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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Report: Envoy tells Israel to talk

A U.S. envoy reportedly recommended that Israeli officials give up on their demand for seven days of quiet before cease-fire talks with the Palestinians.

Anthony Zinni made the comments in talks Thursday with Israeli security officials, according to the Jerusalem Post.

Zinni is scheduled to meet separately with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat on Friday. Zinni is in Israel for his second attempt at reducing Israeli-Palestinian tensions.

Israeli troops withdraw

Israel pulled troops out of the West Bank cities of Jenin, Nablus and part of Ramallah.

A blockade was also lifted around the cities of Hebron and Kalkilya.

The steps were taken ahead of Thursday's arrival of Anthony Zinni.

Further measures were planned, including pulling back tanks from areas of friction.

The United States called the moves a "positive step."

Peres unpopular with immigrants

Russian immigrants in Israel have a less favorable view of Shimon Peres than of Yasser Arafat.

Some 50 percent of immigrants from the former Soviet Union in a new poll said the Israeli foreign minister had the most negative influence on Israeli life in 2001, while 32 percent chose the Palestinian leader.

Sixty percent of respondents said Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon had the most positive influence on Israel in 2001.

British store drops boycott

A British department store ended its boycott of products that are made in the West Bank and Golan Heights.

A spokeswoman for Selfridge's said the boycott had only been imposed to protect holiday shoppers after pro-Palestinian demonstrations outside the chain's London store.

Israel's ambassador to Britain praised the lifting of the boycott.

"Nothing will ever be achieved for the Palestinians this way," Zvi Stauber said.

NEWS ANALYSIS

As Americans criticize Arab world, activists ponder new PR campaign

By Michael J. Jordan

NEW YORK (JTA) — Facing increasingly hostile American attitudes toward the Arab world since Sept. 11, Arab American activists are talking of adopting a public relations strategy similar to the "hasbarah" campaign of pro-Israel advocates.

Hasbarah is a Hebrew term that means part explanation, part public relations — and part propaganda.

Arab American activists say their brethren overseas could use a bit of it: A new Zogby International poll indicates that as Americans struggle to understand why they were attacked on Sept. 11, a growing number are lashing out at ostensible U.S. allies in the Arab Middle East like Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Asked about Egypt, the largest recipient of U.S. aid after Israel, 38 percent of respondents indicated a favorable view, while 34 percent held a negative view. That's down from 64 percent who had a favorable view of Egypt in 1993, when the Oslo peace process began.

The numbers are worse for Saudi Arabia, which has hosted U.S. troops since the Gulf War: Only 24 percent of Americans have a favorable view of the sheikdom, while a resounding 58 percent have negative views, according to the Zogby poll.

To counter the onslaught of bad press — and what some hint is a hidden Jewish agenda to discredit Egypt and Saudi Arabia — activists say they must hit the talk shows and opinion pages. They also encourage spokesmen from the Arab world to take their case directly to the American people, not just to the American government.

"Right now, the sense is that the Arabs are not good allies, so there should be a more active and vibrant PR coming out of the moderate Arab states," said John Zogby, president of the polling firm and himself an Arab American activist of Lebanese Christian descent.

"The Arabs should be stating the difficulties they have, that leaning so heavily toward the U.S. opens up the possibility of fundamentalist activity within their borders," he said. "I think that story has to be told."

U.S. pundits now blame the Saudi regime for the flourishing fundamentalist movement, as countless young men seek a spiritual refuge from political repression and economic deprivation.

Zogby's brother James, president of the Arab American Institute — which the brothers co-founded — also says the problem is mainly one of public relations.

"The problem is that the Egyptians and Saudis are being defined by groups not supportive of the Arab-U.S. relationship, who write the Saudis aren't cooperating with this, the Egyptians haven't done that," James Zogby said.

He identified the responsible groups as "neo-conservatives," "the Christian right," and "some groups in the Jewish community."

"These canards have stuck in the public craw and must be responded to in the same public venues in which they're made," Zogby said.

Jewish leaders reject the idea of a concerted, Jewish-led campaign against Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

"These countries have always been largely immune from scrutiny for various reasons, like concern for their stability. What exposes them is that the 19 terrorists came from those countries, and the media have finally begun to look at a reality that all along has gotten minor mention, including the diatribes and incitement against the U.S. and their governments' failure to act," said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israel arrests Palestinians

Israeli forces arrested four suspected terrorists in the West Bank.

In addition to the arrests of the suspected Islamic Jihad members in the Palestinian-controlled part of Hebron, a suspected Hamas member was arrested near the West Bank city of Tulkarm.

Ethiopian immigrants struggling

Ethiopian immigrant students in Israel score much worse on high school matriculation exams than their Israeli-born counterparts.

Seventy percent of Ethiopians take the exams and 29.6 percent pass, while 79 percent of all Israeli students take the exams and 52 percent pass, according to numbers released by the Central Bureau of Statistics.

Eighty-five percent of students from the former Soviet Union take the exams and 57 percent pass.

Israeli objectors jailed

Three more Israelis were jailed for refusing to serve in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Thirty-six Israeli army reservists have been given jail terms for refusing to serve in the territories during the current intifada.

The three reservists were given sentences ranging from 18 to 30 days in military prison.

Jericho casino owners sue

The owners of the now-defunct casino in Jericho are suing an insurance company for losses.

Austria Casinos International is seeking \$45 million from a Palestinian insurance company for losses incurred because of violence.

Israelis constituted virtually the entire clientele of the casino, which opened in the West Bank in 1998.

The casino closed shortly after the Palestinian uprising began.

the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. "This is the truth finally coming out, and reality catching up with itself."

Observers say it's too early to tell whether Americans' increasingly dim view of the Arab world is a blip in U.S.-Arab relations, or the start of a trend.

They dispute the notion that Islam or the general Muslim world is at fault for Sept. 11, but say if the recent media criticism of Egypt and Saudi Arabia continues unabated, it may bring about the "clash of civilizations" — pitting Islam against the West — prophesied by the scholar Samuel Huntington.

It was little more than a year ago that the political fortunes of Arab and Muslim Americans seemed to be on the rise.

During the 2000 U.S. presidential campaign, American Jewish leaders noted with concern — and a touch of admiration — the rising political maturity, savvy and influence of the Arab American community. But the Sept. 11 attacks have sent the community reeling, forcing it to fend off hate crimes, racial profiling and mass arrests.

Not that Americans are projecting their antipathy for the Arab world onto Arab Americans. Indeed, since President Bush's public embrace of Arab and Muslim Americans and his call not to impose collective guilt, Zogby International says Americans' positive sentiment toward Arab Americans is at an all-time high, with nearly two-thirds offering favorable responses, John Zogby said.

Views of the Arab world, though, are a different story.

In the weeks following Sept. 11, Americans asked, "Why do they hate us?" The Arab world and Arab Americans were quick to cite the U.S. troop presence in Saudi Arabia, U.S.-backed sanctions against Iraq, the economic and cultural ramifications of globalization — and of course, Israeli treatment of Palestinians, which the Arab world believes carries America's endorsement.

Since then, U.S. reporters in the field and pundits in New York and Washington have turned their attention to the two countries that bred most of the suicide hijackers — Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

The heightened scrutiny has made for lousy PR and has elicited strong protests from Egypt and Saudi Arabia — which have lashed out, explicitly or implicitly, at world Jewry and its alleged stranglehold on international media.

Zogby polled 1,004 Americans, with a 3.2 percent margin of error.

Respondents weren't asked this time to explain their negative views of Saudi Arabia and Egypt. In an October poll by Zogby, the most common reasons given were the two countries' "relation to the terrorists," "don't know where they stand," "don't trust them" and "their government."

As for Israel, the Jewish state had a favorable rating of 59 percent, a number consistent with previous results. Its negative rating, however, has doubled since Sept. 11, from 14 percent to 28 percent. The poll did not ask respondents to explain why.

The Palestinian Authority, which traditionally garners low marks, is seen favorably by only 10 percent of the U.S. public, and negatively by 72 percent in the poll.

For both Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the recent poll numbers are the worst Zogby International has ever recorded, John Zogby said. He and others lay much of the blame at the media's door, but a Jewish leader credits the media for telling it like it is.

"These problems are not being manufactured by the media; we've said for a long time there are problems with extremism, anti-Semitism and anti-Americanism in the Arab and Muslim world," said Martin Raffel, associate executive director of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs. "If there's growing recognition that these problems exist, we're happy with that. But from our perspective, we'd much rather see these countries move to address these problems seriously than to see hostile American attitudes toward them."

Hussein Ibish, communications director for the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, acknowledged that "some criticism is warranted, and a very serious discussion needs to take place about the lack of democracy and openness in the Arab world."

At the same time, he said, Americans should also be made aware of their government's role in shaping the policies of various Arab regimes. "There are loud and prominent voices in America and the Arab world that cast these events in terms of a clash of civilizations, which could become a self-fulfilling prophecy," he said. "I feel the need for some radical honesty about the failings of both Arabs and Americans, of the form that will probably lose us friends from both sides." □



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JEWISH WORLD

HIAS grants awarded

The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society awarded more than \$1 million in grants to refugee resettlement agencies for 2002.

The awards were made to agencies proposing innovative programs to benefit refugees of all ages. The HIAS Resettlement Initiative Grants will go to 37 organizations across the United States.

Jewish terror reference removed

Scholastic removed a line from its Web site stating that the Jews who fought the Romans were the world's first terrorists.

The reference was contained in the children's publication "History of Terrorism." An editor with the company said the line was taken out because further research could not substantiate the claim.

Rabbis visit jailed American

Two U.S. rabbis will visit Lori Berenson in her Peruvian prison.

Rabbis Balfour Brickner and Josh Saltzman, along with Christian clerics, will travel to Peru this week to see the jailed American Jewish woman, according to New York's Jewish Week.

Berenson, 32, is serving a 20-year prison term after being convicted of collaborating with leftist terrorists against the Peruvian government.

Berenson has recently complained of physical abuse in the prison.

Reconstructionists set up camp

The Reconstructionist movement is opening its first summer camp in June.

Camp JRF, located 45 miles from Chicago, will offer a sleep-away camp program for children from fifth to seventh grades. The camp will observe Shabbat and kashrut and will offer a range of activities.

Rabbi comes in from the cold

A New York rabbi failed to set the record for remaining inside an ice hut.

Rabbi Abraham Abraham, a senior citizen, emerged from his ice hut last Friday in order to prepare for Shabbat.

Abraham's 54 hours and 54 minutes fell short of the record set by Wim Hof, who lived in a tube of ice cubes for more than 60 hours.

Abraham was fully dressed and did not come into contact with the ice, but said the temperature inside his hut hovered around 10 degrees. He said he neither ate nor slept during his time in the walk-in freezer.

A spokesman for Abraham told the New York Jewish Week that the stunt, dedicated to Sept. 11 victims, was also designed to show the world that Jews are "strong physically and mentally."

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

Jewish politician's slam on Israel splits S. African Jewish community

By Moira Schneider

CAPE TOWN (JTA) — A South African Jewish politician has caused a storm by calling for Israel's withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza Strip — and disparaging Jews who disagree.

At a public meeting Dec. 7, Cabinet minister Ronnie Kasrils launched a petition calling for people "of Jewish descent" to support "justice for Palestine."

Kasrils addressed a mixed group of around 50 supporters under the banner "Not In My Name" at the District Six Museum, which is named for an area that was home to forced removals of blacks under the apartheid government. He lashed out at those in the Jewish community who had been critical of his stance, labeling them "conservative" and "reactionary."

"The Declaration is hardly a radical position, it's a universally adopted one. Our argument is not dealt with by our detractors in South Africa, not even by the learned rabbis of the Beit Din," or rabbinical court, he said. "Instead they denounce us in terms of personal vilification."

Kasrils' call, which attempts to link the suffering of the Palestinians to the treatment of black South Africans under apartheid, is creating public rifts in what normally is a united Jewish community.

Mervyn Smith, immediate past president of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, said he has no problem with the issue being aired publicly — and believes the controversy merely has united the community in opposition to Kasrils and his cause.

"I just question why, of all the issues that face South Africa, such massive public prevalence should be given in the media to the South African Jewish attitude toward the Middle East conflict," Smith said. "The publicity has been relentlessly driven by Kasrils."

Responding to the criticisms, Kasrils said at the rally, "The honest and critical debate which was once the hallmark of this Jewish community has withered away under the stifling leadership of conservatives and reactionaries."

"We're neither anti-Israeli nor anti-Jewish. We call for justice and fairness for both" Israelis and Palestinians, Kasrils continued. "We unreservedly condemn terrorism in all its forms, whether by the Israeli government, Palestinian suicide bombers or the merciless killings of people in mosques by Jewish settlers."

Kasrils drew a parallel between his supporters and Jews who had participated in the struggle against apartheid.

"We may be a minority at present, but change is often started thus: South African history is proof of that," Kasrils said. "The very tiny fraction of us who stood up" in the anti-apartheid struggle "well know how we were shunned by our Jewish community."

Smith, however, expressed cynicism about Kasrils' motives.

"What he has done is linked his current campaign simplistically to his years as an apartheid fighter, but the two issues are separate," Smith said. "There's little doubt amongst the community that it is an overt attempt to gain support amongst the Muslim community for Kasrils and his party."

"The debate on the role of the Jewish community during apartheid is a difficult one," he continued. "Although the community, like most whites, really did fail the apartheid struggle, there were many Jews who did fight against apartheid."

In the 1980s, the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, particularly in Cape Town, spoke out very strongly against apartheid, Smith noted.

In addition, Smith said, Kasrils has misrepresented the Jewish community's position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. "It is preposterous to suggest that the Jewish community is against dialogue and debate on the Middle East issue," Smith said.

The debate continues to rage in both the editorial and letters pages of the mainstream and Jewish press.

Despite the uproar, Smith does not think the incident will change the face of South African Jewry. In fact, he said, "I feel that the effect of the Kasrils campaign has been to unite the community in the face of unfair and blatantly hostile attacks on Israel, and on the community itself." □

WJC's future is unclear as changes shake up group

By Eric J. Greenberg
New York Jewish Week



NEW YORK (JTA) — The World Jewish Congress, the aggressive international organization that led the multibillion-dollar fight for Holocaust restitution, is undergoing dramatic changes that raise questions about the future of the group, its mission, and where its seat of power will be located.

For the first time in its 60-year history the post of secretary-general — the top paid position — will be based in Jerusalem.

Current New York-based Secretary-General Israel Singer is stepping down from the post he has held for the last 15 years.

His deputy, Elan Steinberg, who as WJC executive director was the second-ranking paid professional, is leaving the group after 27 years because, according to sources, he was not tapped to replace Singer. (Steinberg denies this.)

With Jewish philanthropist Edgar Bronfman, who has been WJC president for the last 20 years, the trio has taken on Swiss banks, the Vatican, the German government and former Austrian President Kurt Waldheim on Holocaust-related issues of restitution and the role of the Catholic Church during World War II.

Bronfman, 72, who in October was elected to a fifth five-year term as WJC president, has said he intends to step down in the next two years, according to several WJC officials. Bronfman originally had decided not to run again, said several WJC sources, speaking on condition of anonymity.

They said Bronfman was persuaded to seek a new term in order to block the potential candidacy of fellow billionaire Ronald Lauder, the cosmetics heir and president of the Jewish National Fund who was lobbying to become the next WJC president.

The sources said Bronfman and some other top WJC officials did not feel Lauder would be able to complete to their satisfaction the Holocaust restitution projects that Bronfman began.

"It's pretty clear he [Bronfman] did not want to entrust this with Lauder," said a source who requested anonymity.

Neither Bronfman nor Lauder could be reached for comment. Singer declined to discuss the matter.

Meanwhile, the man elected to replace Singer, Avi Beker, WJC's director of international affairs, will be based in Jerusalem.

It was not clear this week whether the WJC will replace Singer or Steinberg in the New York office, raising questions about the future of the American section of the WJC, which claims to represent Jewish communities in 80 countries.

"I don't know if there will be a paid professional here," Steinberg said.

"It's too early to tell," Singer said.

One Jewish activist said he was worried about the changes.

"For me the biggest concern is what does this mean for the future of the World Jewish Congress?" said Neal Sher, former head of AIPAC, the nation's top pro-Israel lobby, and former head of the Justice Department's Nazi-prosecuting Office of Special Investigations.

Sher contended that the myriad battles over Holocaust restitution that the WJC has fought over the last six years, "could only have been done from the United States."

But WJC senior vice president Isidore Leibler hailed the move to Jerusalem because it symbolically places Israel front and center in the mission of the worldwide group, where, he said, it belongs.

"I believe it is highly timely and I hope it will mean the WJC will recognize more than in the past the need to back Israel," said Leibler, who moved to Jerusalem some years ago from Australia. "I hope helping Israel will be the major function as opposed to all other things [the group] is involved in ... because we are going through an existential struggle in Israel."

The WJC, formed in 1936, seeks to "intensify bonds of world Jewry with Israel and strengthen solidarity among Jews everywhere and secure their rights, status and interests as individuals and communities," according to the American Jewish Year Book. Some observers say the last two decades it was largely the fiefdom of Bronfman, who revitalized the group founded by Rabbi Stephen Wise and Nachum Goldmann.

Bronfman gave it financial clout and brought in Singer and Steinberg to run the operation, which regained headlines with its leadership role in the restitution issue after years of back-channel diplomatic work in the former Soviet Union and with the Vatican.

Singer told The Jewish Week that the power of the WJC will be split in two: the administrative center will be in Jerusalem while the political center will "remain in the Diaspora," where, it appears, he and Bronfman will continue to dominate.

Singer said while he is indeed leaving his paid position "within weeks," he expects to still be the No. 2 man at WJC, after Bronfman. He said he will be the lay chairman of a new seven-person WJC executive operating committee.

"I'm not leaving. I have been elevated to the point that I'm No. 2 in the hierarchy," he said.

Singer said that as chairman of the new operating committee, he will direct the professional staff of the WJC. "Israel Singer is here and more important than he was before," he said at one point. "I'm not going away. The caterpillar has become a butterfly. He's been transformed."

He said the new secretary-general, Beker, will report to him. But some balked at that notion.

"There's a tradition that the secretary-general is not just an employee of the WJC, and that's been respected by previous representatives," said Leibler. "Singer had those rights himself, and I would hope that he will provide Avi Beker with the same framework of autonomy that he enjoyed himself."

Regarding Steinberg, Singer said: "I thought that Elan was the most gifted person I ever worked with. I will value his counsel and I will call on him as often as he will be available."

Steinberg, who has worked for the WJC for 27 years, denied that he sought the secretary-general job.

He was elected to the new lay post of executive vice president in October. He had served as WJC executive director for 15 years.

Steinberg said he was leaving his paid position as Singer's deputy because the team he had been working with — Singer and Bronfman — was also leaving.

Told that it appeared that both Bronfman and Singer were staying on, Steinberg said he wanted to leave on top. He said he had a "very good offer" from a public relations firm in the area of financial consulting.

Said Singer: "I believe the Jewish world is in grave danger, and this is not a job for somebody to be an administrator but someone who can move around" the globe.

Singer, a former City University of New York professor, said he intends to teach courses in Israel, Germany and the United States.

He said he also has other business ventures and Jewish interfaith projects he will be pursuing. □