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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

U.S. envoy's mission in doubt

The future of U.S. envoy Dennis Ross' peace mission is in doubt after he postponed his arrival in the Middle East. U.S. officials say Ross is delaying his arrival until Israel and the Palestinians work out ways to curb violence in the region.

Palestinian sources, however, say the shuttle mission was canceled altogether after President Clinton and Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat spoke by phone Tuesday night.

Palestinian Information Minister Yasser Abed Rabbo, citing Palestinian opposition to Clinton's proposals for a final peace deal, said Wednesday it makes little difference whether or not Ross visits.

Lauder pressed on rally actions

Opponents of Ronald Lauder's participation in a massive rally in Jerusalem on Monday are taking action against the chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

Twelve of the 54 organizations in the Conference of Presidents have signed a letter calling for a meeting of the umbrella organization to discuss Lauder's appearance at the rally, which was widely seen as critical of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's peace-making efforts. Lauder claimed he spoke as an individual, but he was identified in the media as the Conference chairman, creating the impression that the Conference opposes Barak's policies, the groups say.

The dozen groups also want Lauder to send a letter to the media and all Conference members, clarifying that he was not speaking on the Conference's behalf.

Reform urges Scout boycott

Reform Jewish leaders in the United States recommended that parents withdraw their children from Boy Scout chapters and that synagogues end their sponsorship of Scout troops.

The recommendation by the Reform movement's Joint Commission on Social Action, made in a Jan. 5 letter to congregations, is believed to be the strongest reaction yet to a U.S. Supreme Court decision last June allowing the Boy Scouts to exclude homosexuals.

The Boy Scouts' stance on homosexuals is "incompatible with our consistent belief that every individual — regardless of his or her sexual orientation — is created in the image of God," the letter said.

NEWS ANALYSIS

As Barak races election clock, Israelis ask what makes him tick

By Avi Machlis

JERUSALEM (JTA) — His standing may be slipping rapidly in the polls as Israel's Feb. 6 election approaches, but Prime Minister Ehud Barak continues plugging away at the peace process with a doggedness that has supporters and detractors alike pondering his motives.

Beyond his immediate electoral considerations — and it's not clear whether progress toward a peace deal that includes deep Israeli concessions would ultimately help or hurt Barak at the polls — observers say Barak is driven by a military-style sense of mission and an overweening ambition to stake a place in Israeli history as the leader who negotiated ultimate peace with the Palestinians.

Barak's willingness to make decisions on the country's most pressing existential issues — acting with a minority government and under the deadline of impending elections — has aroused intense criticism from opponents and even from left-wing academics who raise the specter of abuse of power.

Attorney General Elyakim Rubinstein became the latest in a line of prominent Israelis to criticize the premier's actions, firing off a letter to Barak last week questioning the legitimacy of trying to make history during an election period.

Recent opinion polls show Likud Party leader Ariel Sharon widening his lead over Barak to as much as 28 percentage points. Barak shrugs off the polls, and rejects any suggestion that he step aside at the last minute to allow former Prime Minister Shimon Peres — who stands a better chance against Sharon, according to the polls — to represent Labor.

Pundits increasingly say that Barak, who earned his stripes in the military on daring commando raids behind enemy lines, is on a suicide mission. Yet officials close to Barak brush off the attorney general's letter as politically motivated, and reject mounting criticism that he is trying to secure a peace deal simply to improve his chances of re-election.

"If Barak wanted to keep his seat, the easiest thing would be to bring Sharon into the government," said an official from the prime minister's campaign headquarters. "He is guided strictly by Israel's national and security interests and will bring any agreement to the people before signing.

"The prime minister is a man who does not bend under pressure," the official added. "The more pressure on him, the more rational he becomes."

After Barak resigned last month and triggered a snap election for prime minister, the conventional wisdom was that his only hope was to secure a historic peace agreement. But that logic may no longer hold. Clinton's proposals to divide Jerusalem and cede sovereignty over the Temple Mount appear increasingly unpalatable to Israelis, especially as the ongoing violence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip has shaken faith, even on the left, in the possibility of an "end to the conflict" with the Palestinians.

In recent days, sources say, Barak has despaired of reaching a peace agreement before the elections, and now is aiming just for a declaration by President Clinton summing up progress in the peace process to this point.

Also unclear are the personal and psychological factors motivating Barak. With a tradition of secrecy and centralization of power gleaned from decades in the army, Barak allows only a handful of trusted insiders into his counsel. However, from the analogies he uses and allusions to his role models, it appears that Barak dreams of

MIDEAST FOCUS

Minister meets with Arafat

Israeli Cabinet minister Amnon Lipkin-Shahak met with Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat in the Gaza Strip to discuss ways to reduce the ongoing violence. A day after their Tuesday night meeting, officials from both sides convened for further security discussions.

Barak says he won't step aside

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak rejected calls for him to step aside and let former Prime Minister Shimon Peres run as the Labor Party's candidate in the Feb. 6 election.

Barak's campaign took a hit Wednesday when a former top aide, Haim Mendel-Shaked, said Peres has a better chance of beating opposition leader Ariel Sharon.

Mendel-Shaked said he believed Barak had already decided to step aside for Peres but had not told anyone — a claim roundly denied by the Barak camp.

Sharon opens his campaign

Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon said he would make concessions for peace with the Palestinians, but nonetheless staked out positions that the Palestinian Authority has already rejected in negotiations.

In a speech opening his prime ministerial campaign, Sharon said Wednesday, "A government under my leadership will keep Jerusalem, the capital of Israel and the Jewish people, whole and united under Israeli sovereignty forever."

Violence persists in West Bank

Israeli troops imposed a curfew on the West Bank city of Hebron after shots were fired at a Jewish settler compound in the area. Also, Israeli troops fired shots and tear gas at a school in a West Bank village to break up a clash with Palestinian rock-throwers.

entering the pantheon of Israeli leaders — such as former Prime Ministers David Ben-Gurion and Yitzhak Rabin — who were visionary enough to read strategic realities years before their contemporaries, and valiant enough to stay the course despite their detractors.

"He's a very megalomaniacal person, and he really put into his head that he would be the one that signs the final agreement" with the Palestinians, Israeli journalist and historian Tom Segev said of Barak. "What really drives him is personal megalomania and an incredible amount of arrogance.

"That's what led him to make a historic mistake," Segev continued. "Rather than continue the Oslo road" of gradual agreements, Barak "put it into his head that he can reach a final settlement and try to impose it on" Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat.

Upon taking office in July 1999, Barak sought to redraw the rules of Middle Eastern diplomacy, dispensing with the extended and leisurely haggling characteristic of the Arab market in favor of strict deadlines that he believed would force Arab leaders to make peace forthwith or expose their intransigence.

Only one deadline — for an Israeli military withdrawal from Lebanon — was kept, and it is seen as one of the few incontrovertible successes of Barak's tenure. Other deadlines, in negotiations with Syria and the Palestinian Authority, proved ephemeral.

A gifted chess player, Barak has laid elaborate and far-sighted plans in both domestic Israeli politics and negotiations with the Arab world, but they contain one basic flaw: a misreading of his adversaries' intentions. Perhaps, some say, by resigning and calling quick elections, Barak sought to force Arafat to cease prevaricating and come to an agreement quickly, rather than face a more stubborn, Likud-led government.

If so, that logic also appeared to be unraveling, as Arafat waited so long to respond to a late December American peace proposal that he effectively killed it.

"There will be no agreement signed before elections," said Yaron Ezrahi, a political science professor at the Hebrew University and the Israel Democracy Institute. "This election will either be a referendum on the outline of a peace agreement or it will be an election on the question of who should lead the country in the wake of the collapse of the peace process."

Some political analysts argue that the only hope for Barak is to secure at least a return to the negotiating table. He then could try to convince Israeli voters he was not willing to make peace at any price and had not crossed any of his "red lines," since he had not signed a formal agreement to divide Jerusalem.

Although a long shot, such a strategy could at least let Barak argue that he is making a serious effort to end the conflict, in contrast to Sharon, who has said a final agreement is impossible in the foreseeable future.

"Barak needs some sort of perception that there is hope, that would force Sharon to put up an alternative policy," said Joel Peters, a professor of political science at Ben-Gurion University in Beersheva. "He will want to create an atmosphere that shows there is something going on."

The official at Barak's campaign headquarters confirmed that this is a "realistic" strategy and is under consideration.

Then again, Barak may have little choice but to press ahead with peace negotiations if he wishes to safeguard Israel's reputation in the world. Neither he nor Arafat wants to bear international blame for causing the peace process to collapse.

Furthermore, though Clinton may now have little chance of securing his legacy as the man who brought peace to the Middle East, he does not want his tenure to end on Jan. 20 in disaster.

Whatever Barak's motivations, polls continue to indicate that Israelis are prepared to punish him harshly less than two years after they catapulted him to power.

With little going Barak's way, another official in the Prime Minister's Office said Barak must employ negative campaigning against Sharon.

"The only strategy now is to scare the people," the official said.

"They are trying to scare the Arabs into voting Barak by reminding them of Sharon's role in the Sabra and Shatila massacres" during the 1982 Lebanon War, "and trying to scare the people by saying the only alternative to talks is a deterioration toward an all-out war." □



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JEWISH WORLD

U.S.-Austrian deal expected

The United States and Austria said they are confident they can wrap up an agreement next week for Austrian payments to Holocaust survivors whose property was stolen by the Nazis.

After meeting Wednesday with Austrian negotiators in Vienna, U.S. Deputy Treasury Secretary Stuart Eizenstat said Austria had significantly increased the offer it made last month.

Eizenstat, who is hoping to close a deal before President Clinton leaves office, said victims' representatives still had not approved the latest proposals.

Nazi collaborator appeals

A convicted French Nazi collaborator appealed to the European Court of Human Rights against his imprisonment. Maurice Papon is charging that he is subject to inhumane treatment, his lawyer said Wednesday.

Papon, 90, is serving a 10-year prison sentence for helping deport 1,500 Jews to Nazi death camps.

MTV focuses on hate crimes

MTV will air 18 commercial-free hours, beginning Wednesday evening, of celebrities reading accounts of hate crimes in the United States.

The programming on the U.S. music-video channel is part of MTV's year-long anti-discrimination campaign.

S.F. rabbi sentenced

A San Francisco rabbi who ran a now-defunct nonprofit organization was sentenced recently to three years' probation, nine months in a halfway house and a course in American government, for illegally structuring \$1.7 million in deposits to avoid federal reporting requirements.

Bentzion Pil, an immigrant from Uzbekistan, could have gotten up to two years in jail, but the judge said he gave a lesser sentence because of the absence of embezzlement. Pil, who pleaded guilty to the charges, until 1997 ran the Jewish Education Center, which solicited donations of cars ostensibly destined for immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Instead, the center sold many of the cars at auction.

Canadian gallery exec apologizes

The executive director of a Canadian art gallery apologized for saying that the Nazis did the world a service by pillaging art during World War II.

Ian Lumsden, executive director of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, had said Nazi looting saved important artworks from destruction and brought them into the public domain. A gallery official said earlier this month that Lumsden plans to write "a letter of clarification" to the Canadian Jewish Congress.

Study: Jews more wary of religion in public life than other Americans

By Sharon Samber

WASHINGTON (JTA) — American Jews are wary of religion's role in politics and reluctant to accept any increased influence of religion in public life, a new study shows.

Following a presidential campaign that often threw religion into the spotlight, the study seems to buttress long-held views that Jews are still concerned about the negative consequences of heightened religiosity in American public life.

The findings counter the beliefs of the general public and even the title of the study, "For Goodness' Sake: Why So Many Want Religion to Play a Greater Role in American Life."

The study, conducted by Public Agenda, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization, and funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, examined what 1,507 respondents think about religion in politics, schools and social settings.

The study included a special focus on American Jews. A breakdown of results was not available for Muslims or most Christian denominations.

Most Americans believe religion can help cure many societal ills. But the survey's respondents also acknowledged that society is diverse and people should be careful about how they bring religion into the public sphere.

"If you're a religious minority, that's good news," said Steve Farkas, director of research for Public Agenda.

Farkas said there were not "a whole lot of surprises" in the responses from American Jews. Among the findings:

- Only 14 percent of Jews — but nearly half the general public — believe elected officials would make better laws and policy decisions if more of them were deeply religious.

- Sixty percent of Jews disagree with the idea that the Supreme Court, which has sought to remove religion from public institutions, has become hostile toward religion. Nearly the same percentage of the general public consider the court hostile toward religion. Among one group — evangelical Christians — 84 percent of respondents said Satan is behind the fight against religion in public life.

- Public schools should avoid prayer or a moment of silence, 60 percent of Jews said. More than half the general public views a moment of silence as a good compromise.

The vast majority of Jewish respondents said the separation of church and state is one of the most important reasons for the success of the American political system.

That finding agrees with a study released in June that found that most American Jews continue to believe the wall separating church and state should be high, and that Jews are significantly more "separationist" than non-Jews.

The earlier study was part of a larger project, "Jews and the American Public Square," being conducted by the Philadelphia-based Center for Jewish Community Studies. The Pew Charitable Trusts also funded that project.

Another church-state separation issue that is problematic for Jews is government funding of faith-based organizations, known as charitable choice. Jews are wary of charitable choice, a favorite project of President-elect George W. Bush.

Only 19 percent of Jews think it is a good idea for government to fund religious groups that provide social services; 44 percent think it is a good idea if the programs don't promote religious messages; and 36 percent say it is a bad idea altogether.

At a panel discussion on the survey on Wednesday, experts said people have just started to think about issues like charitable choice and are not yet fully engaged.

Surprising Farkas was the finding that 80 percent of Jewish respondents believe Jews must be on guard because anti-Semitism could become a powerful force in America. A little over half of the general public agreed.

The total sample of Jewish respondents for the survey was 200. That included respondents who identified themselves as "Jewish," and those who said they had "no religion" but had one or two Jewish parents. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**New House international chairman better known for domestic policy***By Sharon Samber*

WASHINGTON (JTA)— A veteran representative not known for his expertise on the Middle East will head the House of Representatives' International Relations Committee.

Rep. Henry Hyde (R-Ill.), whose domestic priorities have run up against a number of Jewish groups, will hold the chairmanship of a committee that is always closely watched by Jewish organizations.

But while Hyde may not be an expert on Israel issues, his voting record on aid to the Jewish state is strong. Plus, he supported funding for the 1998 Israeli-Palestinian peace accord reached at the Wye Plantation.

In 1992, Hyde urged President Bush not to use loan guarantees to pressure Israel against building new settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

In 1995, he voted to move the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem. However, a waiver in that law allowed President Clinton to postpone the move.

In the past year, he voted to penalize the Palestinian Authority if it unilaterally declared a state, and he blamed the Palestinians for the recent violence.

Hyde will be a quick study on the issues, predicts Richard Foltin, the American Jewish Committee's legislative director.

Foltin indicated Hyde was a fair and capable chairman of the Judiciary Committee and listened to diverse points of views.

"He's a mensch," Foltin said.

The AJCommittee expects to find more common ground with Hyde on international issues than they did on domestic issues.

Hyde was not granted a waiver to remain in charge of the Judiciary committee, a place where he was sometimes at odds with Jewish organizations on domestic issues, particularly abortion.

Hyde has met with local Jewish community organizations on issues related to Israel and had a cordial and open relationship with the community, according to Michael Kotzin, executive vice president of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago and a former Jewish Community Relations Council director.

In 1996, Hyde chaired long and arduous hearings on anti-terrorism legislation.

"He navigated very difficult political terrain and did a good job balancing concerns of both parties," said Stacy Burdett, assistant director of government and national affairs office for the Anti-Defamation League.

Hyde is thought to be generally supportive of the Jewish state, but his positions on Middle East issues are unknown, a House staffer said.

Hyde's chairmanship may mean that Middle East issues will not get a high profile on the committee, the staffer added.

There is still a chance that a Middle East subcommittee could be added. Rep. Benjamin Gilman (R-N.Y.), the former international relations chairman and a strong advocate for Israel, is thought to want to maintain a position of leadership on Middle East issues and could lead such a body.

Gilman was forced to give up his chairmanship because the House imposed a six-year term limit on chairmen.

Another victim of term limits was Rep. Sonny Callahan (R-Ala.), who headed up the House Appropriations subcommittee on foreign operations, which decides on U.S. aid to Israel. Callahan worried some Jewish groups this past year when he threatened to hold up part of Israel's aid package because of a proposed Israeli sale of an airborne early warning system to China.

In the end, Israel canceled the sale.

Callahan's replacement will be Jim Kolbe (R-Ariz.).

Like Hyde, Kolbe is thought to be generally supportive of Israel, but Middle East issues are not high on his resume.

Kolbe consistently voted for aid to Israel and against amendments to cut Israel aid packages.

He, too, voted to punish the Palestinian Authority if it unilaterally declared a state.

"Neither individual has a tremendous amount of expertise in foreign affairs; however, now that they have been assigned these particular committees, we expect they will quickly immerse themselves in the details of the issues we follow," said Kenneth Bricker, a spokesman for the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.

It is very common for a new chairman to have to learn the issues, Bricker added.

The ranking Democrats on the two committees are Rep. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.) and Rep. Nita Lowey (D-N.Y.), both strong supporters of Israel.

Another chairmanship watched closely by Jewish organizations is the House Judiciary Committee, where Rep. James Sensenbrenner (R-Wis.) will soon take the helm.

Crossing Sensenbrenner's desk will be many issues that are important to the Jewish community, including immigration, hate crimes and separation of church and state.

Jewish groups, however, do not have that much to say about him.

Sensenbrenner was chairman of the Science Committee, and Jewish groups have not had much contact with him.

Conflicts could arise, though. Sensenbrenner's conservative record includes support for charitable choice, which allows religious institutions to bid for government social service contracts, and a constitutional amendment for school prayer.

Money for nursing homes and home health care goes through the House Ways and Means Committee, and the United Jewish Communities, the umbrella organization for local Jewish federations, is cautiously optimistic about that committee's new chairman.

Rep. William Thomas (R-Calif.) has a background in health care issues and he supported legislation that allows elderly Jews enrolled in managed health care programs to return to their health care home community after hospitalization.

Meanwhile, in the Senate the fight for committee equality turned out to be something of a victory for Democrats, though the Republicans will maintain the majority and operating control of the Senate floor.

With a 50-50 split in the Senate, Democrats will receive equal representation on the Senate's 19 committees, but some guarantees were worked out so that Republicans could still have a voting advantage in case of a tie in committee votes.

Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) will maintain the chairmanship of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) will continue to head the Judiciary Committee. □