September for new tools in their battle against terrorist groups.

The State Department has yet to draw up a list of overseas terrorist groups as required by last year's anti-terrorism law.

Law enforcement agencies would use this list to ban fund-raising by supporters of those organizations in the United States.

State Department officials responded this week to mounting criticism from Capitol Hill and Jewish activists that they have taken too long to publish the list.

"It's not a question of if, but one of when," said one official, who said the list should be ready in September.

He said the delay stems from the need for government lawyers to have all the documentation necessary should the groups exercise their right to appeal their appearance on the list.

Some of the files on the groups are hundreds of pages long, officials said.

The effort took on renewed importance after police arrested two men in Brooklyn, N.Y., accused of plotting to bomb New York subways last month. Both men expressed sympathy for Middle East terror groups, and investigators are trying to determine if they are affiliated with any such groups.

This week, the administration responded in writing to more than 40 members of Congress who had called on Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to publish the list of terrorist groups.

State Department spokesman James Rubin told reporters that Albright "places a very high priority on fighting terrorism, and she's been very frustrated with the process that has forced the slow pace."

"This isn't about political correctness; it's about legal correctness," he said.

Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D-N.Y.), sponsor of the congressional letter to Albright, said she is "very disappointed" in the State Department's response.

"It's been long enough," Maloney said, calling on the administration to release the list as the designations are completed.

The State Department has refused such an approach, arguing in a letter to Maloney that they want to avoid a false perception that they are singling out certain groups.

The promises to publish the list did not stop others from criticizing the 18-month delay in implementing the law.

"This should have been done a year ago," said Jess Hordes, Washington director of the Anti-Defamation League.

"The perception is that the administration is not adequately engaged." □

Push for Jerusalem embassy could shift to Indyk hearings*By Matthew Dorf*

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Proponents of moving the U.S. Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem are looking for support from one of the Clinton administration's most steadfast opponents of such an act.

If two senators get their way, Martin Indyk, currently the U.S. ambassador to Israel, will face sharp questions on the issue at his confirmation hearing to become the head of the State Department's Middle East shop.

A 1995 law requires that the United States begin planning now to move its embassy in Israel by 1999.

But at the urging of Indyk and others, President Clinton has postponed any action until the Palestinians and Israelis agree on the status of Jerusalem in peace talks.

To satisfy the law's requirement that the State Department begin planning a move, officials have sent reports to Congress that say real estate agents could secure a temporary embassy site on short notice.

Delaying tactics like this prompted Sens. Jon Kyl (R-Ariz.) and Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.) to urge the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to make the embassy move a central issue at Indyk's confirmation hearing, which is tentatively scheduled for the early fall.

"We believe it is critical for his nomination that Martin Indyk state for the record his support for and intent to implement the law," Kyl and Lieberman wrote to Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) earlier this month.

Helms serves as the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee.

"Unfortunately, not only has the State Department failed to implement the law, but at every legislative opportunity, its representatives have sought to stonewall further progress toward recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel," the senators wrote.

The State Department will have another opportunity to change its Jerusalem policy when Congress returns from its recess.

Four provisions aimed at strengthening Israel's claims to the city are included in the State Department authorization bill, which allows for foreign policy spending.

When the House and Senate meet to combine their versions in early September, the State Department plans to argue against the provisions, according to a State Department official and congressional aides.

Among the provisions are a measure that would allow U.S. citizens to have birth certificates stamped "Jerusalem, Israel" instead of "Jerusalem" as they currently are.

Other provisions would bring the U.S. Consulate in Jerusalem under the supervision of the embassy and list it as a mission to Israel rather than Jerusalem. □

Israel demolishes Arab homes, refugee protesters throw stones

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Jerusalem municipality has demolished five illegally built Arab structures in a refugee camp in eastern Jerusalem.

During Wednesday's demolitions, residents of the camp threw stones, lightly injuring a border policeman.

In the days after two terrorists carried out a July 30 suicide attack in Jerusalem, killing 14 Israelis, Israeli officials have carried out numerous demolitions of what they said were illegally built Arab homes.

Israeli officials were scheduled to carry out three more orders, but one order was suspended after an Arab

family whose son was wounded in the July 30 attack petitioned a court to halt the demolition.

Palestinian officials have charged that the demolitions are an attempt by Israel to change facts on the ground prior to final-status discussions between the two sides.

Israel counters that the demolitions have been carried out only in cases where the homes should not have been built in the first place. □

British hitchhiker killed, female companion left wounded

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A massive police search was launched this week in southern Israel for a driver who killed a British hitchhiker and wounded another after picking them up near Eilat.

Jeffrey Hunter, 22, was allegedly shot dead by the driver after they traveled about 75 miles. Hunter's girlfriend, Charlotte Gibb, was moderately wounded.

Israeli police were considering the possibility that the gunman, whose motives were unknown, had fled to Egypt. The incident was the second involving British tourists in the past month.

Several British teen-agers were injured three weeks ago when a car driven by an Israeli Arab crashed into them.

The driver then chased them with a sword.

Meanwhile, police said a man was lightly wounded in the neck in an apparent stabbing attack near the Damascus Gate of Jerusalem's Old City.

According to initial reports, Magen David Adom, the Israeli equivalent of the Red Cross, said the victim appeared to be a tourist and the attackers two Arabs. □

Jerusalem woman deemed fit to stand trial for 'pig posters'*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Psychiatrists have determined that the Israeli woman who stands accused of pasting posters on West Bank storefronts depicting the Islamic prophet Mohammed as a pig is mentally fit to stand trial.

Tatyana Suskin, 26, faces 26 years in prison for her actions.

She is charged with committing a racist act, harming religious sensitivities and supporting a terrorist group.

Suskin, who immigrated from Russia six years ago, was arrested in late June while throwing stones at Palestinian cars and stores in Hebron.

She had dozens of the posters in her possession at the time of the arrest.

After spotting the posters in Hebron, dozens of Palestinians rioted, ending what had been a period of relative calm in the tense West Bank city.

The posters stirred angry reactions from Hebron to Tehran, as Muslims throughout the world condemned the act.

Israeli President Ezer Weizman and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also condemned the posters.

At her arraignment, Suskin told journalists that she did not care about worldwide reactions to her action.

Suskin, who lives in Jerusalem, identifies with the outlawed Kach movement of the late Rabbi Meir Kahane, who advocated the expulsion of Arabs from Israel and the territories.

She had been arrested by police several times in the past for misdemeanors, such as riding a bus with a forged monthly ticket and provoking Muslim guards on the Temple Mount by wearing a Kach T-shirt. □