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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

White House backs Israel rally

The White House voiced support for Monday's Israel solidarity rally in Washington.

"I think that the march yesterday is another sign of the important passions that people feel on this issue," White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said Tuesday, adding that President Bush "has been very clear that Israel has no better, greater friend than the United States."

Fleischer also spoke about Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, who was booed at the rally when he referred in his speech to Palestinian suffering and the eventual creation of a Palestinian state. Fleischer said Wolfowitz "was very well-received for virtually everything he said," minus "one instance, one exception," and that the outburst reflected the "deep passions that run on all sides of this issue."

Powell extends trip

U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell extended his Middle East mission by at least another day. Powell, who said he is optimistic about reaching a cease-fire, met for about one hour Tuesday with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, their third session since last Friday.

Powell plans to see Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat for a second time Wednesday

Israeli troops briefly entered the West Bank city of Tulkarm on Tuesday to round-up wanted Palestinians. The army described the operation as "limited," and the troops withdrew after detaining several Palestinians.

Reform victorious in Zionist vote

Led by the Reform movement, the three largest religious streams garnered most of the votes in the American Zionist elections. Votes translate into seats at the World Zionist Congress, which mean influence over the \$350 million budget of the Jewish Agency for Israel.

ARZA/World Union, the Zionist arm of the Reform and Reconstructionist movements, won 61 delegates. This was the combined number won by the Conservative movement's MERCAZ USA, which won 32 seats, and the Orthodox-supported Religious Zionist Movement, which took 29. The Religious Zionist Movement nearly doubled its numbers from the last election, five years ago. [Page 3]

NEWS ANALYSIS

Pro-Israel demonstrators sent mixed messages to Bush team

By Matthew E. Berger

WASHINGTON (JTA) — One message from this week's rally at the Capitol was clear — solidarity with the State of Israel and its people.

Much less clear was the message to the Bush administration.

Signs, speakers and more than 100,000 demonstrators touted support for the U.S. war on terrorism. But few expressed support for Secretary of State Colin Powell's current mission in the Middle East, his meetings with Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat and the Bush administration's call for Israel to end its military incursions into the West Bank.

A handful of U.S. senators and non-Jewish political leaders mentioned the Powell mission. American Jewish and Israeli leaders skirted it.

But while the Jewish leadership tried to stick to positive tones, a State Department official said the lasting image of the rally will be the negative response to the Bush administration's sole representative, who spoke from the administration's playbook.

Paul Wolfowitz, the deputy secretary of defense who is considered one of Israel's staunchest advocates in the administration, was drowned out by chants of "Down with Arafat" and at times booed when he spoke of an eventual Palestinian state and the death of innocent Palestinians.

"The fact that Paul Wolfowitz is booed for talking about the sufferings of innocent Palestinians in many ways reinforces the deep divide between many people in government — even those sympathetic to Israel — and the pro-Israel community," said a State Department official.

But the real question is what impact, if any, the rally will have on administration policy. The Bush administration is engaged in a delicate balancing act, trying to walk a fine line between supporting Israel's position — that its offensive in the territories is part of the U.S. global war on terrorism — and asking Israel to withdraw its forces and return to political negotiations with the Palestinians.

Within the administration, the response appears mixed.

One State Department official said he did not think the Powell team was about to change course because of the rally. "Given his immersion in this problem," the official said of Powell, "I am not sure he is worrying about what tens of thousands of people gathering on a spring day are saying."

Others in the administration, however, said policy may not change, but the numbers that turned out can't be ignored. "This is not going to change policy because policy is not based on what's popular," said a Bush administration official.

But he added, "We hear so much from Jewish leaders, to see that many Jews turn out for this will just speak volumes."

When deciding to go ahead with the rally, members of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations differed over what the message should be.

The main focus was to send a strong message to the Israeli and American public that American Jews support Israel.

But the rally was also seen as a golden opportunity to send a message about where Jewish Americans want U.S. foreign policy in the region to head.

"Doing an event like this while a decision-making process is going on is key to the fact that the event is going to affect policy," said one American Jewish official. He and others also noted the wide coverage the event received in the mainstream media.

Organizers tried to find a cohesive message that both dovish and hawkish groups

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israel remembers fallen soldiers

Israel marked Remembrance Day for those who fell in defense of the country. The nation came to a standstill as a two-minute siren in memory of the fallen was sounded Tuesday. The siren was followed by ceremonies at 42 military cemeteries.

Since the beginning of the Zionist settlement of Israel in 1860, 21,182 people have fallen defending the ideal of a Jewish state. Remembrance Day also honors the memories of some 3,000 people killed in Arab terrorist attacks.

Saudi prince going to Texas

Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah plans to meet with President Bush next week in Texas. Abdullah is expected at Bush's Crawford ranch April 25.

White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said Tuesday that relations between the United States and Saudi Arabia are strong, despite the fact that some Saudi officials have praised Palestinian suicide bombers. Fleischer would not say what the two leaders would discuss.

Israel recruits volunteers

The Jewish Agency for Israel is hoping to bring 1,000 volunteers to Israel over the next few months to help with social services strained by the intifada.

Service for Israel is seeking people aged 18-65 for 2-4 week stints. Among those needed are physicians, people to assist emergency medical technicians, kibbutz volunteers and people to work with special needs children. For additional information e-mail ipc@jazo.org.il or call (212) 339-6063

Netanya bomber's helper nabbed

Israeli troops arrested a Hamas member who helped prepare the explosives for the "Passover Massacre" bombing in Netanya. Nasser Yetima was arrested by IDF troops during operations in Nablus

could rally behind. And while the official mantra of the rally promoted support for the State of Israel and its people — but not explicitly the policies of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's unity government — placards and speeches at times evoked contradictory messages.

Much of the disagreement was about the U.S. role, and whether Powell should be pressuring Israel to withdraw from the portions of the West Bank and Gaza it went into or whether Israel should be free to complete its mission to rout out the Palestinian terrorist infrastructure.

Another major stumbling point was whether Arafat is the legitimate leader of the Palestinian people who should meet with U.S. officials, or a terrorist who is irrelevant to the political process.

When speakers delved into those issues, the mass of the crowd showed their predilections.

While Wolfowitz was booed, other speakers received huge ovations when they called Arafat a terrorist and said Israel should be allowed to complete its mission.

"Yasser Arafat is the quintessential terrorist," former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told the rally. "Arafat pursues a goal of picide, the destruction of a state, by employing the means of suicide, suicide and mass terror."

That reaction highlights growing fear among some in the American Jewish community that continued U.S. intervention in the Middle East will lead to more pressure for concessions by Israel and more Israeli victims of terrorism.

Event organizers tried to stay out of the dispute and promote a positive message, but individual Jewish organizations — and rally participants — did not.

"If Bush doesn't get the message to stop pressuring Israel, we will have lost a great opportunity with this rally," said Morton Klein, national president of the hawkish Zionist Organization of America. "He will misinterpret that his actions are tolerated, when in fact they are not."

The Israel Policy Forum, a group that had close ties with the Clinton administration and strongly supports U.S. engagement in the region, took out a full page advertisement in the Washington Post on the morning of the rally.

In addition to supporting Israel and its right to defend itself, the ad also supported President Bush's "initiative to end violence in the Middle East and bring the parties back to the negotiating table."

"In the past, some pro-Israel rallies have been dominated by voices of opposition to what the Bush administration is trying to do, and they wanted to make sure that was not the way this rally was perceived," said Jonathan Jacoby, IPF's founding executive director.

He said he was glad, in retrospect, that the ad was placed because it worked to counterbalance the lasting image of the treatment of Wolfowitz.

Public officials are split on whether their colleagues listen to the messages of large gatherings

Former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who spoke at the rally, told JTA that officials have to take public sentiment into account when making policy. In contrast, Rep. Brad Sherman (D-Calif.), who attended the rally but did not speak, said White House day-to-day policy on the Middle East would be affected "infinitesimally or not at all" by the rally.

In fact, it may be too early to tell.

David Harris, the executive director of the American Jewish Committee who was involved in organizing the 1987 rally for Soviet Jewry, said it was much easier to gauge results after that gathering, simply by counting the number of emigrants allowed to leave the Soviet Union. "We are dealing with something far more complex, multidimensional and that does not lend itself to easy measurements," he said.

As for the response to Wolfowitz, some are downplaying its significance.

Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, said he believed the booing was limited and was predominantly a knee-jerk reaction to hearing the words "Palestine" or "Palestinian state." Others speculated that people did not understand the comment or even hear it, and were simply booing because others were.

While no one will know what the rally's lasting impact will be, the message was sent. "If, in the end, there were people who were unhappy with the administration," Harris said, "then it was important for the administration to hear it." □



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JEWISH WORLD

Sharon cancels DC visit

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon canceled plans to visit Washington next week. While in Washington, he was slated to address the American Israel Public Affairs Committee policy conference.

Instead, Sharon is expected to address the conference via satellite, while former prime ministers Ehud Barak and Shimon Peres now plan to be there in person. AIPAC officials say they hope former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will also come to Washington to address the conference.

Man nabbed for Tunisia explosion

German police arrested a man suspected of involvement in an April 11 truck explosion at a Tunisian synagogue. The suspect was taken into custody Monday in the western German city of Duisburg following a tip about a phone call made before the attack, which killed 15 people, 10 of them German tourists.

Two London-based Arab-language papers reported that a group calling itself the Islamic Army for the Liberation of the Holy Sites was behind the explosion, in retaliation for Israeli "crimes" against Palestinians.

Shoah memorial vandalized

A monument honoring Greek Jews who died in the Holocaust was vandalized. In what was viewed as a protest against Israel's military operation in the West Bank, vandals splashed the monument in the northern city of Salonika with red paint Tuesday and painted the word "Palestinians" next to the memorial.

Greek Jewish leaders expressed "deep sadness" over the attack, which occurred one day after a large pro-Palestinian demonstration in the port city.

Harvard head likened to Sharon

A noted black studies professor lashed out at the president of Harvard University and compared him to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

Explaining his decision to leave Harvard to teach at Princeton, Cornel West criticized what he described as the insensitivity of Harvard President Lawrence Summers. Summers "strikes me as the Ariel Sharon of American higher education," West said Monday, according to *The New York Times*. "He struck me very much as a bull in a china shop, and as a bully, in a very delicate and dangerous situation."

Lisbon shul holds peace prayer

A Muslim clergyman recited verses from the Koran inside a Lisbon synagogue. The clergyman, along with Jewish and Catholic officials, was among those who made a plea for Middle East peace during a ceremony Monday in the Lisbon synagogue.

Reform emerges triumphant again in latest American Zionist elections

By Rachel Pomerance

NEW YORK (JTA) — The three major religious streams have emerged as the clear victors in the American Zionist elections to the World Zionist Congress — with the Reform movement once again leading the pack.

Although participation declined by nearly 20,000 from the last elections in 1997, close to 90,000 Jews cast ballots.

The only elected body of Diaspora Jews that determine policies and programs of Diaspora Jewry, the 650-seat World Zionist Congress convenes every four to five years in Jerusalem.

In a labyrinth of policymaking, groups team up there to set the policy of the World Zionist Organization, which makes up half of the decision-making power of the Jewish Agency for Israel.

That means influence over the agency's \$350 million budget, which is involved in immigration and absorption and runs religious, political and educational programs throughout the world.

Of the total 145 delegates elected by Americans, comprising 29 percent of the 500 elected seats, ARZA/World Union, the Zionist arm of the Reform and Reconstructionist movements, won 61 seats. That number equals the combined number won by the Conservative arm's MERCAZ USA, at 32 delegates, and the Religious Zionist Movement, supported by the Orthodox, which took 29.

The Reform movement swept the electorate with even greater numbers — 70 delegates — in the last election in 1997. But the most significant change this time around is the greater weight of the Orthodox movement, nearly doubling its representation from 16 seats five years ago.

While the Conservative stream eked out second place this time, they lost six delegates from the last election.

The last elections drew more attention than usual because they came amid fighting over the status of Reform and Conservative Judaism in Israel. The 1997 victory for the Reform and Conservative movements led to increased visibility and political clout in Israel as well as increased Jewish Agency allocations for non-Orthodox institutions.

This time around, in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 terror attacks and the suicide bombings in Israel, religious pluralism was not on the front burner for many people.

Still, the movements spent a lot of time, money and energy galvanizing their constituencies.

"These elections affirmed the importance of Reform Judaism in the American Jewish community," said Philip Meltzer, president of ARZA/World Union.

At the same time, he said that this year's elections were more about support for the State of Israel than about religious divisions.

"All of us, wherever we stood politically, and whatever our religious beliefs might be, we were unified in support of the State of Israel."

Despite the renewed sense of unity, pluralism remained an important vehicle for voter mobilization.

The Religious Zionists of America made a major push after the Reform movement gained more control of Jewish Agency committees following the last election.

For the Conservative movement, "we did as good as we could," said Rabbi Robert Golub, executive director of MERCAZ, a group which he said spent more on campaigning this time around than it did in 1997, but was outspent by both the Orthodox and Reform movements.

Despite the decreased number of votes, down from nearly 108,000 in the last election, officials at the American Zionist Movement, which organizes and oversees the elections, noted that almost 80 percent of registrants voted, up from 72 percent of registrants in 1997.

And unlike most Jewish organizations, which don't elect their leadership, the Zionist elections remain a bulwark of democracy, he said.

Two new groups also made the cut — the environmentalist Green Zionist Alliance, which won one seat, and the extreme right-wing Herut party, which took three. □

NEWS ANALYSIS

Sharon, Powell push conference, but Arabs may have different vision*By Leslie Susser*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — When Ariel Sharon decided to isolate Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat in Ramallah, he realized he would be accused of deliberately blocking diplomatic channels if he didn't find an alternative form of dialogue with the Palestinians.

Sharon's answer: A regional conference of Israel, moderate Arab states and Palestinians — but not Arafat — to be convened under American auspices.

The conference would focus on condemning terror, defining a roadmap to Palestinian statehood and widening the circle of Middle Eastern countries at peace with Israel. The terms of reference would include the recent Saudi peace initiative based on the principle of land for peace, and an Israeli proposal emphasizing the need for a long-term interim arrangement between Israel and the Palestinians before final borders are determined.

Sharon formally raised the idea in an otherwise tough early April speech in the Knesset. He then put it to visiting U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell in their April 12 meeting in Jerusalem, and Powell immediately began to run with it.

Inside Israel, the idea has broad support across the political spectrum, aside from the far-right parties. It is a bold idea and, if it gets off the ground, could herald the first signs of real progress in Middle East peacemaking since the inconclusive Israeli-Palestinian negotiations at Taba in January 2001.

The reason the conference idea might fly is that it appeals strongly to several of the major players. The trouble is that most of them mean different things by it. As the various sides try to outmaneuver each other in laying down the ground rules, they could end up smothering the parley before it starts.

For Israel, the conference idea provides several bonuses. It enables Sharon to offer the Palestinians a "political horizon" without seeming to be rewarding terror. Sharon can dangle the prospect of a conference while still insisting he won't actually hold political negotiations with the Palestinians until violence stops.

By widening the negotiating framework to include other players and issues, Sharon can argue that the new Palestinian track is a natural adjunct of the wider process, and not a case of Israel being forced to the negotiating table by violence, even if terror does not subside altogether.

Moreover, Israeli officials believe the Palestinians would be reluctant to forfeit the chance to reap major political gains via the international community, and would be under enormous pressure to maintain a de facto cease-fire before, during and after the conference, provided that it leads to a viable peace process. A successful conference will put the onus on the Palestinian side to keep the peace.

Even if there is no immediate progress from a conference, Sharon will gain time. The premier envisions an ongoing mechanism akin to the Madrid Peace Conference of 1991, when an international gathering of several days was followed by committees that tackled the issues on a continuing basis.

Such a system now, Sharon feels, would create a counter-terrorism dynamic and improve Israel's international image.

Sharon stands to make domestic gains too. By initiating a parley along the lines of the Madrid conference, Sharon takes on

the mantle of potential peacemaker. He also hints that he is going back to basics, wiping out the errors of the failed Oslo process and building peace on more solid foundations.

For the United States, the conference primarily would be a means of pacifying the region in advance of a planned strike against Iraq. The Americans also believe a conference would enable them to convince Arab states with a major stake in regional stability, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, to pressure the Palestinians to move forward.

U.S. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice says a conference would have to be based on three principles: Israeli withdrawal from Palestinian cities, an end to violence and a clear denunciation of terror by the Arab moderates. All this would provide a modicum of regional stability to attack Iraq.

For the moderate Arab states, a conference would provide a chance to play a highly visible and prestigious role in Middle East peacemaking. It also could provide an opening for better ties with the United States, while ostensibly backing Palestinian interests.

Egypt already has indicated its willingness to participate — as long as the conference picks up where previous negotiations broke off, a condition that may not be acceptable to Israel.

Yet it is the Palestinians who stand to gain most: Israeli withdrawal, international observers, early statehood, Arab and international pressure for Israeli concessions and an American and European "Marshall plan" to rebuild Palestinian ruins.

But there are problems. First there is the question of participants: Will the Arabs come if Sharon insists on keeping Arafat out? Powell is trying to finesse the issue by talking about a conference at the ministerial level, but it's unclear if the Arab side will buy it.

And what about Syria? Sharon's vision of a conference of "moderate" Arab states surely excludes Syria, and Damascus might, through Hezbollah, heat up Israel's northern border to provoke an Israeli attack and torpedo the peace conference.

And the European Union and the United Nations, which Israel wants out, and the Palestinians say must be included? Sharon could find himself sucked into a full-fledged international conference — rather than the U.S.-led meeting he desires — and a situation of pressure on Israel that he never anticipated.

On the Israeli left, former Israeli Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami predicts the conference will fail unless it adopts the parameters laid out on the core permanent status issues — borders, Jerusalem and refugees — by former President Clinton in December 2000. On the right, Knesset member Yuval Steinitz argues that the conference will fail because the timing is wrong: The United States should change the regime in Iraq and then hold the regional conference, not the other way around, he says.

But the biggest problem remains the fundamental question of substance: Can Sharon, supremely mistrustful of Palestinian intentions, put anything on the table that the Palestinians could accept? Is Arafat, whose direct role in Palestinian terror has been clearly documented, ready to make a deal with Israel on any terms?

If they can't bridge the gaps on substance, how effective can a conference prove over time in lowering violence? Powell hopes a conference would promote stability, even if it doesn't solve all the problems. Indeed, the idea assumed added urgency for Powell when he visited Israel's northern border and saw for himself how Israel could slide into war with Syria and Lebanon.

Powell's next hurdle on the way to a conference is a Palestinian declaration denouncing terror — and ending hostilities. □

(Leslie Susser is the diplomatic correspondent for the Jerusalem Report.)