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86th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Burns meets with Abbas

The new Palestinian Authority prime minister met with the U.S. assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, William Burns.

Burns said after Monday's meeting with Mahmoud Abbas that both Israel and the Palestinians must take steps to advance a new plan for peace.

Burns called on the Palestinians to fight terrorism and on Israel to ease the suffering of Palestinians in the territories, Israel Radio reported.

Burns is holding talks with Israeli and Palestinian officials this week ahead of U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell's arrival in the region next week.

Israel rejected Syrian proposal

Israel rejected a Syrian proposal to resume peace negotiations. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's office confirmed Monday that an Israeli businessman was involved in contacts before the war in Iraq to discuss an initiative to renew negotiations, but said the proposal did not seem serious.

The daily Ma'ariv reported Monday that an Israeli businessman who was a former senior Foreign Ministry official had met in Jordan with Syrian President Bashar Assad's brother.

Fallen soldiers remembered

Israel's memorial day for its fallen soldiers began Monday evening. Commemorations opened with a siren, followed by a memorial service.

The total number of fallen, including the 236 soldiers who have died in the intifada, is 21,540.

Remembrance Day ends Tuesday night with a ceremony on Mount Herzl, which also marks the beginning of celebrations of Israel's 55th Independence Day.

E.U. wanted to involve Arafat

The European Union wanted to present a copy of the 'road map' for Israeli-Palestinian peace to Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat, but the United States intervened.

Diplomatic sources say E.U. leaders felt Arafat should receive the document — crafted by the "Quartet" of the United States, European Union, Russia and the United Nations — because he is still a relevant player in the political process, but the United States disagreed.

FOREIGN JOURNAL

Moderate Iraqi Shi'ites seem tolerant, but how much power will they have?

By Matthew Gutman

BAGHDAD, Iraq (JTA) — For now at least, the highest Shi'ite imams in Iraq are practicing what they preached throughout three decades of oppression and assassination under Saddam Hussein — tolerance.

On April 22, after he called on millions of Shi'ites to return loot plundered from the Baghdad National Museum, Sa'id Kamal Din Al-Mukadas Al-Ruweifi gave museum officials 22 Torah scrolls and manuscripts, along with dozens of other artifacts that had been stolen.

In mid-April, as the American invasion of the city toppled the regime, Iraqi looters stripped the museum of artifacts, air conditioners, even door hinges.

In an interview with JTA, Ruweifi, a follower of the Al-Hawza Supreme Clerical Council in Najaf and the arbiter of Islamic law for about half of Baghdad's Shi'ites, looked puzzled when asked why he returned the Torah scrolls.

The two purplish, horn-like smudges on his forehead, marks of a devout Muslim who prostrates himself in prayer five times a day, inched upward: "True Islam respects other people's belief in God. Muslims respect others, whether they be Christians or Jews, as long as they respect Islam."

His voice husky with age and sickness, Ruweifi added that Jews once thrived in Iraq: "We knew many of them. They were traders and lived and worked in the Al-Jorjia district in Baghdad," he said. "We had nothing against them. In Iraq a person's religion does not matter too much to the people."

According to U.S. Marine Col. Mathew Bogdanos, who heads a task force charged with cataloging and retrieving the stolen artifacts, the "clergy has been instrumental in helping us."

The Torahs were delivered in a "wooden chest with rivets that was about a yard wide, full of scrolls and manuscripts," he said.

Bogdanos' task force had distributed leaflets, put advertisements on the one radio station still playing and walked the streets to convince looters that the "no questions asked" policy meant no questions asked," he said.

Little worked, until leaders like Ruweifi stepped in.

The response "was tremendous," Bogdanos said. "They made our job a lot easier."

Swathed in a black robe and bulky black turban, Ruweifi looks older, his spade-shaped beard much whiter than in the pictures on his living room wall.

Under Saddam, Iraq's Shi'ites endured suffering, assassination and deprivation. Imams that got too powerful were executed. Constant pressure by the regime may have contributed to the severe heart attack suffered by Ruweifi — an honorary title for a Shi'ite leader — which has left him with greatly reduced mobility.

The Shi'ites of Sadr City, a slum of more than a million people formerly known as Saddam City, routinely were rounded up by the paramilitary fedayeen groups and tortured, executed or forcefully conscripted. During a tour through the lawless sector, where gunfire crackles day and night, one encounters dozens of men with angry crimson marks on their ears, legs, chests and backs, legacies of torture under the Saddam regime.

The ugly face of the district evinces years of poor sanitation, barebones infrastructure, nonexistent health care and minimal education. Saddam purposely left the district in poverty and filth to prevent a possible Shi'ite rebellion against him.

Shi'ite leaders now command the allegiance of as much as 60 percent of the

MIDEAST FOCUS

Bombers, activists met for tea

The two British bombers involved in last week's suicide bombing in Israel had tea with members of the International Solidarity Movement, a group of pro-Palestinian activists. The men reportedly were with a group of Palestinians who met with ISM activists and then visited the site where ISM member Rachel Corrie was killed by an Israeli bulldozer earlier this year.

Israeli and British reports have said that the two men, one of whom succeeded in setting off his bomb in the April 30 attack that killed three people, entered Israel through the Gaza Strip by pretending to be ISM activists. A spokesman for ISM denied any connection.

Barghouti aide sentenced to life

A senior Fatah member was sentenced Monday to 14 consecutive life terms by an Israeli court.

Nasser Awis, who served as deputy to West Bank Fatah leader Marwan Barghouti, was found guilty last week of involvement in planning, funding and carrying out terrorist attacks that killed 14 Israelis.

De Klerk: Israel should de-nuke

Israel should voluntarily disarm its nuclear arsenal, former South African President F.W. De Klerk said. Addressing a meeting of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, De Klerk, who made the decision to dismantle South Africa's nuclear capacity in the early 1990s, said Israel could use the promise of disarmament to extract concessions from the Arabs.

Israeli population growing

Israel's population grew by 2.2 percent during the past year. According to statistics released on the eve of Israel's 55th Independence Day, the country's population stands at 6.7 million people.

According to the Central Bureau of Statistics, the 5.4 million Jews in Israel constitute 81 percent of the population. Israeli Arabs number 1.4 million.



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population.

"All we want is a constitutional democracy that represents the population of Iraq," Ruweifi said — in other words, a government that enshrines the Shi'ite's majority dominance.

The Al-Hawza seem to have dismissed the hard-line stance adopted by the Iran-sponsored Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq. That group rejects the U.S. presence in Iraq and supports rumors that the invasion was part of a Zionist plot to steal Iraq's oil wealth.

Residents of Sadr City even kicked out a few members of the Badr Brigades, the Supreme Council's military branch — mainly Iraqis who took shelter in Iran and returned with the war — when they ensconced themselves in a neighborhood school.

Magnanimity, or at least caution, colors the rhetoric of moderate Shia loyal to the Al-Hawza sect and to its leader, Sa'id Muhammed Al-Sistani.

Preaching last Friday at the Sunni Al-Rahman Mosque, built according to the colossal specifications of Saddam's megalomania, Qassen Al-Tahi, a chief Al-Hawza member, called on the thousands of Shi'ite faithful in attendance to follow the peaceful path of the prophet Mohammed.

Instead of whipping the crowd into a fury, Al-Tahi preached patience and tolerance.

"The Americans are civilized and admired in many respects," he said.

He advised his people to respect the Americans and hoped that the changeover to a new government goes smoothly, without affecting "women, children and the poor."

He also chastised the public for looting.

Not a word was spoken about the "Zionist plot" or about Israel. While Saddam used the Palestine question ceaselessly to win support across the Arab world, Israel seems to be of little importance to most ordinary Iraqis.

Especially in Sadr City, the Shi'ites seem wary of Palestinians here who glorified Saddam throughout his decades of brutality. According to reports, hundreds or thousands of Palestinians were kicked out of Iraq as soon as Baghdad fell.

"No," Ruweifi wheezed, "our duty to our people is to make them do good, to follow God's wishes, to stop the stealing and the lawlessness."

Part of this means returning the heritage of other religions, whose history is as long as anyone's here, Ruweifi said: "It is their country too."

The Jewish community in Iraq dates from the time of the Babylonian exile in 586 BCE. Even though the Persian king who conquered Babylon 70 years later allowed Jews to return to their homeland, the majority chose to stay put, as Babylon was far richer and more cosmopolitan than contemporary Jerusalem.

The majority of the community made aliyah in the late 1940s and early 1950s after growing tensions between the Arab world and the new Jewish state led to pogroms and anti-Semitism.

Today, a few dozen elderly Jews still live in Baghdad but they refused to be interviewed, fearing for their safety if their religion is publicized.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, Israel's government made some noise about "rescuing" Iraq's Jews by bringing them to Israel, but it was unclear how enthusiastic the Jews were about going, and the proposal has faded from the headlines.

As for the Jews who fled Baghdad pogroms for Israel in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Ruweifi believes they should be welcomed back.

"If elections bring freedom and people want to come back that is their choice. They are our brothers, we must respect all the minorities here," he said. □

Britain may outlaw kosher slaughter

LONDON (JTA) — Britain's most influential animal welfare body may outlaw kosher slaughter.

The semiofficial Farm Animal Welfare Council is scheduled to present a report next month to the British government that, among other proposals, will recommend that all animals in England, Scotland and Wales be stunned before being slaughtered.

Jewish authorities have ruled unanimously that such a move is unacceptable, and a group of Jewish leaders walked out of a meeting with the council in March when discussions broke down. □

JEWISH WORLD

Israeli envoy visits Paris mosque

Israel's ambassador to France visited Paris' Grand Mosque on Monday to congratulate the rector on his recent election as president of the new French Muslim Council. Nissim Zvili's meeting with Dalil Boubakeur was the first time an Israeli ambassador has visited the mosque.

"We exchanged views on the necessity of a Jewish-Muslim dialogue and our concern to preserve the peaceful coexistence between our two religious families," Boubakeur said.

Groups: Ruling won't affect us

A U.S. Supreme Court ruling allowing states to sue telemarketers won't affect Jewish charities, Jewish experts said. The Supreme Court ruled 9-0 Monday that states can sue telemarketers that mislead potential donors into thinking that most funds raised will go toward charitable use when, in fact, most of the money will be kept by the fund raiser.

"I think the implications for the Jewish community are rather slim," said Gary Tobin, president of the Institute for Jewish and Community Research. "Jewish organizations that use telemarketing firms don't use those kinds of firms. Why would they?"

Blair slurred on Mideast

A veteran British lawmaker accused Prime Minister Tony Blair of "being unduly influenced by a cabal of Jewish advisers" regarding the Middle East.

Eric Moonman, the president of Britain's Zionist Federation, called the remarks by Tam Dalyell, the longest-serving member of the British Parliament, "outrageous and highly inflammatory" and said he is considering bringing racism charges against Dalyell.

Liaison leaving White House

The White House's liaison to the Jewish community is stepping down. Sources tell JTA that Adam Goldman, who began working with President Bush in Texas in 1993, is leaving to pursue opportunities in the private sector.

Goldman was named by the National Journal in November as a "person to watch" in politics.

U.S. Russian Jews rally for Israel

Russian Jews across the United States will hold rallies and send petitions throughout the month in honor of Israel's 55th birthday.

Rallies are slated for New York, Chicago and Atlanta. The petition campaign, which will highlight support for the State of Israel and call on the U.S. government to remember Israel's security needs, is slated for cities such as Los Angeles and Milwaukee, according to a spokeswoman for the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society.

With search facing difficulties, Hillel opts for an interim leader

By Rachel Pomerance

NEW YORK (JTA) — Unable to attract its ideal candidate to succeed Richard Joel, Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life is expected to appoint Hillel consultant Avraham Infeld as interim director.

Joel, a visionary leader who gave the group a prestigious makeover, concluded his tenure April 30. He will assume the presidency of Yeshiva University in June.

Hillel's presidency and international directorship is considered one of the top positions in international Jewish communal service, and has gained prominence as campuses have blazed with activity surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Joel transformed Hillels from local campus chapels to full-service Jewish community centers boasting the theme of "Jewish renaissance," a buzzword he coined.

Infeld, an Israeli who founded the pluralistic Melitz educational organization, was unavailable for comment. Approval of his candidacy could take place as early as Tuesday.

Infeld also is president of Israel Forum, a volunteer program in Israel he helped found, and directed the planning process for birthright Israel, the free trip to Israel for 18- to 26-year-olds who have never been on a peer educational trip there.

He also served as director general of the Shalom Hartman Institute, the Jerusalem-based center for pluralist Jewish education, and Gesher Educational Affiliates, which promotes religious-secular dialogue.

Born in South Africa, Infeld immigrated in 1959 to Israel, where he graduated from Hebrew University with degrees in Bible and Jewish History, and later from Tel Aviv University's law school.

After narrowing the field to five, sources said Hillel's nominating committee offered the position to an Ivy-league educated, 30-something Bostonian who did not come from the Jewish professional world. But the man declined, saying he didn't want to relocate.

Two other candidates have since dropped out of the running, the sources said.

Throughout the search process, sources said, the nominating committee asked several top Jewish professional leaders if they wanted to be considered for the post, including Barry Shrage, president of Boston's Jewish federation; John Ruskay, executive vice president of New York's Jewish federation; and Cindy Chazan, director of The Wexner Foundation.

All declined.

Some say the challenge in finding a successor has to do with the intimidating breadth of the position, the inherent difficulty of finding a high-caliber candidate and candidates' fear of matching Joel's performance.

The nominating committee plans to hand the search over to a professional firm. □

Bush declares Jewish Heritage Week

WASHINGTON (JTA) — President Bush declared this week Jewish Heritage Week.

In his proclamation recognizing the annual commemoration, Bush said the point of the week is to "recognize the contributions of Jewish Americans to our country and to celebrate their commitment to faith, family and freedom."

Bush recognized Jewish Americans serving in the U.S. armed forces and said Jews in the United States "have demonstrated that goodness can overcome evil." □

Gimme that old-time music

NEW YORK (JTA) — Old-time Israeli songs are available on the Web. In honor of this week's celebration of Israel's 55th Independence Day, the classic tunes can be heard at <http://jnul.huji.ac.il>.

The posting of the songs is part of a project sponsored by the Jewish National and University Library at Jerusalem's Hebrew University. □

NEWS ANALYSIS

Mitzna's resignation is low point, but also new opportunity, for Labor

By Leslie Susser

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Amram Mitzna's decision to abdicate the leadership of the Labor Party after just months on the job seems to signal the lowest ebb for a party that dominated Israeli life for decades. But it might just herald a dramatic realignment of Israel's political map.

After months of rebellion from party officials who never grew accustomed to his leadership style, Mitzna threw the Israeli political establishment into turmoil by announcing his resignation Sunday.

The announcement opened what could be yet another a bitter battle for the leadership of Labor, which has been rudderless since party leader Ehud Barak retired after losing the premiership to Ariel Sharon in February 2001.

It also raised the possibility that centrist Labor politicians, who chafed at Mitzna's decision not to join a national unity government after Sharon was re-elected by a landslide in January, might take the party back into Sharon's embrace.

If that happens, the more dovish wings of the party could split, leaving Labor for an alliance that former Labor legislator Yossi Beilin and Yossi Sarid, head of the left-wing Meretz Party, have been talking for months about building. Beilin even says Mitzna could lead the alliance.

If just six other Labor members of Knesset joined Mitzna, the leftist group would have 13 Knesset members to Labor's 12, and would constitute the largest opposition faction in Parliament.

Ironically, in that case Mitzna no longer would be Labor leader, but he still would be leader of the opposition.

Such a move could lead to a major realignment of political forces in Israel — and the scenario is quite conceivable if the new Labor leadership decides to join Sharon's government.

First, though, Labor will have some hard choices to make about its leadership and direction. Mitzna was hailed as a potential savior when, at age 57, he burst onto the national political stage eight months ago after serving as mayor of Haifa for a decade.

The Palestinian intifada was at its height and Labor, which had been the junior partner in Sharon's unity government until leaving on a budgetary pretext, was struggling.

Mitzna promised to discard Sharon's policies, immediately sit with any Palestinian leaders and even unilaterally withdraw Israeli troops and settlers from the West Bank and Gaza within a year.

Many Israelis hoped that Mitzna, soft-spoken and highly principled, would give Labor a new sense of purpose and help the country address its most pressing problems.

But his resignation this week dashed those hopes and left the party worse off than at any time in its long and checkered history.

Some pundits are predicting the demise of the 70-year-old party. Others foresee a split in the ranks.

Even if none of that happens, Labor, which has fallen to just 19 seats in the 120-member Knesset, faces a long and difficult process of rehabilitation.

The circumstances and manner of Mitzna's resignation made an already tough situation infinitely worse. In his resignation speech, he claimed leading figures in the party had never accepted his leadership, hadn't given him a moment's grace and had done all they could to undermine him.

Mitzna said he had been confronted by a group of manipulative Machiavellians who put personal ambition above the general good.

"I regret this," he said. "But I do not regret the fact that I am cut from different cloth."

Although he didn't mention names, Mitzna's barbs were aimed, first and foremost, at the man he replaced as party leader, former Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer. Mitzna's main problem as leader was that — although he had been elected by an overwhelming majority of the party membership — Ben-Eliezer's people still controlled Labor's decision-making institutions.

Time and again, Ben-Eliezer used this to embarrass and humiliate the politically inexperienced Mitzna.

Just two weeks after Sharon's new government was sworn in in late February and Mitzna became opposition leader, Ben-Eliezer issued a challenge: He insisted that a peace plan he had drafted, which was different from Mitzna's, be adopted as party policy.

The Ben-Eliezer plan ultimately became Labor Party policy.

The final straw came two and half months later when Mitzna, after a string of similar defeats, failed to get his way on candidates for the Haifa municipal election in June.

At his news conference Sunday, Mitzna said he was prepared to fight for his dovish views, but not to fight daily to prove his legitimacy as party leader.

The press was deeply divided over Mitzna's decision to resign.

"Maybe Mitzna failed. Maybe he is not the stuff of which leaders are made," Yediot Achronot's Sima Kadmon wrote. "True, he has little political savvy. You would need more than the fingers of two hands to count his mistakes. But even if all that is true, only a pathetic party like Labor could reject a man of such quality."

But Doron Rosenblum of Ha'aretz argued that, "like others on the Israeli left," Mitzna was too finicky and fragile.

"He is touchy, spoiled and refined. A weakling and a cry baby. Suited only to aesthetically pleasing situations," Rosenblum wrote. "He deserves better. And if not he walks out."

It's difficult to gauge how much Mitzna's departure will cost Labor in terms of public support. A weekend public opinion poll, however, gives some indication: 60 percent of the those polled thought Mitzna most suited to lead Labor, followed by Ben-Eliezer with a mere 10 percent.

Labor voters liked Mitzna's promise of cleaner politics, and his unmitigated condemnation of his party peers will repel many potential supporters. To steady the ship, most Labor leaders are now talking about appointing a temporary party leader, rather than going straight into another strength-sapping leadership race.

The lone candidate for interim leader is veteran Shimon Peres, whose task would be to put things back on an even keel and smooth the way for a leadership race in about a year's time.

There also is talk of a "collective leadership" working in unison around Peres. Labor's secretary-general, Ophir Pines, says sadly that maybe now, after the shock of Mitzna's resignation, the others "will get their act together."

Many names are being bandied about as prospective candidates to eventually take over as party leader, among them former Knesset Speaker Avraham Burg, former ministers Matan Vilnai and Ben-Eliezer, and perhaps even Barak.

The key question is whether Sharon will be able to attract the new, temporary leadership to join his coalition. Peres, Ben-Eliezer and Barak are known to be in favor. □

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