

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Court: No commandments display

The U.S. Supreme Court barred the display of a Ten Commandments monument on the grounds of Kentucky's state Capitol.

Without comment, the court Monday let stand an appeals court ruling that had said the display would violate the constitutional separation between church and state.

The monument features the words "I am the Lord thy God" on it, followed by the commandments. There also are two small stars of David and a Jesus symbol on the display.

In a related development, the American Jewish Committee urged a federal court to declare unconstitutional a Ten Commandments memorial recently erected in the rotunda of Alabama's highest court.

Sharon open to talks with Syria

Israel is willing to hold negotiations with Syria without preconditions, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said Monday.

Sharon made the remarks in a meeting with Rep. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.) in Jerusalem, Army Radio reported.

Lantos was visiting Israel after meeting with Syrian President Bashar Assad in Damascus. In a statement broadcast on Israel's Channel One television, Lantos said he had passed a message from Assad to Sharon that the Syrian leader wants to talk about outstanding issues with Israel.

Israel marks Holocaust day

Israel celebrated Holocaust Memorial Day. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said one of the lessons of the Holocaust is that security and peace can only be achieved for the Jews through strength.

"We are peace seekers with all our might, but we have learned this: We will not achieve security and peace with weakness and soft-heartedness, but with strong-spiritedness and boldness and readiness to guard from every guard post what is valuable and essential to our future," Sharon said at the official torch-lighting ceremony at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem.

Holocaust Remembrance Day this year marks the 60th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The theme of commemorations this year is Jewish resistance to oppression.

Elections for French Muslim Council give alarming result for Jewish groups

By Philip Carmel

PARIS (JTA) — French Jews may have been hoping that the election of the first council to represent France's 5 million-strong Muslim community would act as a moderating influence on its members.

They received a rude awakening earlier this month.

Representatives from more than 900 mosques across France who cast their ballots for the new Muslim Council delivered a stinging slap to moderate candidates backed by the government.

The result was a personal defeat for the man seen as the modern face of French Islam, Dalil Boubakeur, the rector of Paris' Grand Mosque.

The main winner was the National Federation of French Muslims, a group closely linked to the large Moroccan community in France and which receives financial and political backing from Rabat. The Moroccans are regarded as more conservative than the more integrated Algerians although they are more mainstream than the fundamentalist French Union of Islamic Organizations.

Candidates from the union established themselves as the second largest grouping with 14 seats.

Trailing behind came candidates backed by the Paris Mosque, which only succeeded in placing six of its supporters on the council.

The result is particularly troubling for the Jewish community, since it comes as anti-Semitic incidents are at their highest level in more than a decade — and the vast majority are carried out by Muslim youths.

French Jews and government officials had hoped the election of moderate elements to the council would provide Boubakeur with increased authority to take on the more radical elements within the Muslim community.

Almost 200 years after Napoleon set up the consistorial system as a means to fully integrate France's Jewish community, Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy decided that the time had arrived to "bring French Islam out of the garages and basements."

Sarkozy's intention was to provide a representative voice for the Muslim community, as well as to assure it of state support for services such as the provision of mosques and halal meat, and burial rights within municipal cemeteries.

Moreover, he had sought to unite the Muslim community around Boubakeur and diminish the role played by foreign-born preachers, whose more fundamentalist brand of Islam is taking root in mosques in working-class suburbs around the big cities.

Sarkozy's plan was based around Boubakeur to such an extent that he was guaranteed the post of council president, whatever the election results.

Apart from Boubakeur's moderation, the Paris Mosque also is closely associated with France's largely integrated Algerian community. President Jacques Chirac had promised his Algerian counterpart during a recent state visit that the Algerians would maintain their traditional hegemony on the new council.

For the government and the Jewish community, the most worrying sign was the second-place showing by the French Union of Islamic Organizations, an organization with strong links to the Muslim Brotherhood fundamentalist group.

Such fears were exacerbated by the union's reaction to the election. In fact, union officials said, the group's success was even greater than it appeared.

"A lot of the Moroccans elected on the" National Federation of French Muslims "lists are closer to us than to the" federation, Lhaj Thami Breeze, president of the union,

MIDEAST FOCUS

Arafat's group OKs Abbas

Yasser Arafat's Fatah Party approved the Cabinet proposed by the Palestinian Authority's prime minister-designate, Mahmoud Abbas.

The move is believed to pave the way for Palestinian legislators to OK the Cabinet on Tuesday.

President Bush has said he would unveil the "road map" for Israeli-Palestinian peace once Abbas, also known as Abu Mazen, takes power.

New chief rabbi challenged

A Tel Aviv accountant petitioned Israel's High Court against the appointment of Rabbi Yona Metzger as Israel's chief Ashkenazi rabbi.

The petition filed Monday cites legal opinions that say Metzger is not qualified to be a religious court judge.

It also said that allegations of fraud and other improprieties involving Metzger were not investigated in return for his commitment not to stand for chief rabbi of Tel Aviv in 1998. The allegations included repeated forging of witnesses' signatures on religious marriage contracts and unlawfully demanding payment for performing weddings, the daily Ha'aretz reported.

In a separate development, the daily Ma'ariv reported over the weekend that allegations of sexual harassment of male youths had been leveled against Metzger. Metzger aides have dismissed the allegations as a smear campaign.

SARS checks at Ben-Gurion

Israel will begin screening passengers who arrive at Ben-Gurion Airport from areas affected by SARS.

The Health Ministry said passengers would be examined by doctors at the airport and would be asked to fill out forms. The measures were expected to primarily affect travelers from China, Hong Kong and Toronto, Israel Radio reported.



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told a recent conference of his organization.

The union's conference, which had the feel of a victory rally, was attended by Sarkozy, a clear indication that the government is aware where real power now lies in the Muslim community.

The final makeup of the Muslim Council's General Assembly remains unclear because there will be runoff elections in certain areas.

Nevertheless, leading moderates such as the imam of Marseille, who has appeared on platforms together with Jewish leaders at rallies against anti-Semitism, and the rector of Lyon's Grand Mosque who attended a service at a synagogue in the city's suburbs last year following a fire-bombing incident, are unlikely to win.

And the lack of support for Boubakeur, as well as other candidates who have attempted to reach out to the Jewish community during the recent wave of anti-Semitic attacks, deeply concerns Jewish leaders.

Officially, Jewish organizations were supportive of the moves to integrate the Muslim community, though they largely declined to comment after the elections for fear of further harming the more moderate groups on the council.

According to Bernard Kasovitch, who is responsible for relations with the Muslim community for the CRIF umbrella organization of secular French Jews, the poor showing of candidates supported by Boubakeur proved that in the current climate it is difficult for moderate candidates to win support in their own community. The test for the council is how it adapts to the secular values of the French state, he said.

"They have to choose between whether they want to be guided by the sharia" — Islamic law — "or by the principles of the republic," Kasovitch said. "They should also be careful not to choose the wrong target. I tell them that Jews are not against Muslims, but rather that we want the same things."

Perhaps the first indication that the union is not prepared to tone down its demands came at its conference last week.

At first, Sarkozy received a rapturous ovation for his backing of the Muslim Council. But he was widely jeered when he said he would insist that Muslim women be photographed bareheaded for their national identity cards.

The union position also contrasts sharply with that of Boubakeur, who has called on French Muslims "to live with the times."

"It's not because the French law says so that we should change our behavior, but because the world itself is changing," Boubakeur said.

For his part, Kasovitch, who with Boubakeur co-authored a book that promotes tolerance and understanding between French Jews and Muslims, said the union was "choosing the wrong fight."

"The issue of head covering within state institutions is a deliberate provocation. The government is not against religious expression," Kasovitch said. "It's a shame because there are so many things that need to be done for the Muslim community."

Ultimately, the elections have presented a vision of French Muslims that is considerably more extremist in tone than either the Jewish community or Sarkozy had hoped for. Nevertheless, Sarkozy was quick to reassure the Jewish community.

"The danger" of extremism "would have been there even if we had done nothing," he said. "It is important that the republic engages in dialogue with Muslims — and that, in itself, is a factor in maintaining a peaceful climate."

But "this mutual recognition also gives us more latitude to fight against those imams who break the law in calling for violence and anti-Semitism," Sarkozy warned. "They will be expelled." □

Olive tree honors Jewish soldiers

ROME (JTA) — An olive tree from Jerusalem was planted in Rome to commemorate the "Jewish brigade" that helped fight the fascist regime in Italy during World War II.

The tree was planted near Rome's Venice Piazza last Friday. April 25 is celebrated in Italy as Liberation Day. Earlier in the day, some Jews pulled out of a Liberation Day parade after a group of far-left, pro-Palestinian participants unfurled banners with anti-Israel slogans. □

JEWISH WORLD

ADL defends Paige

The Anti-Defamation League is defending Education Secretary Rod Paige, saying the secretary was misquoted when he said he prefers Christian values in schools.

The national director of the ADL, Abraham Foxman, said "it's clear that the secretary's words were not only taken out of context, they were changed to ignite a controversy."

Foxman also said the Baptist Press reporter who authored the article is no longer with the news organization.

Foxman's comments came after Paige addressed the group on Sunday.

Paige praised the ADL's leadership in education issues, and said he believes "education is a national security issue of a first order."

Study: Anti-Semitic incidents up

There were more violent anti-Semitic acts last year than there have been for more than a decade, according to a new report.

There were 311 cases worldwide, according to the Tel Aviv University report, which was issued jointly with the World Jewish Congress on Monday. Western Europe led the world in terms of anti-Semitic violence, with France, Belgium and the United Kingdom topping the list.

Israel gears up for tourists

Israel's Tourism Ministry is preparing a new campaign aimed at attracting Jewish tourists and Christian supporters of Israel.

The campaign will be targeted at tourists who visited Israel during the past two years, but refrained from doing so during the war in Iraq. It also will target new audiences, with the message that now is a good time to visit Israel because of regional political and security changes after the Iraq war.

Some 862,000 visits were made to Israel in 2002. The ministry hopes 1 million visits will be made in 2003.

Swedish cemetery defaced

A Jewish cemetery in Sweden was fire-bombed. The attackers fire-bombed the purification room at the cemetery in Malmo, but the room was not destroyed. A few hours earlier, a Star of David was painted on the city's central mosque.

Boston gets liberators memorial

A monument dedicated to soldiers who liberated Nazi concentration camps was unveiled in Boston. The Liberators Monument, unveiled Sunday, is adjacent to the New England Holocaust Memorial.

As Argentina heads to runoff, Jews want anyone but Menem

By Florencia Arbiser

BUENOS AIRES (JTA) — With more skepticism than hope, Myriam Gartenkrot cast her vote for Argentine president on Sunday morning.

But the results were what she wanted least: Former President Carlos Menem placed first, winning a slot in a May 18 runoff, the first in the country's history.

"I don't have a strong conviction about who is the best choice," Gartenkrot said. "What I'm sure about is that I don't want to go back to the Menem era, when the terrorist attacks took place."

She was referring to the 1992 bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, which killed 29 people, and the 1994 bombing of the AMIA cultural center, which killed 85.

Both attacks took place during Menem's time in office, which lasted from 1989 to 1999.

Critics accused Menem of corruption, and said his stewardship of the country led to the current economic meltdown.

In addition, a witness in the 1994 bombing case has accused Menem of receiving a \$10 million bribe to cover up Iranian participation in the bombings, for which the Iranian-backed Hezbollah terror group remains the prime suspect. Menem denies the charge, saying it is politically motivated.

Menem still won 24 percent of the votes in Sunday's first round, more than any of the other 17 candidates. But the run-off is up for grabs, as some two-thirds of Argentines say they will never vote for Menem, according to several polls.

Menem's opponent will be Nestor Kirchner, the governor of Santa Cruz province in Patagonia, who won 22 percent of the vote on Sunday. Kirchner has the support of Argentina's current president, Eduardo Duhalde.

Both Menem and Kirchner belong to the Peronist party, as did another first-round candidate, Adolfo Rodriguez Saa, who got 14 percent of the vote.

Two candidates representing new political forces had strong showings on Sunday: Ricardo Lopez Murphy, a conservative former economy minister, got 16 percent of the vote and placed first in Buenos Aires.

A left-leaning coalition headed by Elisa Carrio got 14 percent of the vote, without even investing in campaign advertising.

No single candidate had overwhelming Jewish support. And some voters weren't moved by any of the candidates.

"I come because it's a civic duty" — voting is obligatory for citizens over age 18 — "but I am a clear example of the impoverished middle class and have little faith that something can change soon," said Gartenkrot, a volunteer at the Iona Jewish day school and community center, where her youngest son, Axel, studies with a full scholarship.

Gartenkrot's husband, Jorge Podostrej, a former shop owner, lately has been employed in a clothing shop and receives a salary of less than \$300 dollars per month.

Their oldest daughter, Natalia, 16, also has a scholarship at a non-Jewish private school. To survive during the country's economic crisis, the family shares its small first-floor apartment with Jorge's mother.

Jose Zayat, 66, opened a kosher candy shop two weeks ago, thanks to Jewish communal support. His shop is in the Once neighborhood, home to many religious Jews.

Zayat used to have three shops but had to close them five years ago because of the economic crisis. "As part of an impoverished middle class group, I vote for the least bad candidate, not out of conviction," Zayat told JTA.

Eliau, 59, a Moroccan-born rabbi who asked that his last name not be published, passed by Zayat's shop.

"I just hope Menem won't become president after the runoff. It's crucial for Jews, after the terrorist attacks," Eliau said.

Before the elections, DAIA, the political umbrella organization of the Jewish community, invited each candidate to present his or her views to Jewish leaders.

Both Menem and Rodriguez Saa said they did not have time to attend the DAIA meetings. □

BACKGROUND

In postwar Iraq, Shi'ites trying to assert some political power

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Twenty years ago in Lebanon, the Shi'ite Muslims turned within a matter of weeks from a suppressed community into the torchbearers of a national struggle.

Now it seems they may do the same in Iraq.

When Israel invaded Lebanon in June 1982, the Shi'ites in the South initially greeted the Israeli soldiers as liberators from PLO oppression.

However, once the Shi'ites realized that Israel planned to stay for a while, they became the spearhead of Lebanese resistance, forming the fundamentalist terrorist group Hezbollah as well as a secular militia, Amal.

Iraq's Shi'ites have not even given America the benefit of doubt. Only a few days after the fall of Baghdad earlier this month, Shi'ite clergymen already were lifting the banner of resistance against the continued presence of American troops in the country.

Like Lebanon's Shi'ites, the Shi'ites of Iraq enjoy the support of neighboring Iran, where a fundamentalist Shi'ite regime took power in the 1979 Revolution.

In the past few days, Shi'ite clerics have been streaming from Iraq to the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala, Iraq's major Shi'ite teaching centers.

In addition, hundreds of Iraqi students who studied at Iran's religious seminaries have begun returning to Iraq.

On the face of it, it seems a return of exiled sons. But experts say it also represents an orchestrated attempt by Shi'ite radicals to export Iran's Islamic Revolution — and the Iraqi ground is ripe.

Shi'ite militants from both banks of the Shatt al-Arab waterway do not want to waste any time. The Iraqi-born Grand Ayatollah Kadhem al-Husseini al-Haeri has issued a fatwa, or religious edict, calling on Shi'ites to "seize the first possible opportunity to fill the power vacuum in the future administration of Iraq and play their role in reconstructing their country."

Shi'ites make up around 60 percent of Iraq's population, some 13 million out of an estimated population of 22.4 million.

Shi'ism is Islam's second largest branch after Sunni Islam, representing about 10 percent of the total Muslim world.

The sect emerged in the middle of the seventh century as "Shi'at Ali," or the faction of Ali Ibn Abu-Taleb, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad. Ali, who was in power from 656-661, was just the fourth caliph, or Islamic ruler, after the religion was founded.

Following Ali's assassination, the Shi'ites claimed that it had been Ali's right to succeed Muhammad, and that the previous caliphs had been usurpers. They maintained that only the descendants of Ali and his wife, Fatima — Muhammad's daughter — were entitled to rule the Muslim community.

From its early days, Shi'ism differed from mainstream Islam in its strict adherence to the Koran as a divine revelation, and to Muhammad's descendants as divinely blessed.

Consequently, the Shi'ites traditionally believed their religious leaders held a higher degree of political legitimacy than did the state — similar to the haredi perception of the rabbinical establishment's authority vis-a-vis the secular Israeli state.

There are an estimated 165 million Shi'ites worldwide. They

are the majority in Iran and Iraq, and large numbers of Shi'ites live in Syria, Lebanon, India, Pakistan and parts of Central Asia.

Despite religious differences, in recent years several Shi'ite leaders, including Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, advocated rapprochement and solidarity with Sunni Islam.

The Shi'ites in Arab countries have not enjoyed political status and power proportional to their numbers. In Iraq, for example, the ruling Sunni minority has oppressed the Shi'ites and excluded them from the highest levels of political power.

Yet Iraq's Shi'ites remained loyal to Iraq during the 1980-88 war against Shi'ite Iran. Nevertheless, groups of pro-Iranian Shi'ites have been active in Iraq.

The main Shi'ite opposition group in Iraq has been the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, which receives financial and strategic backing from Iran.

In March 1991, just after the Persian Gulf War, Shi'ite strongholds in southern Iraq staged a widespread revolt against Saddam Hussein's rule.

Western coalition forces were close at hand but did not intervene, and the Iraqi army was able to reassert control over urban areas by midyear.

International concern for the Shi'a resulted in the declaration, in August 1991, of a no-fly zone below the 32nd parallel, where fixed-wing Iraqi aircraft were forbidden.

Extreme poverty, along with the murder — allegedly by Saddam's regime — of some senior Shi'ite religious leaders prompted widespread unrest in many southern towns and in Shi'ite areas of Baghdad in late 1998 and 1999.

The reaction of Saddam's security forces was harsh: According to some reports, the Iraqi government ordered the burning and shelling of villages and had dams built to divert water from the marshes in southern Iraq, depriving the Shi'ites of food and cover.

Last week, in Karbala in central Iraq, Shi'ites staged a massive religious celebration that had been banned during the Saddam era.

Suddenly Iraqi Shi'ites smelled the sweet odor of political freedom. But instead of thanking the Americans for that freedom, Shi'ites, many of whom oppose Western influence, called on U.S. troops to leave Iraq.

Other expressions of freedom were the appointment of neighborhood committees run by Shi'ite religious leaders, the handing down of fatwas calling for a Shi'ite takeover of the country and the self-appointment of local mayors and governors.

With the Shi'ites' new sense of power came local power struggles. Only a few days after religious leader Abdul Majid al-Khoei returned from his London exile, he was stabbed to death by Shi'ite rivals in the shrine of Najaf, causing further agitation in the community.

How fast will the Shi'ite fire spread? The answer depends not just on the local scene but on possible outside support, mostly from Iran.

The Bush administration has issued stern warnings to Iran not to back Shi'ite resistance to the American presence in Iraq.

At the same time, Gen. Jay Garner, the U.S. official responsible for leading the reconstruction of Iraq, convened a meeting with some prospective Iraqi leaders in an effort to stall an "Iranization" process.

As Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said last week, an Iranian-style government in Iraq "isn't going to happen."

At the least, it would be an unintended — and, from America's perspective, most worrying — consequence of the war. □