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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Israeli soldier killed in Nablus

An Israeli soldier was killed and another seriously wounded during clashes Monday in Nablus. Sgt. Ari Weiss, 22, was taking part in a search for terrorists and arms caches when his unit came under Palestinian fire.

Weiss, a Ra'anana resident, immigrated to Israel with his family 10 years ago from Texas.

Bush signs Jerusalem bill into law

President Bush expressed strong reservations about a bill he signed that encourages recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. When he signed the bill into law Monday, Bush said he would treat the clauses regarding Jerusalem as a recommendation rather than an order.

Among other things, the bill urges the Bush administration to shift the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Treating the Jerusalem provisions as an order would "impermissibly interfere with the president's constitutional authority to conduct the nation's foreign affairs," Bush said.

Meanwhile, Palestinian officials reacted angrily to the newly signed legislation.

Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said Tuesday that Bush's signing of the bill "undermines all efforts being exerted to revive the peace process and put it back on track" and could cost lives.

Ben-Eliezer: Iraq won't hit Israel

Israeli Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer said he does not expect Iraq to attack Israel in case of a U.S. war against Iraq. Addressing the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee on Tuesday, Ben-Eliezer also said Iraq has the capability to launch surface-to-surface missiles, but these missiles have a limited ability to carry chemical and biological materials.

Cordon tightened around Arafat

Israeli soldiers tightened their cordon around Yasser Arafat's Ramallah headquarters. Snipers could be seen taking up positions on a building some 500 yards from the headquarters.

Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer said Tuesday the army believes that suspected terrorists remain holed up in the building with the Palestinian Authority president.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

With Iraq debate advancing, some groups are remaining mum

By Matthew E. Berger

WASHINGTON (JTA) — As Congress prepares to debate a resolution on war against Iraq, one might expect American Jewish groups to weigh in.

But while some groups have offered at least conditional support for the administration's goals, other groups are remaining mute.

In fact, some groups have timed their debates so that they take place only after a resolution has been approved on Capitol Hill.

"Once this became very politicized, we were all forced to take a step back," one American Jewish leader said.

Jewish groups have been trying to keep a low profile on the Iraq issue.

While many see Iraqi President Saddam Hussein as a threat to Israeli and American interests, they also have concerns about the effects of unilateral action by the United States and worry about the region's stability after a war.

Others are trying to distance themselves from the debate to counter any claims that the United States is going to war on Israel's behalf.

So far, several American Jewish groups have expressed support for President Bush's Sept. 12 speech to the U.N. General Assembly, in which he called for regime change in Iraq and said America would act alone if necessary to eliminate Iraq's capability to develop weapons of mass destruction.

The Anti-Defamation League supported the speech, as did the American Jewish Congress and the Zionist Organization of America.

Many other groups expressed support for the president's sentiments but did not take a formal stand.

B'nai B'rith International sent a letter to the president last Friday, complimenting Bush's leadership and supporting the proposed congressional resolution authorizing military action against Iraq.

The Orthodox Union is expected to do the same this week.

"The debate has reached a point of critical mass and we felt it was important to lay out our position now," said the executive vice president of B'nai B'rith International, Daniel Mariaschin, noting that there has been talk of an attack on Iraq for more than a year.

Some other groups have offered conditional support for U.S. action.

The Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations last week decided to support U.S. action against Iraq, but only after nonviolent strategies have been exhausted and international and European support has been sought.

The Jewish War Veterans expressed support for a strike against Iraq's weapons capabilities, but came out against an American invasion or the deployment of ground troops.

Many other groups have yet to take a stand. Several American Jewish leaders said they had to consult with their membership or boards, while others said that now was not the right time to weigh in.

"If we are going to speak for Conservative congregations, while you can't take a poll of 800 congregations, we are trying to be fair and honest and get a pulse," said Rabbi Jerome Epstein, executive vice president of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism.

Epstein expects his organization to announce its policy in coming days. Expressing

MIDEAST FOCUS

Official: Siege boosted Arafat

The Israeli army siege of Yasser Arafat's headquarters in Ramallah gave the Palestinian leader a temporary boost, a senior Israeli military intelligence official said.

The official made the remarks Tuesday during a special meeting of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee. Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer said the government had taken this possibility into account before the siege, but had decided that Arafat's standing was so low that a boost would not matter much.

Report: Saudi sermons full of hate

Sermons in the main mosques of Saudi Arabia focus mainly on anti-Semitic themes, according to a new report.

In the report by the Middle East Media Research Institute, translations of sermons from a number of Saudi mosques show that Jews are the central issue of many sermons, in which preachers refer to them as "apes and pigs."

Israel bars prayer at Joseph Tomb

Israeli Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer said he issued an order barring Jewish worshippers from visiting Joseph's Tomb in Nablus.

Speaking before the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee on Tuesday, Ben-Eliezer said the ban was issued for safety reasons, adding that anyone trying to enter the area would be arrested.

Israeli Arabs mark riots

Israeli Arabs held peaceful rallies to mark the second anniversary of riots in northern Israel during which 13 people were killed by police. Police were on heightened alert Tuesday in northern Israel, but they were instructed not to enter Arab towns unless there were disturbances, Israel Radio reported.

concern both about the issues at hand and about perceptions, some Jewish leaders would prefer to speak out once the congressional resolution has passed — which many see as inevitable — and American action is a foregone conclusion.

Foremost is a real concern that the Bush administration has yet to lay out details of its vision — including an exit plan for American troops, whether Israel should be allowed to retaliate if attacked by Iraq and what type of Iraqi regime the United States envisions after the war.

But the concern also stems from deeper emotional views on whether the Jewish community should be out front in this effort.

Some say that Jews, who traditionally vote Democratic, should not be stumping for a Republican president.

Others say Bush's strong support for Israel places a responsibility on Jewish leaders to back his war plans.

There also is concern that, if the Jewish community is too vocal in its support, some will conclude that the war is being fought for Israel — especially considering several Jews, including Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, are among the more hawkish voices on military action.

"It makes the average Jewish American uncomfortable that there are people in the administration, who just happen to be Jewish, who are the strongest advocates for regime change," one American Jewish leader said.

In 1991, Jewish leaders felt the backlash from Persian Gulf War opponents such as conservative commentator Pat Buchanan, who claimed the United States was fighting for Israel.

When Iraq's foreign minister claims that the current U.S. plans to attack are part of a Zionist conspiracy, those concerns resurface.

"We have more variables in our calculations this time, and they are scary variables," one Jewish leader said.

In an action that Jewish leaders say is symbolic, the membership of the Jewish Council on Public Affairs last week chose, by a 3-1 margin, to postpone a vote on whether to support the president's congressional resolution.

Hannah Rosenthal, JCPA's executive director, said there is a "clear consensus" that Saddam poses a threat to the United States, Israel and the world, and that there needs to be a response to that.

"What that response is, is where you are not going to find a clear consensus," she said.

The JCPA includes many members of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, and Jewish officials said they believe the vote reflects a wide divide among Jewish groups and constituencies.

But Malcolm Hoenlein, the executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents, said a draft statement of consensus will be sent to groups this week, and will be voted on next week. □

Labor strains showing at convention

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Tensions over whether Israel's Labor Party should remain in the government erupted at a party convention.

In a move that could lead to early elections in Israel, members voted Monday night that the party leadership insist on changes in the state budget before a first vote is held in the Knesset.

The decision was a political blow to party chairman Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, who had proposed that Labor support the budget in its first vote and demand the changes in subsequent votes.

The meeting was punctuated by fiery speeches by Ben-Eliezer and his two rivals for the party leadership, longtime Labor legislator Haim Ramon and Haifa Mayor Amram Mitzna.

Ramon accused Labor of being herded like sheep in the Likud-led government, adding that "you know what happens to sheep at Ariel Sharon's ranch."

Mitzna also called on Labor to leave the government.

Ben-Eliezer insisted that Labor was not just a paler version of Likud. □



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JEWISH WORLD

Groups duel over Palestinian tour

The Zionist Organization of America is protesting a U.S. tour by the top Palestinian official in Jerusalem.

The ZOA is urging New York's Congregation B'nai Jeshurun to reverse its decision to host Sari Nusseibeh on Thursday. Calling Nusseibeh a "longtime supporter of violence against Israel," ZOA promised to picket the event.

ZOA also issued a report titled "The Truth About Sari Nusseibeh, Arafat's Man In Jerusalem," which cites a recent appearance by Nusseibeh on Qatari television alongside a Hamas leader and the mother of a suicide bomber.

Americans for Peace Now, which is sponsoring the tour, condemned ZOA's campaign as a right-wing attempt to "defame" Nusseibeh, who the group said has urged a halt to Palestinian suicide attacks. Peace Now also issued its own pro-Nusseibeh report.

The tour, which included stops in Los Angeles and Chicago, has Nusseibeh appearing alongside several Israeli peace activists.

Federation names new leader

The Baltimore Jewish federation has a new president.

Marc Terrill, a federation veteran who most recently served as executive vice president under Darrell Friedman, will assume the position on July 1, 2003, when Friedman retires.

Sharon called a 'deranged killer'

Columbia University professor Edward Said called Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon a "deranged killer of Arabs."

Writing in the latest issue of the English-language Egyptian weekly Al-Ahram, Said also compared the current situation of the Palestinians to what European Jews experienced during the Holocaust. Said also wrote, "Yasser Arafat is now being made to feel like a hunted Jew by the state of the Jews."

Author, teacher Zvi Kolitz dies

Zvi Kolitz, a professor of Jewish philosophy, author and producer, died Sunday in New York at 89.

Kolitz wrote "Yosel Rakover Talks to God," a novel about a Holocaust victim's struggle to believe in God.

The book was so realistic that it initially was believed to be an actual diary found in the Warsaw Ghetto.

Kolitz also wrote and produced "Hill 24 Doesn't Answer," a film about Israel's 1948 War of Independence.

He later taught philosophy at Yeshiva University and wrote philosophical tracts, including "The Teacher, An Existential Approach to Bible."

Sharon visit to Moscow shows deepening ties with the Kremlin

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's visit this week shows the growing seriousness of Israel-Russia relations, Jewish observers here said.

"After Sept. 11, and with Russia moving closer to G-8 membership, this visit is less of a courtesy trip like before and more of a real political visit," said Mikhail Chlenov, president of a Jewish umbrella group called the Va'ad. He was referring to the progress Moscow has made over the last year toward acquiring full membership in a consortium of industrialized nations.

Yevgeny Satanovsky, the president of the Russian Jewish Congress and a leading analyst of Middle Eastern issues, went even further.

The scope of the issues Sharon discussed in Moscow allows one to talk of a "real breakthrough" in bilateral relations, Satanovsky said.

"The Kremlin hears, understand and shares many of Israel's concerns about security and about Iraq," Satanovsky said. "In that sense we are allies without any doubt."

Security concerns topped Sharon's agenda during two days of talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin and other Russian officials, including Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov and Russian Orthodox Patriarch Alexei II.

Putin focused on Israel's treatment of the Palestinians. Sharon played up the issue of Islamic terrorism and extremism as major threats for both Israel and Russia, which has been accused of brutality in its long-running war with Muslim separatists in Chechnya.

The only surprise was that the talks lasted for three-and-a-half hours — instead of the planned 90 minutes — and ended with Putin treating his guest to a kosher lunch with Israeli wine, which Sharon said he hadn't expected.

Putin welcomed Israel's decision to lift its siege of Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat's Ramallah headquarters and repeated calls for Israeli troops to leave Palestinian cities.

"We condemn terrorism in all its forms, and we welcome your decision to lift the siege," Putin told Sharon in the Kremlin.

Putin said Russia supports the U.S.-led anti-terror coalition and views Israel as an important member of the alliance. Sharon emphasized that the two countries are natural allies against "the serious threat of extremist Islam."

Israeli officials tried to convince Moscow to approve a possible U.S.-led attack on Iraq, with which Moscow has good relations.

Both Putin and Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov restated their calls for the use of diplomacy and U.N. instruments to resolve the standoff with Baghdad.

Sharon shared his concerns about alleged Iraqi and Iranian efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction.

Israeli officials believe the technology for such arms comes from Russia and other countries of the former Soviet Union, with or without official sanction from Moscow.

A Moscow daily reported that the Israeli delegation — which included the outgoing head of the Mossad, Ephraim Halevy — brought files allegedly proving links between Palestinian militants and Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

Speaking to leaders of the Russian Jewish community Monday night, Sharon praised Putin for his understanding of Israel's security concerns and said Putin shows considerable concern for the welfare of Russian-born Israelis.

Sharon said Putin has contacted him after terrorist attacks in Israel to check if there were Russian-sounding names among the victims.

But despite a considerable improvement over the last decade in its relations with Israel, the Kremlin has maintained its traditional support for the Palestinian cause.

Russia still misses no opportunity to express its solidarity with Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat, often releases pro-Palestinian statements to the media and regularly backs anti-Israel resolutions in the U.N. Security Council. Arafat's deputy, Mahmoud Abbas, was due to visit Moscow this week for talks. □

NEWS ANALYSIS

Israel fears withdrawal sends bad signal before possible Iraq war*By Leslie Susser*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The scenes from Yasser Arafat's headquarters in Ramallah this week played tricks on the mind.

The gaping ruins seemed to epitomize the collapse of the Palestinian Authority and demonstrate the P.A. president's impotence.

But Arafat's smiling emergence after Israel withdrew its tanks under heavy American pressure seemed to say just the opposite: that a resurgent Arafat was back in control, stronger politically than he had been for months, and that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's attempt to humiliate the Palestinian leader had backfired.

But that was not the worst news for Sharon.

The more dangerous problem, analysts here said, is that Israel's 12-day siege of Arafat's headquarters had cemented a subversive linkage in the Palestinian mind between the Palestinian and Iraqi issues.

It appears obvious that President Bush had so bluntly insisted on an Israeli pullback because he believed the siege was interfering with American plans for a war against Iraq.

The sight of America's strong ally humiliating an Arab leader did not play well in the Arab world, where Bush is trying to drum up Arab support for toppling Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

The firm U.S. intervention clearly made sense from an American point of view.

But for Sharon it creates a tactical problem.

The Palestinians might now be encouraged to plan major terrorist attacks in the belief that America's focus on Iraq essentially ties Israel's hands.

In the event of a Palestinian attack, Israel's dilemma would be acute: If it doesn't respond, it risks encouraging more attacks; if it does respond, it risks a showdown with Washington.

Writing in the Israeli daily *Yediot Achronot*, the former U.S. ambassador to Israel, Martin Indyk, argued that Arafat was likely to conclude that by "standing firm against Sharon, he could drive a wedge between the U.S. and Israel.

"The prime minister of Israel must find a way out of that trap before he finds himself, rather than Arafat, under heavy American pressure, and his options after the next suicide bombing even more limited," Indyk wrote.

Israeli intelligence officials are convinced that some Palestinian groups will try to exploit Israel's dilemma by escalating violence before and during an American attack on Iraq.

Indeed, one reason Sharon gave for besieging Arafat's headquarters was to show that Israel would not allow its hands to be tied.

That effort clearly boomeranged, and Israel now finds itself worse off from a deterrent point of view.

Addressing the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee on Tuesday, Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer admitted that "cardinal mistakes" had been made in the siege: No one had anticipated the vehemence of the American response, he said, as a result of which "our freedom of action has been curtailed."

The same perceived constraints could encourage Hezbollah

terrorists to open hostilities on Israel's northern border. But analysts insist that Washington would not restrain Israel in the same way if Hezbollah bombarded Israel's northern towns and villages.

"Hezbollah knows this, and so do their Syrian and Iranian patrons," said Ze'ev Maoz, a strategic analyst at Tel Aviv University.

Still, the Lebanese for weeks have been exploiting Israeli restraint in the run-up to an Iraq war to divert the Wazzani River to irrigate villages in southern Lebanon.

After an initial bellicose warning, the Israeli prime minister acknowledged in late September that, because of Iraq, the time was not propitious for military action.

He said Israel would have to try to resolve the problem in coordination with the United States.

According to left-wing critics of Sharon's government, the Ramallah siege may have another negative consequence for Israel: Arafat's resurrection as a popular hero may have slowed down moves toward change in the Palestinian leadership, they say, moves the Israeli government says could help create a peace partner on the other side.

Critics point out that Palestinian plans to discuss the appointment of a prime minister alongside Arafat, which were to have taken place in his Ramallah compound, were postponed indefinitely because of the siege.

The day after the siege ended, Knesset member Ran Cohen of the Meretz Party accused the government of having nipped Palestinian reform plans in the bud.

But other analysts downplay the significance of Arafat's return to center stage.

His renewed popularity may well prove fleeting, they say, noting that the forces for change on the Palestinian side remain as determined as ever.

For one, Mahmoud Abbas, better known as Abu Mazen, the Arafat deputy discussed as a potential prime minister, continues to speak about nonviolence and chart a new political course.

"There were many mistakes in this last intifada, and turning to the use of arms against Israel was the decisive one," Abbas said in an interview broadcast this week on LBC, a Lebanese television channel.

Turning the intifada into a peaceful, popular struggle is "the only way to convince the world of the justice of our cause," Abbas said.

So while some Palestinians may try to escalate violence to exploit Israel's current constraints, others are talking nonviolent resistance, hoping to exploit American goodwill after a strike on Baghdad.

America may then want to rebuild ties with the Arab world by pressuring Israel to make concessions to the Palestinians, and a nonviolent Palestinian leadership would be in a much better position to press the advantage, the thinking goes.

Indeed, according to unconfirmed reports, Israeli and Palestinian negotiators already are looking ahead to the day after an attack on Iraq and are talking peace in a secret channel that bypasses Arafat.

Sharon's representative is said to be outgoing Mossad chief Ephraim Halevy. □

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