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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Two Palestinian officers killed

Israeli security forces killed two Palestinian intelligence officers during a search for suspected terrorists in the West Bank.

The head of Palestinian intelligence in a village north of Hebron, and one of his officers, were killed Tuesday morning.

According to Israel, the men were responsible for multiple attacks on Israelis. A third man, a member of Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat's Force 17 presidential guard, was arrested.

Arafat power may be limited

Members of Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement are preparing a plan to limit his powers, according to a Palestinian legislator. In an interview with the Arabic-language newspaper *Al-Hayat*, Hatam Kader said Fatah members will soon discuss the plan with Arafat, according to the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz*.

Once the plan is implemented, he said, Arafat "will have to surrender some of his authority." Arafat was slated to convene the Fatah leadership Tuesday night to discuss reforms in the Palestinian Authority, Israel Radio reported.

Benefits restored for refugees

A new U.S. law restored some benefits for refugees and legal immigrants.

The law, signed by President Bush on Monday, allows refugees to get food stamps. Legal immigrants who have been in the country for five years will now be eligible as well.

In 1996, new laws changed the eligibility requirements for food stamps.

As a result, refugees and immigrants, a number of whom are elderly Jews from the former Soviet Union, faced financial difficulties. This, in turn, put a strain on the finances of Jewish agencies trying to assist them, according to the United Jewish Communities' Washington Action office.

Bomb note backs Palestinians

A note attached to a bomb found Monday in a Philadelphia mailbox read "Free Palestine Now."

Although the note also made reference to the Al-Qaida terror network, authorities said Tuesday there was no indication the bomb was related to Middle East terrorists.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Netanyahu wins Likud showdown, but Sharon may have the last laugh

By Leslie Susser

JERUSALEM (JTA) — It's no secret that former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu plans to challenge Ariel Sharon for leadership of the Likud Party and, he hopes, succeed Sharon as prime minister of Israel.

So when Netanyahu moved to have Likud's Central Committee vote Sunday against the establishment of a Palestinian state, it seemed he had found the perfect weapon to accelerate Sharon's political demise.

Indeed, Netanyahu succeeded in pushing through the vote against a Palestinian state, over Sharon's vehement opposition.

Yet after being seen for some time as the front-runner to be the next leader of the Likud and possibly the next prime minister, Netanyahu may have embarked on a gambit with unintended consequences.

Paradoxically, the fact that the policy-making body of Sharon's own party turned against him has only shored up Sharon's credentials among the general Israeli public as a centrist and a responsible national leader.

Internationally, too, Sharon's strong statements repudiating the Central Committee vote reassured world leaders that he would not spurn the slight recent opening toward peace, and painted him as a statesman able to rise above petty domestic politics.

Sharon's troubles in his party began last September when he declared that, unlike the Turks, British and Jordanians — who controlled the West Bank before Israel — Israel was prepared to allow the Palestinians to establish a state of their own.

That set off alarm bells in the Likud, where the idea of Palestinian statehood long has been anathema.

Prompted by Netanyahu, some party activists decided to bring Sharon's deviation from the party line to a vote.

Sharon tried to defer the vote against Palestinian statehood, but was soundly defeated. Still, commentators lauded his courage in presenting the motion despite the certainty of a humiliating defeat.

Sharon made clear to the committee that he was not prepared to rule anything out at this juncture, and that he wanted to keep his diplomatic options open.

"I was elected to bring security and peace," he thundered, "and that is what I intend to do."

Even after the voting, Sharon stressed that he had no intention of allowing the Central Committee decision to bind him in any way. He would act, he said, as he had always done — according to his understanding of Israel's national interest.

Sharon also told U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell that he would not allow party machinations to deflect him from his search for peace with the Palestinians.

Glowing media reports the next day said Sharon had come across as a national leader, ready to take a political beating within his party rather than compromise the national interest.

Netanyahu, on the contrary, was widely depicted as an opportunist, willing to undermine Israel's international standing for the sake of petty political gain.

Worse, by opposing Palestinian statehood so vehemently, Netanyahu may have painted himself into a far right-wing corner, which will make it difficult for him to win support from the center if he runs again as a candidate for prime minister.

Indeed, the vote might even hurt Netanyahu's chances of winning the Likud nomination: The party leader and prime ministerial candidate is elected by the full

MIDEAST FOCUS

Did deportee kill American?

The United States is examining whether one of 13 Palestinians deported to Cyprus was involved in the slaying of an Israeli American.

A U.S. official said it is unclear what the United States will do if it turns out that Ibrahim Abayat was indeed involved in the killing of Avi Boaz five months ago.

Abayat is one of 13 Palestinians deported under a deal reached last week to end the standoff at Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity.

Arafat accepts Clinton plan

Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat said he accepts the peace plan that President Clinton outlined in 2000, on condition that Palestinian sovereignty over the Temple Mount is guaranteed. Arafat made the comment Tuesday in Ramallah, Israel Radio reported.

Arafat also said he agrees to Israeli sovereignty over the Western Wall and the Jewish Quarter of Jerusalem's Old City.

Saudi prince: Bush uninformed

President Bush is "not fully informed about the real conditions" in the Middle East, Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah said.

The Saudi newspaper Okaz quoted the prince, who met with Bush last month in Texas, as saying that the president has "noble qualities."

But he also said, "He is the type of person who sleeps at 9:30 p.m. after watching the domestic news. In the morning, he only reads a few lines about what is written on the Middle East," and as a result is not fully aware of the "conditions suffered by the Palestinian people."

The Saudi prince added: "I felt it was my duty to spend as long a time as possible to brief him on the facts."



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Likud membership, currently estimated at about 150,000, not by the more militant, 2,600-member Central Committee.

As columnist Nahum Barnea put it in Yediot Achronot: "Netanyahu has placed himself so far to the right that soon they'll be comparing Sharon to Chirac and Netanyahu to Le Pen."

Netanyahu supporters, however, argue that it was their man who was going out on a limb for the national interest. They contend that a Palestinian state would be a mortal danger to Israel, because statehood entails control of airspace, borders, armed forces and water.

Even if limits are imposed in these areas by treaty, Israel could hardly guarantee that the Palestinians would observe the restrictions.

Netanyahu backers also dismiss Sharon's argument that the issue is not relevant now, and say Netanyahu acted just in time to subvert secret government plans to grant Palestinian statehood soon.

Netanyahu says he suspects that Sharon intends to go to a proposed Middle East peace conference this summer with a plan for early Palestinian statehood, based on a formula devised by Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and Palestinian Authority official Ahmed Karia.

"Whatever talks have been going on with the Palestinians behind the scenes will now come up against a very strong barrier," warned legislator Yisrael Katz, a key Netanyahu supporter.

Netanyahu backers depict the Central Committee vote as the beginning of the end for Sharon.

They predict a snowball effect as allegiances shift to the man perceived as the stronger candidate.

Internal party polls show Netanyahu 15 percent to 25 percent ahead of Sharon among the full Likud membership, they say.

But independent polls say otherwise. A recent Ma'ariv poll showed Sharon leading Netanyahu by 44 percent to 35 percent among right-wing voters, and a poll in Yediot Achronot showed Sharon even further ahead in the Likud, by 54 percent to 35 percent.

A few months ago, it was a foregone conclusion among Israeli pundits that Netanyahu would supplant Sharon as Likud leader sometime before the next national election in October 2003. That's no longer the case today.

Ironically, the new faith in Sharon, which started with Israel's invasion of the West Bank in late March in response to Palestinian terror attacks, gained further momentum through public perceptions of what happened in the Likud Central Committee.

Ultimately, though, Sharon's grip on power depends on two factors largely outside his control — the Labor Party's continued support for the national unity coalition and the level of Palestinian terror.

If terror returns to Israel's streets, voters may look further to the right. But if a peace process is launched and Sharon follows through, he probably will retain the broad-based popular support he enjoys today.

Labor leader and Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer has made it clear that he will continue to support Sharon only if he keeps peace options open. Ben-Eliezer bluntly warned that if Sharon allows the Likud Central Committee to dictate policy, Labor will leave the coalition.

The Israeli left is urging Ben-Eliezer not to wait until Sharon reveals his intentions. The night before the Likud meeting, an estimated 60,000 demonstrators gathered in Tel Aviv's Rabin Square calling on Israel to pull out of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and demanding that Labor leave the government.

The growing left-wing pressure does not affect Sharon directly, but it does resound in Labor.

The result is a chain reaction: Left-wingers pressure Labor to leave the government, and Labor leaders, who very much want to stay, pressure Sharon toward peacemaking.

Matters could come to a head at next month's Labor Party convention.

There the party will have to decide whether Sharon is moving quickly and seriously enough in the direction of viable Palestinian statehood — which Labor, the left and virtually the entire international community see as the only long-term solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. □

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

JEWISH WORLD

Arafat bill finds House support

A bill restricting Palestinian officials' travel privileges was introduced in the House of Representatives.

The Arafat Accountability Act, sponsored by Reps. Roy Blunt (R-Mo.) and Bob Menendez (D-N.Y.), also calls for additional sanctions against Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat and other officials, including seizing their U.S. assets and downgrading the PLO's Washington office. An identical bill was introduced last month in the Senate by Sens. Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) and Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.).

First lady blasts suicide bombers

U.S. first lady Laura Bush criticized child suicide bombers, citing Palestinian attacks on Israelis.

"Every parent, every teacher, every leader has a responsibility to condemn the terrible tragedy of children blowing themselves up to kill others," Bush said Tuesday in Paris, where she addressed a forum of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

DNA study eyes Jewish origins

Many Jewish communities were formed by unions between Jewish men and non-Jewish women, according to a new study.

This is the conclusion reached by a group of researchers who examined the DNA of women in nine communities around the world, including Morocco and the former Soviet republic of Georgia. The study, reported Tuesday in *The New York Times*, contradicts the view that most Jewish communities were founded by Jewish families fleeing persecution or were invited to settle by local rulers.

Shanghai JCC opens

A Jewish community center opened in Shanghai, China. The center, a project of the Lubavitch movement, was officially dedicated Sunday.

With the JCC's opening, "We become a complete community," said Rabbi Shalom Greenberg. The JCC will serve a community of some 250 people, including some expatriate businesspeople, students and teachers.

Former Hadassah president dies

Rose Matzkin, the 15th national president of Hadassah, died Monday at 88 after a lengthy illness. After holding numerous positions within Hadassah, Matzkin served as its president from 1972-1976, when she oversaw the opening of the Hadassah hospital on Mt. Scopus.

She also served on the executive committee of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations and was a member of President Ford's Task Force on Women.

Dennis Ross at center stage as new institute plans Jewish future

By Jessica Steinberg

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Dennis Ross, who served as Middle East envoy for the Clinton administration, is now handling an entirely different role with a think tank created by the Jewish Agency for Israel.

Ross was front and center when the Policy Planning Institute for the Jewish People opened its doors Tuesday in Jerusalem.

The institute "will examine the challenges, threats, needs and opportunities" confronting Jews worldwide, Jewish Agency officials said.

It also will "deal with formulating policy for the Jewish people by promoting professional studies" and fostering "long-term strategic thinking."

According to Ross, the newly appointed chairman of the institute's board of directors, "We need to be thinking about the problems emerging down the road.

"We're creating a group to think about these problems, putting policy and research together," said Ross, who also is director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy think-tank.

A group that includes Ross, Jewish Agency Chairman Sallai Meridor and Hebrew University political science professor Yehezkel Dror has been planning the institute for more than a year.

The group of 15 to 20 people — half from Israel, the rest from around the world — gathered several times to talk about major issues facing the Jewish people, including Israel's changing demographics and issues of Jewish identity.

The institute was first discussed before the Palestinian intifada began in September 2000.

At the time, Jewish leaders were concerned with Israel's lack of long-term tools to plan strategically for the future.

"We're a nation that excels in responding minute to minute," Meridor said. "But we need to also think and plan for the future."

Dror, a well-known Israeli policy planner, quoted the great thinker Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, who wrote about the need to choose between being carried along by fate or taking deliberate action to shape the future.

"That's our goal, to take a long-term look at the alternative futures of the Jewish people and Israel," Dror said this week.

What emerged from the deliberations was a collective decision to create the institute, which will be funded with \$1 million annually from the Jewish Agency, with additional funds expected from Jewish philanthropists.

The institute's research projects will be carried out by several paid research professionals, gathered into policy papers and eventually presented to government officials.

The think tank is being structured as a public, not-for-profit company, with 50 percent held by the Jewish Agency — and the other half by Jewish bodies and foundations.

It will be small, with a core of Jewish thinkers and practitioners guided by a board of directors.

Issues expected to be researched first include Israel's demography, as the Arab sector grows faster than the Jewish sector; the cohesion of the Jewish people; collective action and its financing; information technology in Jewish affairs; and the Jewish nation's global standing.

Ross said he decided to work for the institute because it was the least he could do "as a member of the Jewish people."

"I wouldn't do it if I didn't think it was important," he said. "I think it will prove itself."

According to the institute's founders, policy papers won't emerge immediately.

Once there are position papers that identify the problems and make recommendations, it will be up to the institute's board of directors — as well as its partners, the United Jewish Communities and the Jewish Agency — to talk to various governments and transform stances into policy. □

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Jewish nursery schools breed high potential, low investment

By Julie Wiener

NEW YORK (JTA) — With their abundant classroom hours, impressionable young students and highly involved parents, Jewish nursery schools have the power to help shape the Jewish identity of children and their families.

But only 14 percent of American Jewish youngsters are enrolled in such programs.

And many Jewish early childhood programs are not as effective as they might be at teaching Judaism because their educators lack strong backgrounds in Jewish education and the programs' goals for religious education are often vague.

Those are among the findings of a new study conducted by the Jewish Early Childhood Education Partnership, a new national group that aims to "sensitize and inform local and national Jewish communities about the power and potential of early childhood education."

Based on a survey of 152 nursery school directors in 28 states, the study is believed to be the first national research focusing exclusively on this age, which has in the past been "underestimated," said Ilene Vogelstein, the education partnership's director.

Most Jewish nursery schools are based in synagogues, Jewish community centers and day schools.

Vogelstein, who previously oversaw a Baltimore text-study program for Jewish early childhood educators, said she is hoping to get Jewish leaders to recognize that early childhood education is "not babysitting."

"These children are capable of greater intellectual abilities than we give them credit for and they need to have different kinds of experiences," she said.

There have been a number of new initiatives in the past few years — in the areas of professional development, curriculum development and even some experiments with Hebrew immersion programs for nursery school students. But early childhood programs generally get less attention and funds than other endeavors, such as day schools and family education.

As the study notes, nursery schools are the only formal Jewish education programs that generally do not receive Jewish federation allocations.

Among the study's other findings:

- There are an estimated 100,000 children under the age of 6 in Jewish early childhood programs in North America, including day school kindergartens. Seventy-seven percent of the students are Jewish, with Jewish enrollment ranging from 25 percent in some community center settings to 100 percent in some synagogue-based schools.

- More than one-quarter of the children enrolled in early childhood programs spend 30 hours or more per week there.

- There is a significant drop-off in enrollment between age 4 and 5, a trend assumed to result from the fact that many families switch their children to a public school for kindergarten.

- Sixty-one percent of the programs have mission statements, of which 88 percent list some Jewish education as part of their mission. But 12 percent of those with mission statements do not mention Judaism at all.

- Half the directors surveyed did not respond or did not know

the answer when asked if their teachers' religious philosophy is compatible with the school's, and 68 percent who did respond said they do not think it is important for the teachers to share the school's religious philosophy.

- Among the staff, 98 percent of early childhood professionals in Jewish programs are women, and 69 percent are Jewish. The percentage of non-Jewish teachers and assistant teachers in Jewish nursery schools is three times higher than reported in a 1994 Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education study.

- Forty-five percent of the Jewish teachers had no Jewish education beyond afternoon Hebrew school.

- The average salary for early childhood teachers is \$19,400 with no benefits. That is comparable to compensation in non-Jewish early childhood programs.

- The majority of Jewish nursery school directors are between the ages of 50 and 59, and an estimated 79 percent will reach retirement within 10-15 years.

Early childhood educators emphasize the importance of early childhood Jewish education.

Jewish nursery schools not only provide an early Jewish foundation for children, but serve as "natural feeders into synagogue schools" and "natural feeders into the Jewish community in general," Vogelstein said.

Recent research on brain development indicates that early childhood education is more influential over the long term than previously believed, Vogelstein said.

Ruth Pinkenson Feldman, the director of early childhood services at the Jewish Community Centers Association of North America and a member of the partnership's advisory board, said she was pleased with the study and hopes that it spurs more efforts to improve nursery schools.

In particular, she said, more funding is needed for "ongoing training, recruitment and enhancement" of early childhood educators.

Feldman said more work is also needed to recruit students, especially now that the schools are competing with public schools, some of which are now offering tuition-free pre-kindergarten programs as well as kindergarten.

"There are a lot of families we're not reaching at all," she said.

Once families opt for secular, rather than Jewish, nursery programs, they are on a "different calendar, social network and framework, and you might not get them back," she said.

Jonathan Woocher, executive vice president of the Jewish Education Service of North America and head of the United Jewish Communities' Renaissance and Renewal Pillar, said he welcomed the new study and is "looking as part of our own strategic planning at how we can expand work in the area of early childhood."

"Clearly, this is an important venue full of potential because of the interactions with families and young parents as well as children," he said.

So why has it not yet gotten more attention?

Woocher speculated that the attitude toward Jewish early childhood education mirrors the broader attitude toward early childhood education in the United States, which he said is "not close to the top of the list in terms of countries that invest in early childhood education."

"It's just taken awhile for us to catch up to the fact that the old ideal — that mothers stay home and early childhood education is done in the context of family — is no longer the way the world works," he said. □