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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

At least 15 dead in bombing

At least 15 people were killed and 51 injured in a suicide bombing Tuesday night at a pool hall south of Tel Aviv.

Hamas claimed responsibility for the explosion in Rishon le-Zion, which came just before Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon began meeting with President Bush at the White House.

Bush sending Tenet to Mideast

President Bush said CIA Director George Tenet will return to the Middle East to help build a "unified security force" in the Palestinian territories.

Bush met with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in the Oval Office on Tuesday.

Asked whether Israel should negotiate with Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat, Bush said, "I'm never going to tell my friend the prime minister what to do."

Sharon said it was premature to discuss a Palestinian state until the Palestinian Authority had undertaken serious reforms, and Bush said he hoped Arab states would work on reforming the Palestinian leadership "as soon as possible."

Sharon defends Jenin action

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon defended his decision not to allow a U.N. fact-finding team into Jenin.

Speaking Monday at the Anti-Defamation League's annual leadership conference in Washington, Sharon rejected Palestinian claims that a massacre had occurred in the Jenin refugee camp.

He also said the world should not put Israel on trial.

JDC: Change at the top

The head of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee is retiring.

Chief Operating Officer Steven Schwager will replace Executive Vice President Michael Schneider as the top professional of the JDC, a partner of the federation system that deals with international relief and welfare for Jews.

Schneider has worked with the JDC for 25 years and has been executive vice president for the past 15. He will retain his title and remain involved with the organization.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Sharon tries to show Washington that Arafat, Saudis not to be trusted

By Matthew E. Berger

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon came to the United States this week with a mission: to paint a different picture for the Bush administration and the American public about Israel's once and, perhaps, future peace partners.

Israel wanted Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat to be seen as a leader who has reneged on past agreements, has chosen violence over peace, can't be trusted — and thus can't be a player in future political negotiations.

The Israeli delegation also wanted to paint Saudi Arabia as an accomplice to terrorism — based on evidence of its funding to groups like Hamas and payments to the families of suicide bombers — rather than the leader in a push for peace.

With a tentative diplomatic opening emerging after 19 months of violence, Sharon's strategy was important because it could influence the contours of any future peace talks. But even after his meeting with Bush on Tuesday, it's too early to tell whether the Israeli premier succeeded.

The two leaders met just after a suicide bombing at a banquet hall south of Tel Aviv. At least 15 people were killed and 51 injured in the attack, the first inside Israel since the country withdrew most of its forces from the West Bank after a campaign to root out terrorists.

When Bush emerged from the meeting and was asked whether Sharon should negotiate with Arafat, he said, "I'm never going to tell my friend the prime minister what to do."

Bush also announced that he was sending CIA Director George Tenet to the Middle East to help with the construction of "a unified security force" in the Palestinian territories. Israel has long said that the multiplicity of forces, which Arafat encourages, contributes to the general lawlessness and lack of accountability.

Bush also said he hoped Arab states would work on reforming the Palestinian leadership "as soon as possible." Sharon said it was premature to discuss a Palestinian state until there were real reforms among the Palestinians.

Sharon's efforts came just weeks after Israeli officials and pro-Israel activists were basking in their bond with the administration. But the tide seems to have turned.

And many pro-Israel forces in the Jewish community and Congress are worried that the new momentum could lead to undue pressures on Israel.

Bush's meeting late last month in Crawford, Texas, with Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah, just two days after the end of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee policy conference, changed the focus back to the leadership role that relatively moderate Arab states could play in ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Some argue that President Bush is not working from a clear playbook, but rather is following the advice of the last person he speaks to. A productive meeting with the Saudi Arabian leader has led to several weeks of tough White House talk toward Israel.

Until the Crawford meeting, many Israel backers had thought that Bush strongly backed Israel's positions, but recent events have shown that the convergence is not so close. Bush seems to have an interest in using the Saudi peace initiative — which calls on Arab states to normalize relations with Israel in exchange for an Israeli withdrawal from all land won in the 1967 Six-Day War — as the backbone of future negotiations.

Bush also reprised his earlier tough comments demanding an immediate withdrawal of Israeli troops from the West Bank.

Israel withdrew from virtually all the areas it invaded in late March in response to

MIDEAST FOCUS

Clinton: Send troops to Mideast

International troops will be necessary to achieve peace between Israel and the Palestinians, President Clinton said. "I do believe it will have to be, if not imposed, at least strongly pushed," he told about 2,000 students Monday at New York's Hunter College.

In a related development, the Israel Defense Force chief of staff warned this week against allowing international troops. Lt. Gen. Shaul Mofaz pointed to the involvement of the United States and Britain in the recent agreement to free Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat from house arrest — and Italy's position in an evolving deal to end the standoff at Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity — as proof of growing international involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Two Palestinians killed in Gaza

Israeli troops killed two armed Palestinians on Tuesday in the southern Gaza Strip. The two died when Israeli forces returned Palestinian fire, the army said.

Nobel panel: Peres keeps prize

The Nobel Peace Prize Committee said it never considered revoking the award to Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres.

After Israel launched a massive anti-terror military operation in the West Bank in late March, individual committee members said they regretted giving Peres the prize. But the committee set the record straight Tuesday. According to the prize statutes, "the Nobel Prize cannot be revoked. This question therefore has never been an issue," the committee said.

Just the same, a campaign continues to have Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat's prize revoked. An online site has gathered more than 380,000 signatures in favor of taking the award away.



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a wave of terror attacks, but remained in Bethlehem while negotiators tried to finalize a deal for the release of Palestinian gunmen who took refuge in the Church of the Nativity.

In addition, the United States and Europe brought increasing pressure on Israel to allow Arafat to leave his Ramallah headquarters. Israel also was criticized for blocking a U.N. team from investigating Israel's attack on terrorists in the Jenin refugee camp. Even while Congress was passing bills last week in solidarity with Israel, the Bush administration was emphasizing a more international approach.

Russia, the European Union and the United Nations joined U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell in announcing an international peace conference for early this summer.

Taken together, the developments have led Israeli officials and many American Jewish leaders to conclude that the peace process was being pushed at the clip that Arab states demanded. The main problem, critics said, is that the timetable toward political negotiations was cut, with the White House now calling for negotiations to begin alongside security talks, rather than after a cease-fire has been reached.

For his part, Sharon, armed with his own proposals, sought to curb the diplomatic momentum to a level that — given the recent months of violence and the doubts about Arafat's credibility — he considered more realistic.

The ADL's national director, Abraham Foxman, charged that the Bush administration was changing the rules of the game to please the Arab world.

"We set forth the parameters and the Saudis say no, and Arafat says no, and Egypt says no, and we keep changing the parameters," Foxman said.

Few believe the Arab states will persuade the United States to push Israel all the way back to the pre-1967 borders, but a real understanding of the Bush administration's "line in the sand" has yet to emerge.

"This is a moment of flux," said David Makovsky, senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "All these groups are trying to fill that vacuum, and it might take time to sort it out."

The Bush administration says it is speaking to a diverse collection of leaders in order to formulate a strategy. Saudi Arabia's foreign minister was here Monday and Jordan's King Abdullah was to meet with Bush on Wednesday.

Meanwhile, in media interviews and meetings with administration officials, Sharon's entourage worked on a multipronged approach. At the top of their list was the effort to discredit Arafat as a potential peace partner.

The Israelis unveiled a 103-page document, mainly of evidence captured during Israel's anti-terror sweep in March and April, linking Arafat to suicide bombings and other terrorist activities.

Their goal was to convince the Bush administration that Arafat cannot be treated as a partner for peace, and that Israel will negotiate only when someone else represents the Palestinians.

Israeli leaders are encouraging the rebuilding of the Palestinian infrastructure, fueled in part by the United States, with the hope that a revived Palestinian economy may lead to changes in political leadership.

While Sharon may not convince the United States to bypass Arafat, it was clear that Israel will regard with extreme skepticism any new commitments that Arafat makes.

"Israel cannot tell the Palestinians who their leaders are," Makovsky said. "But at the same time, if the leader is Arafat, Israel cannot be expected to trust any promises about the future."

Israel also hoped to influence the Bush administration's view of Saudi Arabia.

Israeli officials visiting Washington tried to persuade media outlets that the Saudi government was financing Hamas and the families of suicide bombers.

"If Saudi policy is to finance suicide bombers, then they probably cannot be part of the peace coalition," said Limor Livnat, Israel's education minister.

But Livnat refused to implicate the Saudi government specifically, saying only that "the documents speak for themselves."

Saudi officials denied the Israeli claims.

Israeli officials also tried to minimize the amount of outside influence in the proposed international conference on the Middle East, hoping to remove the United Nations and European Union — both of which it considers implacably anti-Israel — from the equation. □

JEWISH WORLD

Former SS officer on trial

A former Nazi SS officer is standing trial in Germany for war crimes committed 58 years ago in Italy. Friedrich Engel, 92, is accused of having given orders to kill 59 prisoners in the Marassi Prison in Genoa in May 1944.

Engel, who was sentenced in absentia to life in prison in 1999 by an Italian military court, has denied giving or approving the orders for the shooting.

Foundation exec resigns

The top professional at the Samuel Bronfman Foundation has resigned. Rabbi Richard Marker, executive vice president of the foundation, left abruptly last week after several years there. Run by mega-philanthropist Edgar Bronfman Sr., the foundation has given millions of dollars to Jewish causes.

Controversy erupts in Germany

German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder plans to discuss Germany's national identity with a writer who once said it was time to stop invoking the Holocaust to criticize Germany.

The Central Council of Jews in Germany said it is "irritated and bewildered" by Schroeder's decision to talk publicly with Martin Walser on Wednesday, the 57th anniversary of Nazi Germany's surrender to the Allies. "Is this event intended to attract right-wing nationalistic voters?" asked Michel Friedman, a vice president of the council. The Berlin Association Against Anti-Semitism and Anti-Zionism asked Schroeder's Social Democratic Party to cancel the event, calling it "scandalous."

In a move that has generated additional criticism, the program is to be moderated by journalist Christoph Dieckmann. Last November, Dieckmann wrote an article in which he suggested that Nazism mirrored "the Jewish belief of being a chosen people."

Tourists avoiding France

Some Jewish tourists are avoiding France following a recent series of anti-Semitic attacks there.

Some fear for their safety, while others do not want to spend their money in France until official do more to crack down on those carrying out the attacks, according to a report Tuesday by The Associated Press.

"Usually, France is one of our most popular destinations. Not this year," said David Lawrence, director of Kosher Expeditions, which caters to Jewish travelers. "We've canceled all the tours."

Meanwhile, an official at the French Embassy in Tel Aviv said about 100 people have been arrested recently in France on suspicion of attacking Jews and Jewish property, according to the Israeli daily Ha'aretz. French authorities have issued orders to take strict action against such offenders, the official added.

Frustration over Mideast coverage leads to boycotts of New York Times

By Peter Ephross

NEW YORK (JTA) — For Ali Scharf, the last straw came recently, when The New York Times ran an interview with a masked Palestinian.

Scharf had long been upset with the Times' coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict — and the article made the man, an admitted member of a group responsible for numerous terrorist bombings, "sound very human," Scharf says, "as if you were supposed to applaud this Palestinian for cutting back on suicide bombings."

Using the power of the Internet, Scharf took matters into his own hands and organized a temporary boycott of the Times, one of two such campaigns being launched this month.

The boycotts are the latest battles in the media war that has accompanied the 19-month-old Palestinian intifada.

Scharf sent out e-mails to friends and family describing his boycott campaign. These e-mails were then passed on.

He also contacted Jewish organizations, some of whom — including Aish HaTorah and Emunah of America, an Orthodox women's group — gave him their mailing lists to send out requests, asking Times' readers to cancel their subscriptions for at least a month effective May 1.

Not all Jewish leaders back the campaign.

"It's not a good idea to make the media the major enemy here," says Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the Reform movement's congregational arm. "That's diverting our energy" from taking action in support of Israel.

In addition, some of those joining the boycotts hold fringe views, Yoffie says.

"These are the folks who think Tom Friedman is an extremist," he says, referring to Times columnist and Pulitzer Prize-winner who will be honored by the Reform movement's rabbinical college at the end of May. "To see Tom Friedman as an anti-Israel extremist is an absurdity."

For his part, Scharf says he is happy with the overall response. Although he's just now setting up a Web site to track how many people have joined his campaign, he estimates that approximately 5,000 people have suspended their subscriptions.

After last month's Israel solidarity rally in Washington, "people were primed and ready to express themselves," he says. "When it comes to victims on the Palestinian side, they are always described in great detail, making them human. The Israelis are rarely given a face."

That's a charge that the Times denies.

"What we've always tried to do is provide balanced and comprehensive coverage," says Catherine Mathis, the Times' vice president for corporate communications. "The point for us is to continue to do a good job of reporting the news fairly and dispassionately. That's what we continue to do, boycotts or otherwise."

Mathis says the number of people who have canceled their subscriptions as a result of the current boycotts is "small." But she adds that "any time we get inquiries from our readers regarding our coverage, we try to respond."

On Tuesday, the Times printed an Editors Note, saying it had erred in running photos on the Salute to Israel parade in New York on Sunday that gave too much weight to anti-Israel protesters.

The current campaigns aren't the first to be launched against the Times during the current intifada. Rabbi Haskel Lookstein launched a temporary suspension last summer that he says garnered an estimated 10,000 cancellations — and an audience with the then-executive editor of the Times, Joseph Lelyveld.

Upset over recent coverage, Lookstein organized a separate cancellation campaign that was slated to begin Thursday. His campaign also asks members of the Jewish community to suspend placing advertising and obituary notices in the Times, and requests that letters and e-mails be sent complaining about the paper's Mideast coverage. "We're not telling people to stop reading the Times forever," Lookstein says. "We're sending a message" □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

After invasion, dissent heard on Palestinian street, in Cabinet

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM (JTA) — With the monthlong Israeli siege over, life seems to be returning to normal in Ramallah — but beneath the surface, Palestinians are questioning their regime in unprecedented ways.

Dissent, which Palestinians usually keep to themselves because of threats to their livelihood or, indeed, their lives, is being heard after a wave of Palestinian terrorism brought a fierce Israeli reprisal that left Palestinian areas of the West Bank in ruins.

Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat may be out of his besieged headquarters, angrier and more militant than ever. But people in the streets, trying to cope with the aftermath of the fighting, increasingly are asking, Was all this misery really necessary?

"People are tired," gas station attendant Mohammad Amir said. "People are not made of iron. Things have been more difficult than one could imagine."

"The suicide attacks contradict our national interest," Issam Sakker, a former laborer in Israel, said in Manara Square in downtown Ramallah. "They were counter-productive in that they intensified the pressure on Arafat."

One message that Israel's Operation Protective Wall has conveyed to the Palestinians is that they paid dearly for the fact that their government left every Palestinian militia free to engage in terrorism against Israel.

Few Palestinians say that suicide bombings are immoral, but they do talk about their "ineffectiveness." Only a month ago, such statements were hardly heard — at least not openly on the street — and suicide bombers were considered martyrs to be envied.

But the shock caused by the Israeli military operation has changed moods and opinions, not only of the man in the street, but also among Palestinian politicians, who are calling on Arafat to reform his government.

"One must begin discussing a reform in the institutions of the P.A.," said Nabil Amer, a member of the Palestine legislative council who resigned from Arafat's Cabinet on Saturday.

"Everybody feels that an earthquake has taken place in Palestinian society. So the changes must be equal in size to what happened," Amer told journalists in Ramallah. "I say the change must come from within the Palestinian Authority."

According to a classified report reaching the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem, the P.A.'s minister of international cooperation, Nabil Sha'ath, told Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov that the Palestinian leadership committed many mistakes, particularly in its attitude toward suicide bombers.

He said the phenomenon had caused considerable damage to the credibility of the Palestinian leadership, and should be stopped at all costs.

Hussein A-Sheik, a leading official of Arafat's Fatah faction, demanded a reform in Fatah ranks. Last weekend A-Sheik urged that a party conference be urgently convened for the first time in 13 years.

Even Arafat's top lieutenants say the disastrous events of the past month cannot be allowed to pass without comment.

"The establishment must learn the lessons of what happened,"

said Col. Jibril Rajoub, head of the once-powerful Preventive Security Service in the West Bank. "One must learn the lessons to bring about change, because what happened was a national disaster. One must check, What happened? Who bears the responsibility?"

Once mentioned as a possible successor to Arafat, Rajoub is believed to have lost much of his power.

Rajoub was not present when his security headquarters in a Ramallah suburb was captured by the Israel Defense Force and surrendered with little resistance. He also was not with Arafat during the prolonged siege of his compound in central Ramallah.

IDF forces that raided Rajoub's headquarters found yarmulkes and other disguises that Palestinian terrorists sometimes wear to sneak more easily into Israel. Yet though many individuals in the security services have taken part in terrorist attacks, Rajoub has kept the forces, the closest thing to a Palestinian army, out of regular combat with Israel throughout the intifada.

Many Palestinians now see Rajoub as a collaborator with the Israelis. He sits at home, away from the decision-making process, frustrated, angry and tired.

One of Rajoub's greatest worries should be the growing demand for a drastic reform of the security forces to put the many official organizations under a unified command.

Judging by Rajoub's current political weakness, such a reform may force him into early retirement — not to speak of other, less pleasant options — with his Gaza Strip counterpart, Mohammad Dahlan, becoming head of the force. That would make Dahlan the virtual defense minister of the Palestinian Authority, and a potential second in command to Arafat.

That scenario leaves many question marks: Is Arafat ready to accept a second-in-command? Does he really want order in the security forces — or would he prefer to keep multiple forces to maintain a veneer of deniability after terrorist attacks, and to keep any single figure from becoming a potential challenger?

Even if Arafat does opt for reform, it's not clear that he can carry it through. In addition to the multitude of official security forces, a variety of militias tied to Arafat have flourished in Palestinian areas, often taking the lead in terrorist attacks. Under its treaties with Israel, the Palestinian Authority is obligated to disarm the militias.

The militias suffered major blows in the IDF operation, but they are still a presence in the Palestinian streets, casbahs and refugee camps.

The other major question is whether Arafat is prepared to confront the armed fundamentalist groups, such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, who would have to be curbed for a unified Palestinian command to emerge. Judging by voices heard last weekend, the Palestinian political arena is ready for a drastic change.

During a session of the Palestinian Cabinet last Friday, the first held since Arafat's release, Parliamentary Affairs Minister Amer was the spearhead of criticism. He demanded that a new Cabinet be appointed made up of members of the legislative council and under the council's supervision, "just like in any other democratic country."

Arafat responded by appointing a "reform committee," but Amer said he suspected that this was a way to avert real change, and resigned. While challenging Arafat to introduce changes, however, none of the ministers called for change at the top of the Palestinian pyramid, which Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and many Israelis see as the real prerequisite to peace. □