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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

NEWS ANALYSIS

With Mideast summit on horizon, Bush prepares to wade into fray

By Matthew E. Berger

WASHINGTON (JTA) — President Bush will not be the first president to risk his own time, energy and possibly his legacy trying to forge Arab-Israeli peace.

But as he prepares for a summit with the prime ministers of Israel and the Palestinian Authority, Bush — unlike his predecessors — will not be coming into the negotiating sessions to seal the deal, the way President Carter did with the Israeli-Egyptian pact at Camp David in 1978, and as President Clinton tried to do on the Israeli-Palestinian front in 2000.

Instead, Bush is providing the momentum toward Israeli-Palestinian peace from its inception — which may be just the kind of jump-start the “road map” plan needs, analysts say.

Unlike previous presidential engagements, Bush will not be going for broke, keeping foreign leaders secluded until a deal is hammered out, attempting to settle all of the issues between the sides.

The summit Bush is planning with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas — tentatively scheduled for June 5 in Jordan — will be much more concise, likely to last just one day.

The goal won't be making peace but making it possible to make peace, said David Makovsky, senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

“What Bush is attempting is more modest: conflict management,” Makovsky said. “We're not trying to solve the core issues but to change the dynamic on the ground, change the war process and give hope to the peace process.”

The president is expected to meet with Sharon and Abbas at the tail end of a European trip, in which he also will visit American troops in Qatar.

Administration sources said a separate summit for Bush and Arab leaders, to push for increased Arab support both of the road map and of Abbas, is expected to be announced within the next few days.

The Israeli-Palestinian summit is being touted as a recognition of the steps the sides have made toward peace in recent weeks.

From the Israeli side, that includes Sunday's Cabinet vote in favor of the plan.

On the Palestinian side, it's the installation of Abbas as the first Palestinian Authority prime minister, part of an attempt to nudge aside P.A. President Yasser Arafat, whom the United States considers too tied to terrorism.

“What the president is going to signal is an end to the unfortunate chapter of the last two and a half years and the start of a new one,” one State Department official said this week.

Aaron Miller, a veteran of several State Department efforts to forge Arab-Israeli peace, including the 2000 Camp David summit, says presidential involvement is important because peacemaking depends heavily on personal interaction, and American presidents command respect.

“When we've achieved breakthroughs it has almost always been when leaders have been prepared to get involved,” said Miller, now president of Seeds of Peace, a conflict mediation summer camp in Maine.

Even though no peace agreement will emerge from next week's summit, Miller says it's still important to show new intensity toward that end.

“The level of personal mistrust is so profound, only the involvement of key decision

U.S. envoys head to Middle East

Two senior U.S. envoys will travel to the Middle East to lay the groundwork for an Israeli-Palestinian summit.

William Burns, assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, and Elliott Abrams, senior director of Near Eastern affairs at the National Security Council, are expected to leave Wednesday morning for the region, sources told JTA.

They will prepare for a meeting in the region next week involving President Bush, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas, as well as a likely second meeting between Bush and Arab leaders.

Sources say Bush will press Arab leaders to support Abbas and play a larger role in furthering peace efforts.

Sharon-Abbas talk rescheduled

A meeting scheduled for Wednesday between the Israeli and Palestinian Authority prime ministers was postponed. Palestinian sources cited a scheduling conflict in Mahmoud Abbas' agenda, Israel Radio reported. The meeting could be rescheduled for Thursday, Israel Radio reported.

Israel chairs disarmament parley

Israel chaired a major international meeting for what is believed to be the first time.

Ya'akov Levy, permanent representative of Israel to the U.N. Office in Geneva, opened Tuesday's Conference on Disarmament in Geneva. In protest, several Muslim countries sent lower-level representatives to the meeting, and two delegations sat in the gallery instead of behind their country's nameplates, but no one walked out of the meeting.

Palestinian killed in West Bank

A Palestinian teen-ager was killed by Israeli army fire in the West Bank on Tuesday. Another youth was wounded in the incident, in which the two were throwing rocks at soldiers. In Jenin, an Israeli soldier was lightly wounded in the back during an exchange of fire with armed Palestinians.

Elsewhere, Palestinians fired two Kassam rockets at the Negev town of Sderot from the northern Gaza Strip. One landed inside the town, and two women were treated for shock.

MIDEAST FOCUS

Sharon blasted over 'occupation'

Ariel Sharon came under a hail of criticism after referring to Israel's "occupation" of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The Israeli prime minister told legislators Tuesday that Attorney General Elyakim Rubinstein already had informed him that the preferred phrase was "disputed territories." Sharon's initial statement before Likud legislators prompted deliberation in the Foreign Ministry on whether to allow spokesmen to begin using the word "occupation" to describe Israel's presence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Army Radio reported.

Swiss: Israel shot at vehicle

Switzerland's Foreign Ministry complained that Israeli troops shot at a Swiss diplomatic vehicle in the Gaza Strip. An initial Israeli military inquiry found that soldiers fired at Palestinians on Monday at a Gaza Strip checkpoint, but the bullets ricocheted and hit the Swiss vehicle.

Bulgarian bows to Israeli pressure

Bulgaria's foreign minister reportedly canceled a meeting with Yasser Arafat because of Israeli pressure. Solomon Passy made the move after the speaker of Israel's Knesset, Reuven Rivlin, said he would not meet with Passy if he met with the Palestinian Authority president during his visit to the region Tuesday.

Grant to help study of Russians

Hebrew University in Jerusalem received a donation from a Russian Jewish philanthropist to expand its academic research on Russian Jewry.

The Nevzlin International Center for Research of Russian and East European Jewry, dedicated this week, will operate on a \$500,000 annual grant from Leonid Nevzlin, a former president of the Russian Jewish Congress.



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makers on our side is going to get everyone's attention and have some follow-up," he said.

Miller says Bush's involvement is important to signal a different tone, in contrast to the perception when Bush first took office that the administration was not interested in playing an active role in Mideast peacemaking.

"It's absolutely critical because it will be perceived, unmistakably, as real seriousness on the part of the president and the administration," he said.

But Miller warned of one important lesson from the Clinton efforts: It's best to husband presidential clout, using it only at key times rather than making the president the main mediator.

For that, Miller suggests appointing a special envoy.

With Bush's visit coming at the start of peace talks rather than their conclusion, there has been much less time for preparation than at past summits, and it seems unlikely that all of the parties will be on the same page.

Carter's meetings at Camp David came after four and a half years of diplomacy, said William Quandt, who served as director of Middle Eastern affairs in Carter's National Security Council.

Now a professor at the University of Virginia, Quandt warns that an American president must keep the sides focused on his agenda and not allow himself to be drawn into either side's corner.

"This can easily turn into the United States negotiating with Israel and the United States negotiating with the Arabs, instead of the United States getting both sides to make movements together," he said.

Quandt also suggested that Bush listen more than he speak, at least in public: His comments could give signals as to which side he favors on certain issues, or show his inexperience in Middle East diplomacy.

"You don't want to look like the least experienced person there, which you are," Quandt said.

"Don't get into stuff you don't understand, especially in public."

Miller warns that Middle East peacemaking "is not for the faint-hearted," and that Bush will need to walk a fine line between empathy for the parties and the need to push them to make sacrifices.

"You've got to be tough but fair," he said.

To that end, Quandt suggests that a key component of the summit will be giving Abbas something he can bring back to the Palestinian public, helping him win support away from Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat.

"If the judgment is that he's as good a Palestinian leader as we are going to find, we should find something to give him so that" his first meeting with Bush "is a diplomatic success," Quandt said. "That is a political need that Bush, as a politician, should understand." □

Group helps quake victims

NEW YORK (JTA) — The American Jewish World Service is collecting money for victims of last week's earthquake in Algeria.

More than 2,000 died and more than 9,000 were wounded in the quake, which was followed by a strong aftershock Tuesday.

Contributions can be sent to the American Jewish World Service, Algeria Earthquake, 45 W. 36th St., 10th Fl., New York, NY 10018; or visit the Web site at www.ajws.org.

Layoffs for Austrian Jewish community

NEW YORK (JTA) — The Austrian Jewish community has to lay off 35 workers because of a lack of government funding, its leader says.

Community leader Ariel Muzicant made the announcement Tuesday.

The community has been fighting with the government for years over assets that were stolen or destroyed by the Nazis during World War II. □

JEWISH WORLD

State workers covered by leave

Jewish groups are praising a Supreme Court ruling that state employees are protected by the Family and Medical Leave Act.

The court found that state employees have the right to take 12 weeks of leave per year for the birth or adoption of a child or in order to care for an elderly relative.

Several Jewish groups — including the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee and National Council of Jewish Women — had joined a brief by the National Women's Law Center arguing that the law protected state employees from gender discrimination in hiring because it allows both male and female employees to take leave.

Belarus memorial defaced

The main Holocaust memorial in Belarus was desecrated.

On Monday, swastikas and such slogans as "Holocaust 2003" and "Kill the Kikes" were found on the memorial in the capital of Minsk, according to NCSJ: Advocates on Behalf of Jews in Russia, Ukraine, the Baltic States and Eurasia.

Accused war criminal dies

A man accused of Nazi-era war crimes recently died in Chicago. Joseph Guzulaitis was accused of participating in atrocities while a member of a Lithuanian police battalion during World War II.

He also was an armed guard at Majdanek and guarded prisoners during a death march to Dachau in 1945, the U.S. Justice Department alleged. Guzulaitis was arrested in 1945 in Germany, but released in 1947 after paperwork was misplaced.

A Canadian rights museum?

A leading Canadian Jewish philanthropist will build a human rights museum in Canada that will include a room dedicated to the Holocaust.

The Winnipeg museum, to be partially funded by a foundation headed by Israel Asper, founder of CanWest Global Communications, will feature a 21-story Tower of Hope and exhibits focusing on the theme of racial, religious and sexual intolerance.

Five years ago, the Canadian government shelved plans to build a Holocaust wing in the Canadian War Museum after strong opposition, but Asper has obtained support for the museum from a cross section of social, religious and ethnic groups.

Torontonians raise money

An Israel solidarity rally in Toronto raised \$500,000 for Israeli victims of terror.

More than 20,000 people participated in Sunday's march.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

With synagogue concert, Jews mark St. Petersburg's 300 years

By Lev Krichevsky

ST. PETERSBURG (JTA) — Hundreds of St. Petersburg Jews gathered recently at the Choral Synagogue.

They weren't coming for a service.

Instead, they were attending an event marking the beginning of festivities for the city's 300th anniversary, featuring conductor Zubin Mehta and members of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra at the recently renovated synagogue.

Before the concert, a 70-year-old watchman at the synagogue who gave his name as Boris Samoilovich looked very pleased by the attention the synagogue was receiving.

"Had it not been for this celebration, I don't know if the renovation would have ever been finished," he said, pointing out the freshly painted details of the synagogue interior.

Built in a Moorish style, the impressive 100-year-old synagogue — one of the largest in Europe — was once a reflection of the might, wealth and pride of the Russian Jewish bankers and entrepreneurs who funded the construction of what was poised to be the nation's major synagogue when St. Petersburg, the European-style city built under the direction of Peter the Great, was still the country's capital.

It took foreign philanthropists to help bring the grand shul back to its former glory.

The renovation that began a few years ago was mostly funded by the late Swiss Jewish banking tycoon Edmond Safra, and the synagogue concert was funded by Lev Levayev, an Israeli diamond merchant and the largest single sponsor of Jewish life in the former Soviet Union.

Natan Sharansky, Israel's Diaspora minister, who came to St. Petersburg to take part in the festivities, said the idea of a classical music concert held in a synagogue symbolizes the perfect match between world culture and Jewish culture. Sharansky said there was another reason for him, as an Israeli official, to attend the celebration: "Israel has the largest St. Petersburg Diaspora in the world — about 80,000 people."

St. Petersburg's 300th birthday is being celebrated widely throughout the city — from small local festivities to galas at the city's magnificent palaces, which were built for Russian royalty. Aside from the concert, the Jewish community is maintaining a relatively low profile during the celebrations.

The community's chairman, Mark Grubarg, believes "this is an important function of the Jewish community — to maintain its presence at various levels during such celebrations." Yet Grubarg noted that the Jewish community should remain aware that "too much Jewish presence" in the commemorative events could be irritating to "some of the people" in St. Petersburg.

"Today the authorities are way ahead of the ordinary people in their understanding of the importance of harmonious and tolerant relations with the Jewish community."

According to Menachem-Mendel Pevzner, St. Petersburg's chief rabbi, the city has a Jewish community of 100,000, the second largest in Russia after Moscow.

"Jews have always been numerous in St. Petersburg," Grubarg said.

"Historically these have always been Jews of some special sort, prominent in arts and science."

While it is no longer the nation's capital — the Soviet government moved to Moscow in 1918 — St. Petersburg takes special pride in its reputation as the cradle of Russian European culture.

Similarly, the city's Jewish community here prides itself in the city's former status as the center for Jewish publications, social services and the flourishing cultural life that was all but gone after the first few decades of Bolshevik rule.

The Jews of St. Petersburg now benefit from dozens of educational, welfare and cultural opportunities that were revived after the fall of communism.

But today's Jewish leaders here remain preoccupied with their efforts to reach out to the overwhelmingly assimilated and intermarried Jewish population.

And they strongly believe that the special status of St. Petersburg and its Jewry requires a special approach — like a classical music concert by a world-famous orchestra held in the synagogue. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

With support for 'road map,' Sharon strikes blow against his right wing

By Matthew Gutman

TEL AVIV (JTA) — Prime Minister Ariel Sharon plunged a rhetorical sword through Israel's political right wing on Monday, severing it into roughly two halves.

With three candid sentences a day after the Cabinet approved the "road map" peace plan, Sharon managed to split the center-right empire he had painstakingly constructed over the past three years through diplomacy, carrots, sticks and some guile.

"The idea that it is possible to continue keeping 3.5 million Palestinians under occupation — yes, it is occupation, you might not like the word, but what is happening is occupation — is bad for Israel, and bad for the Palestinians, and bad for the Israeli economy," Sharon said at a Likud Party meeting Monday.

"Controlling 3.5 million Palestinians cannot go on forever," Sharon continued, ignoring the dropped jaws and jeers among the flock he shepherds. "You want to remain in Jenin, Nablus, Ramallah and Bethlehem?"

The political fallout was quick. In Sharon's own Likud Party, almost every legislator took the opportunity to lambaste the prime minister.

Uzi Landau, a veteran Likud legislator, said the speech and the road map were "worse than Oslo," a put-down nearly akin to an accusation of treason in current Israeli politics.

Even Knesset rookie Gila Gamliel joined the fray, wondering whether "it would have been better if we had accepted Oslo."

Cabinet Minister Natan Sharansky put it differently. A longtime supporter of a democratic Palestinian state, Sharansky — who voted against the plan on Sunday — argued that starting to apply the road map before the Palestinians democratize betrays both Israel and the Palestinians.

"The Palestinian state cannot be a down payment prior to discussion of everything else," he told JTA.

Many Israelis believe that the European Union, United Nations and Russia — America's partners in the diplomatic "Quartet" that drafted the road map — are biased against Israel. Their participation eventually will put Israel at loggerheads with the United States, Sharansky predicted.

"Today it's more difficult to say no than yesterday, but saying no tomorrow will be that much more difficult," Sharansky warned.

But it's doubtful that even voices as persuasive as Sharansky's will change Sharon's mind or quash the initiative.

Asher Cohen, a political analyst from Bar-Ilan University, says the right won't sway Sharon — but it also won't abandon him.

"We've seen this type of trauma before, which has split and then destroyed" the governments of former prime ministers Yitzhak Shamir and Benjamin Netanyahu.

This time the Likud, which returned to power in March 2001 through Sharon, as well as the other parties of the right, know the price of leaving the government, Cohen said — "the infiltration of the left."

There remains one group that is not likely to back down, however.

With their dream of settlement outposts spreading through the West Bank vanishing with a flick of Sharon's pen, settlement leaders are fighting back, hitting Israelis where it hurts most —

their Holocaust solar plexus. A poll released Sunday by the daily Yediot Achronot showed that 56 percent of Israelis support the road map as a way of restarting peace talks — even though they're pessimistic about where the talks will lead.

Settlement activist and former legislator Elyakim Haetzni minced no words in an interview on Israel Radio, comparing Israelis who support the road map to Jews who "willingly boarded those trains" to concentration camps, "believing everything the Germans told them."

"The Jews are a people which is very dangerous to itself. It is a people that has brought holocausts down on itself throughout the course of its history," he said.

The use of such Holocaust imagery shows how threatened the right feels by the plan — and by the fact that Sharon, considered the patron of the settlement movement, had agreed to it.

"This time it's different," explained David Wilder, a leader of Hebron's Jewish community. "At Camp David we had a prime minister," Ehud Barak, "who was working on his own. He was a loner, operating without any government backing. Here it is a governmental decision, here we have a group of 24 ministers making a decision that is binding, accepting a Palestinian state and all of its implications."

Wilder believes that settler leaders will bond together like never before to launch fierce demonstrations against the plan. The concessions of the road map, coming after nearly 800 Israelis have been killed in the intifada, indeed are analogous to the Holocaust, he says.

So furious are the settlers with Sharon that they have begun to describe him as an apikoros.

The term refers to Jewish apostates who, shortly before the fall of the Second Temple, accepted and glorified the dominant non-Jewish culture — even though the Romans wished for the Jews' destruction.

Settlers fear a civil holocaust that could rip the fabric of Israeli society to shreds — especially if a final peace agreement calls for dismantling the settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which are now home to more than 200,000 people.

Still, the idea of unifying Israelis around the flag of settlement outposts — especially wielding the charged rhetoric of the Holocaust — could further polarize the public.

Despite the passage of almost 60 years, "Israelis are still not immune to references to the Holocaust," said Dr. Danny Brom, director of the Israel Center for the Treatment of Psychotrauma.

"It serves to express and create fear" by projecting the image of "how horrible things can get if you don't follow a certain political opinion," he said.

"But Israeli politicians have learned their lessons," Cohen added.

"They'll scream and shout, but at the end of the day, they remember who's the boss here." □

Australia may ban Hezbollah

NEW YORK (JTA) — Australia may list Hezbollah as a terrorist group.

Australia currently follows a U.N. terror list, but the country's attorney general says the list is inadequate because it only includes organizations linked to Al-Qaida.

Individuals linked to terrorist groups may be prosecuted under Australian law. □