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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Barak to present government

Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak sent a letter informing the Knesset that he had formed his government, which he will present next week.

Barak sent the letter Wednesday, hours after reaching an agreement with the fervently Orthodox Shas Party that gives him at least 59 of the 120 Knesset seats.

Shas gets four ministries: Health, Infrastructure, Labor and Religious Affairs. Barak is also expected to sign agreements with the Center and One Nation parties.

Meretz, which has already signed a coalition agreement, will decide whether it wants to remain in a government that also includes Shas.

Barak has already signed up Yisrael Ba'Aliyah, the National Religious Party and the United Torah Judaism bloc.

U.S. blasts Geneva meeting

The United States wants to postpone, if not cancel, a proposed international meeting to discuss Israeli settlements, the U.S. assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs said.

Martin Indyk told reporters Wednesday that the meeting of the international signatories to the Fourth Geneva Convention scheduled for July 15 "has been invented for the purposes of trying to put Israel in a corner" and that it sets a negative tone for the incoming government of Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak.

Last month, Vice President Al Gore said the U.S. would not participate in the meeting, which Israel is planning to boycott.

Day of prayer plan defeated

The U.S. House of Representatives narrowly defeated a resolution on Tuesday calling for Americans to observe a national day of prayer and fasting in response to recent school violence.

The measure, sponsored by Rep. Helen Chenoweth (R-Idaho), failed to win the two-thirds majority needed for passage under special rules designed to speed passage of non-controversial bills through the House.

The bill, which failed on a vote of 275 for to 140 against, only two votes shy of the necessary two-thirds majority, could be reintroduced under regular rules.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Future of U.S.-Iranian relations could depend on fate of 13 Jews

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The future of the Clinton administration's diplomatic dance with Tehran could depend on the fate of 13 Jews who face execution in Iran.

President Clinton's overtures to Iran began two years ago when the Islamic Republic elected Mohammad Khatami, a relative moderate, as president.

Now members of the U.S. Congress who are skeptics of that policy have put Iran on notice that the United States will exact a price if the Jews are convicted on charges of working as "Zionist spies."

The detainees — who are believed to include rabbis, teachers and leaders of the Isfahan and Shiraz Jewish communities in southwestern Iran — had been held for nearly three months without being charged. Earlier this month Iran announced the arrests and charged them with espionage, which resulted in an outcry from Jewish leaders who enlisted presidents, prime ministers, the Vatican and others to help secure their release.

"Should these innocents be mistreated, Iran will pay a price for many years to come," Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) said recently.

"Should they be executed, Iran will slip back into pariah status for decades — which means no loans, no trade, no international respect," said Schumer, flanked by two senators and a half dozen members of Congress.

Even as members of Congress talked tough last week during a news conference at the foot of the Capitol building steps, real questions remain about what impact U.S. policy toward Iran will have on the regime's policies.

The congressional group said they had gathered to convey a message to Khatami: "The world is watching."

"If we shine the light of world opinion on these 13 hostages, then neither France nor any other Western country will want to invest in Iran or provide them with oil technology," said Rep. Brad Sherman (D-Calif.).

But just what is the world going to do? America's allies do not appear to be willing to stake their relations with Iran on the situation of the 13 Jews.

Although leaders of more than a dozen countries, some with diplomatic relations with Iran, have voiced concern over the arrests and called for the prisoners' release, business deals continue unfettered.

European states have shown no signs of slowing their efforts to improve relations with Iran, a process that began last year when Iranian clerics lifted an order to assassinate author Salman Rushdie.

Since the arrests of the Iranian Jews became public, the following signs of rapprochement with Iran have occurred:

- A delegation of business executives from England reportedly traveled to Iran seeking new investment opportunities;
- Norway announced plans to lift export curbs and to send an ambassador to Tehran later this summer;
- Japan announced plans to lift a ban on loans and send its foreign minister there later this summer; and
- The French energy giant Total continues to develop crucial Iranian gas and oil fields.

For years the United States has tried in vain to isolate Iran. Since the 1979 Islamic

MIDEAST FOCUS

Clinton invites Barak to D.C.

President Clinton invited Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak to visit the White House on July 16, according to the Israeli daily Ha'aretz. But the report said Barak may put off the visit until his government is in power for several weeks.

The report also said Barak is likely to delay a U.S. proposal that he meet with Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat prior to visiting Washington.

Indyk: Syria ready to talk

A leading U.S. official on the Middle East said he believes Syria is ready to engage in peace negotiations with Israel.

Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Martin Indyk said Tuesday that Syrian President Hafez Assad has given the Clinton administration a "number of indicators" regarding a possible resumption of such talks during the past six months.

More Kwara Jews arrive

Close to 100 Jews from northern Ethiopia arrived in Israel on Tuesday as part of stepped-up efforts to bring over the more than 3,000 Jews from the Kwara region.

Israel was criticized during the past year for failing to expedite the immigration of the Kwara Jews.

Israel likely to rejoin monitors

Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak is likely to renew meetings of the international group monitoring the 1996 cease-fire in Lebanon, according to Labor politician Shimon Peres.

He was reacting to outgoing Defense Minister Moshe Arens' announcement Tuesday that Israel would no longer abide by the three-year-old agreement that protects civilians in Lebanon. Israel refused to attend a meeting Tuesday of the five-nation monitoring committee, which includes Israel, the United States, Syria, France and Lebanon.



Daily News Bulletin

Caryn Rosen Adelman, *President*
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Revolution, the United States has maintained stiff economic sanctions against Iran.

Under U.S. law, Iran is considered a state sponsor of terrorism and until recently was known officially as a "rogue" state.

But following Khatami's election, the United States adopted a more conciliatory tone as it waited to see if Iran's policies changed to match the president's rhetoric.

U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright laid out a "road map" last year to improve relations between Washington and Tehran.

Albright went out of her way to call Iran by its preferred name — the Islamic Republic of Iran — and praised Khatami, who she said "publicly denounced terrorism and condemned the killing of innocent Israelis." But since the arrest of the Iranian Jews, Clinton administration officials are publicly criticizing Iran.

The arrests are "unacceptable," Albright said recently, adding that the United States views the matter "with great concern."

Yet while administration officials have used strong language to criticize the arrests, the administration has not gone as far as members of Congress in linking future relations with Iran.

But Congress has the ability to frustrate Clinton's overtures, according to a congressional aide who said discussions are under way to develop new legislation aimed at further isolating Iran financially.

"The level of economic contact that Iran has with the Western world is imperiled by its criminal action," said Sherman, who spearheaded congressional efforts to pass a resolution condemning the arrests.

In recent years, Congress has passed legislation banning U.S. firms from bidding on contracts in Iran and imposing restrictions on overseas businesses that have lucrative deals with Tehran. To be sure, Iran is already beginning to feel some financial pressure.

The World Bank this month reportedly put on hold preparations to provide \$200 million in loans to Iran to protest Tehran's arrest of the 13 Jews. World Bank officials postponed indefinitely a trip to Tehran to discuss the loans for sewer and health care projects, The Washington Post reported last week, citing unidentified bank officials.

Last year the World Bank approved some \$720 million in loans to Iran.

But if other countries continue to pursue warmer diplomatic and fiscal relations with Iran, does U.S. policy matter?

Not really, according to Middle East analysts.

"The American threats are of some utility, but more important is what the Europeans do," said Daniel Pipes, the editor of Middle East Quarterly.

"The United States looms large in terms of ideology and myth in Iran but is rather small in practical matters," he said, citing its low level of trade compared to Europe.

But if Iran needs American humanitarian aid, Congress and the Clinton administration might have some leverage.

Although no direct U.S. aid reaches Iran, the Clinton administration earlier this year approved limited humanitarian assistance, including American grain.

Last week Iran reported more than \$1 billion in crop losses as a result of one of the worst droughts to hit the area this century.

Schumer said he would seek to condition any future grain sales on the Jews' fate.

"We have to take a hard line," he said.

"We have to say, 'You have to at least show you can have some modicum of civility.'"

But not everyone thinks it is a good idea to completely isolate Iran.

Without some engagement, there would be nobody to plead with Tehran to release the Jewish prisoners, some analysts say. In a recent encounter here, Iranian journalists close to Khatami met with a Jewish organization, which asked not to be identified.

At the closed-door meeting hosted by Middle East Insight, the journalists said they believe the arrests of the Jews were an effort to thwart the president's policies.

No world pressure will lead to their release, the reporters said. And that is where the first major test of Clinton's policy of greater engagement with Iran lies.

"The harsh reality is that these 13 are being used as pawns between two warring political factions in Iran," Schumer said. "If Khatami can't deliver on this issue, then what is his reform movement about in the first place?"

□

JEWISH WORLD

Israeli envoy to Baltics resigns

Israel's ambassador to the Baltics resigned in the wake of a scandal he triggered by accusing Lithuania of a poor record in prosecuting suspected Nazi war criminals.

But it is not clear if the controversy is the cause of his resignation.

Ben Hur has served as Israel's envoy to Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia since 1996.

Rabbi gets Senate tribute

The U.S. Senate paid tribute to the late Rabbi Moshe Sherer, who headed Agudath Israel of America for more than 30 years.

Nearly 200 representatives from the Orthodox group gathered Tuesday with lawmakers as Sherer's son, Rabbi Shimshon Sherer, opened the Senate with a prayer, expressing the hope that his father's memory inspires members of the Senate "to find within their hearts an echo of his nobility of spirit, selfless devotion and compassion for all in need."

Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.) said Sherer was a "giant in our midst, whose counsel and wisdom will be missed by all of us who were privileged to enjoy his friendship."

Parent slams Maccabiah report

The father of one of the Australian athletes injured in the fatal bridge collapse at the 1997 Maccabiah Games in Israel called "shocking, hurtful and bordering on the farcical" the soon-to-be-released report on the tragedy issued by the Maccabiah World Union.

Colin Elterman, whose daughter, Sasha, is still recovering, said the report unfairly exonerates the world sports body. The report has already been issued to the victims and their families.

Four people were killed and dozens injured in the collapse, which occurred during the Games' Opening Ceremonies.

ADL blasts rap song

A record label's denial that a song by the rap group Public Enemy is anti-Semitic is "completely unacceptable," the Anti-Defamation League said last week.

The denial came after the ADL wrote to Atomic Pop Records complaining that "Swindler's Lust" contains "classic anti-Semitic code words" and blames Jews for the plight of underprivileged blacks.

The ADL also said it is "outrageous" that the song "denigrates the memory of Oskar Schindler in a 'profanity-laced diatribe.'"

The record company replied that the song contains "no anti-Semitic reference," adding that "art is always subject to interpretation."

Jewish groups: Muslim leader on U.S. panel condones terrorism

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The appointment of a controversial American Muslim leader to a counterterrorism commission has prompted a strong rebuke from Jewish officials.

House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.) earlier this month named Salam Al-Marayati to serve on the newly created National Commission on Terrorism, which will review policies aimed at preventing acts of terrorism directed at the United States.

Al-Marayati heads the Los Angeles-based Muslim Public Affairs Council, a group that critics say has tried to gain legitimacy in American public life while tacitly seeking to promote the interests of radical Islamic terrorism.

According to the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, Al-Marayati has made statements justifying or condoning terrorism, equating America's struggle for independence with Islamic fundamentalism and calling for a renewed Arab economic boycott of Israel.

"It's really a question of propriety here and whether the commission will be able to function, whether people will be able to feel free to talk in his presence, after taking the kinds of positions he has taken," said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents.

The 10-member commission, established by legislation passed last year, includes terrorism experts appointed by President Clinton and by congressional leaders. They include former CIA director James Woolsey and retired Gen. Wayne Downing. Former U.S. Rep. Jane Harman (D-Calif.) and New York businessman Maurice Sonnenberg, both of whom are Jewish, were also named to the panel.

Al-Marayati, reached by telephone in Los Angeles, took issue with the way Jewish officials have characterized him and his views.

"Those people either don't know me or are putting words in my mouth. They need to do more homework before coming up with statements like that," he said.

"People look to our statements from a narrow point of view, and it's that narrow-mindedness that is the cause of unwarranted apprehension," he said, adding that "Islam has no room for terrorism" and that his organization "has been on record as condemning terrorism."

While he acknowledged that his group has "made several statements that to many are controversial," he said "that only further enhances the point that we need more dialogue."

In addition to serving as executive director of the Muslim group, Al-Marayati has been active in the Democratic Party and has participated in events at the White House and State Department. He has also been involved in public service projects and in working to forge greater interfaith ties with Christian and Jewish groups.

Many of his public comments, however, have provided Jewish officials with a decidedly different perception. A March 1997 MPAC statement found on the group's Web site asserts that Israel's prime minister "bears the brunt of responsibility for the loss of innocent lives."

In a 1994 interview, Al-Marayati reportedly said, "Just as Hitler forged a conflict between Judaism and Christianity, apologists for Israel crave for Islam to be at odds with both Judaism and Christianity."

The minority leader's office was not aware of Al-Marayati's controversial statements before the appointment, said Sue Harvey, a spokeswoman for Gephardt.

"We have since been made aware of these concerns and have received assurance that he unequivocally opposes terrorism of any kind," she said, citing a letter Al-Marayati wrote to Gephardt on Monday.

"My sole desire to serve on the National Commission on Terrorism is to advance U.S. anti-terrorism efforts and the security of our nation and all of its citizens, both at home and abroad," Al-Marayati's letter states.

Although appointments to the commission require no confirmation, Al-Marayati still has to be investigated by the FBI in order to gain security clearance. □

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

Rabbi's letter highlights conflict among Jewish groups in Ukraine*By Lev Krichevsky*

MOSCOW (JTA) — Add Ukraine to the list of countries wracked by tensions among Judaism's different streams.

A letter recently issued by the office of Ukraine's top Orthodox rabbi is angering Reform Jewish leaders in the former Soviet republic — and in the United States. It is also spotlighting the strained relations between the Orthodox and Reform movements in some parts of the former Soviet Union.

The letter vehemently rejected claims by Reform Jews in Ukraine to confiscated synagogues that have yet to be returned by the government.

A 1992 decree from the Ukrainian government provides for the restitution of properties belonging to religious communities seized during Soviet rule. But it does not address how to resolve competing claims over such property.

The restitution process has been slow. Many local officials are reluctant to return such properties because of the difficulty in removing current occupants and because they fear being perceived as favoring Jews.

The letter signed by Rabbi Yaakov Bleich, chief rabbi of Kiev and Ukraine, states that the Reform movement, which was virtually non-existent in most of Ukraine until restrictions on religious freedom were lifted in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, has no legal right to synagogues that originally belonged to Orthodox Jews. The letter also sharply criticizes Reform Judaism for what the document calls an abandonment of Jewish law and the creation of "an undemanding religion."

"It is understandable that Orthodox Jews perceive these innovations with pain, especially the Jews in the former Soviet Union who lived with the faith of their grandfathers," the letter reads.

According to Bleich, the letter was prepared by his office in May at the request of an Orthodox synagogue in Crimea, a region in southwestern Ukraine.

Bleich says the letter was intended to inform members of that congregation about his viewpoint as chief rabbi on the issue of Reform Judaism in Ukraine.

But Reform leaders argue that whatever the original reason for the letter, the document could discredit the Reform movement in the eyes of the Ukrainian authorities. They insist that the letter was actually a reaction to requests from several Reform congregations for the return of synagogues in Crimea and that it reflects Bleich's fear of the popularity of the Reform movement in Ukraine.

Jewish leaders in Ukraine acknowledge that regardless of relations among Judaism's streams, the restitution of Jewish property depends on local officials.

"If authorities are inclined to return a synagogue, they would return it. If they are looking for excuses not to, they could find an excuse" in this letter, said Josef Zissels, one of the most prominent Jewish lay leaders in Ukraine.

Anatoly Gendin, a Jewish leader in Crimea who made the letter public, said he believed the letter was intended for Crimean authorities and that in fact he received a copy of it from an official with the Crimean government.

He said that now that the authorities had a letter signed by the nation's chief rabbi, they would be reluctant to give property back to Reform congregations.

Before the Jewish revival that has taken place in the former Soviet Union's breadbasket since the collapse of communism, most of Ukraine was unfamiliar with Reform Judaism. Among the exceptions were Odessa, a Black Sea port that was a pioneer of the 19th-century Jewish Enlightenment in Russia, and portions of western Ukraine.

A majority of Ukraine's largely assimilated Jewry remains indifferent to Judaism as a religion, but an increasing number of Jews — particularly younger Jews — has shown an interest in Reform Judaism in recent years. In Ukraine, the World Union for Progressive Judaism has created more than 20 congregations affiliated with the Progressive movement, as Reform Judaism is known in the former Soviet Union. Most of Ukraine's Reform congregations do not have buildings of their own and rent space for their services and other activities.

Last month, a Reform congregation in the small resort town of Evpatoria in the Crimean Peninsula received a 100-year-old synagogue confiscated by the Communist authorities some 70 years ago. Reform congregations in the towns of Alushta and Kerch, both in Crimea, have also laid claims to synagogue buildings.

All of the synagogues in dispute were built by Orthodox communities before the 1917 Bolshevik revolution. None of these towns, however, has an active Orthodox group and Jewish life there is concentrated around their nascent Reform congregations.

Boris Kutik, president of the Kiev-based Association of Progressive Jewish Congregations in Ukraine, said that as a result of the letter, Ukrainian officials might look upon members of Reform synagogues as "illegitimate Jews."

Meanwhile, a leading U.S. Reform rabbi called the letter by Bleich "outrageous and disturbing."

Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, the executive director of the Association of Reform Zionists of America, said the situation replicates a pattern in which Orthodox rabbis present themselves as representing an entire Jewish community.

"We've seen it in Israel, other parts of the world, now we see it in the former Soviet Union."

Bleich said he didn't want to make Reform Jews look illegitimate and that he wrote the letter as a reminder that "under Ukrainian restitution law, Reform congregations have no rights to take back buildings that formerly belonged to the Orthodox movement."

Kutik, who is a board member of Kiev's Jewish umbrella organization, which is headed by Bleich, disagrees.

"These buildings once belonged to the Jews of Ukraine. Now they should belong to their children and grandchildren," he said, adding that as Ukraine's chief rabbi, Bleich "should be concerned about all trends of Judaism and not about which synagogue a Jew goes to to pray."

While the situation created by the Bleich letter is the first example of an open confrontation between Orthodox and Reform Jews in the former Soviet Union, their relations have never been smooth.

Two years ago, the Chabad movement in Russia objected to the inclusion of Progressive communities in a nationwide Russian Jewish umbrella group. Chabad subsequently created another umbrella organization that embraces only congregations employing rabbis affiliated with the movement. □