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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Wolfowitz praises Ayalon plan

U.S. official Paul Wolfowitz praised a plan based on Israel reverting to its pre-1967 borders.

Wolfowitz, the deputy defense secretary and a close adviser to President Bush, told a Georgetown University audience Thursday that a one-page proposal circulated by the former head of the Shin Bet, Ami Ayalon, and former Palestinian official Sari Nusseibeh is the plan that best reflects the "road map" peace plan.

Wolfowitz also said Bush is ready to pressure Israel to freeze settlements and keep the security fence out of Palestinian-populated areas. Wolfowitz also said Palestinian terrorism is the "greatest single obstacle" to peace.

Sharon grilled on scandals

Israeli police questioned Ariel Sharon over two funding scandals in which his sons allegedly are involved.

The Sharons have been accused of accepting a \$1.5 million loan from a South African friend for a 1999 Likud campaign and of interceding on behalf of a party stalwart who wanted to buy a Greek island resort. The Israeli prime minister has denied wrongdoing; his sons, Omri and Gilad, invoked the right not to answer investigators' questions.

Political observers say Thursday's questioning at Sharon's Jerusalem residence would not significantly damage his popularity, though polls show most Israelis want him to resign if misconduct is proven.

Chief of staff under pressure

The Israeli army's chief of staff was rebuked by the prime minister for criticizing government policy on Palestinians. According to media reports, Ariel Sharon demanded that Moshe Ya'alon apologize for his comments, which were the latest signs of dissent in Israel over the handling of the Palestinian issue.

Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom agreed with Ya'alon's comments, according to Israeli Army Radio, though Shalom reportedly is unhappy with the way Ya'alon worded his comments.

Ya'alon on Thursday was exposed as the "senior military official" who had said that free-movement restrictions imposed on the Palestinians as part of Israel's anti-terror moves foster hostility and subvert Israel's interests.

NEWS ANALYSIS

With 'road map' in tatters, Sharon begins imposing unilateral solution

By Leslie Susser

JERUSALEM (JTA)— In the nearly two months since Mahmoud Abbas resigned as Palestinian Authority prime minister, the United States has stepped back from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In the meantime, Israel has adopted a two-pronged policy, taking bold unilateral moves while encouraging Abbas' successor to form a government with which Israel can negotiate.

In the hiatus following Abbas' departure, the Israeli government has approved the route of the controversial security fence separating Israel from the West Bank; hinted at plans for a second, eastern fence that would cut off the Jordan Valley from the West Bank; stepped up anti-terror military activity, and called for bids to build over 300 apartments in disputed areas.

The policy cuts two ways: It begins to impose an Israeli vision of a weakened and truncated Palestinian entity, and it puts pressure on the Palestinians to start negotiating in earnest before that vision becomes a reality.

On Oct. 1, Israel's Cabinet approved a route for the security fence that — if all the planned sections eventually are joined — would include sizable tracts of the West Bank on the Israeli side.

Moreover, in an Israeli television interview last week, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon intimated that, despite American objections to the main fence's route, he was contemplating a second, eastern fence along the Jordan Valley.

That would have major implications: If both fences are built, the entire West Bank would be fenced in and the Palestinians would get no more than 60 percent of the land.

Analysts who argue that this reflects Sharon's bottom line were quick to point out that, taken together, the route of the two fences is very close to the borders Sharon envisaged for the West Bank in his 1989 autobiography, "Warrior."

Commenting on Sharon's TV interview, a senior Israeli official confirmed that Sharon's intention was to keep the entire Jordan Valley under Israeli control, maintaining that plans for the eastern fence had been approved in principle but that there was no budget for it yet.

In the aftermath of Abbas' resignation in September, Sharon also stepped up Israel's anti-terrorist campaign. Ground forces blew up tunnels in Rafah used to smuggle arms from Egypt to the Gaza Strip, destroying dozens of houses in the process.

In addition, special units killed or detained terrorist leaders in the West Bank, and Israeli fighter planes and helicopters ran operations in Gaza, where a number of civilians were killed and wounded along with the terrorists targeted.

The American response was remarkably low-key, especially after the Oct. 15 Palestinian bombing of a U.S. diplomatic convoy in the Gaza Strip that killed three Americans. U.S. spokesmen said only that Israel should take into account the consequences of its military actions — a sign of American assent, if not endorsement.

In late October, Israel made yet another unilateral move: Despite its commitment to a total freeze on settlement building under the "road map" peace plan, the Housing Ministry called for bids for the construction of 333 apartments in the West Bank settlement of Karnei Shomron and in Givat Ze'ev, a Jerusalem neighborhood beyond the pre-1967 border.

Palestinian leaders accused Israel of trying to torpedo the road map. This time the

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israel: We're thwarting bombings

Israel said it has thwarted seven suicide bombings in the past 10 days. Among the operations that were prevented included a double suicide bombing that was to have taken place in Beit She'an, officials said. "People should not be misguided by the supposed calm," an Israeli official told the Jerusalem Post.

Israelis ask British for help

Israeli officials asked their British counterparts for help in tracking down a number of suspected British Muslim terrorists.

According to the London Times, Israel is concerned that several young Muslims, traveling on British passports, have gone missing in Syria in recent months. They also believe that at least three other British Muslims are being sheltered by terrorist groups in the Gaza Strip. Israel believes the men may be organizing suicide bombing missions.

The request for help comes after the April suicide bombing of a Tel Aviv cafe by two British Muslims. The attack killed three and injured 40 people.

Poor mount in Israel

The number of Israeli families living below the poverty line tripled between 1988 and 2001. However, the percentage of Israelis living in extreme poverty remained the same, according to the National Insurance Institute study.

The study cited the conflict with the Palestinians and the growing number of fervently Orthodox families, many of whom have large families but often do not work, as reasons for the rise in poverty.

Israelis run

Twenty-five Israeli runners are slated to run in this year's New York City marathon. Among the Israeli runners in Sunday's event are father-and-daughter team Daniel and Oranit Morgenstern.



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United States was less circumspect in its response, describing the Israeli move as "a provocation" and threatening to deduct the settlement activity's cost from the \$9 billion it has promised Israel in loan guarantees.

However, at the same time as he has increased pressure on the Palestinians, Sharon has been making overtures to Ahmad Karia, who replaced Abbas and has been heading an emergency Cabinet appointed by P.A. President Yasser Arafat.

Sharon's bureau chief, Dov Weisglass, is scheduled to meet leading Palestinians soon, including Finance Minister Salam Fayad, to explore ways of taking the road map forward.

Maj. Gen. Amos Gilad, head of the Defense Ministry's new political department, plans to hold preliminary talks with Karia confidants on security matters.

Moreover, partly to ease what the army calls an "explosive pressure cooker" situation in Palestinian areas and partly to encourage Karia, Sharon and Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz have decided to ease some of the restrictions on Palestinian movement, despite warnings from security officials that this could enable terrorists to carry out attacks.

Whether the new combination of carrot and stick will work remains to be seen. Karia has been studiously avoiding direct contact with Israeli officials, arguing that their embrace of his predecessor hurt Abbas' standing on the Palestinian street.

Nevertheless, Karia has made it clear that he wants to work with Israel to stabilize the situation, and that when the time is ripe he will do all he can to get the road map moving.

Last week in Cairo, Karia told American negotiator William Burns that he believes he will be able to form a government before his emergency mandate expires Nov. 4 — the main sticking point has been a struggle with Arafat for control of the Palestinian Authority's myriad security services — and that he is relatively optimistic about the future.

The key question remains whether the Palestinians can get all the terrorist factions to cease their attacks on Israel.

Karia has sent letters to the various terrorist organizations calling for cease-fire talks.

Hamas spokesmen have been non-committal. They say they are ready to meet Karia to "hear what he has to say," but are not convinced that conditions for a cease-fire are ripe.

If Karia does get a cease-fire, however, the equation will change.

The United States probably will come back into the picture, pressing both parties to take the road map forward. Israel's capacity for unilateral action will be circumscribed, and a second round of talks on the road map will begin.

After Abbas' resounding failure in the first round, and with the sword of Israel's unilateral options hanging over their heads, the Palestinians might be more aware of the potential consequences of failure this time.

Indeed, given the explosiveness of the situation, perhaps all three parties involved — Israel, the Palestinians and the United States — will be more focused the second time around. □

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

Profs blast suicide bombers

NEW YORK (JTA) — University professors around the world are calling for the criminalization of organizing suicide bombings.

Last week, Scholars for Peace in the Middle East gathered 250,000 signatures on a petition calling on the United Nations and world leaders to try as war criminals the organizers of suicide attacks against civilians.

The group is gathering about 1,000 signatures a day and hopes to reach 1 million signatures, the group said.

"As the world becomes aware that the United Nations, the Red Cross and other targets other than the United States and Israel are targets, it is becoming clearer to more and more people worldwide that terrorists are war criminals with no regard for humanity or the sacredness of human life," said the group's president, Edward Beck. □

JEWISH WORLD

Reform movement honors victim

The U.S. Reform movement is receiving hundreds of letters and drawings honoring a young victim of last month's Haifa bombing.

Assaf Shtier was slated to become a Bar Mitzvah at Congregation Or Hadash, a Reform temple, in Haifa early next year, but he was killed in the Oct. 4 bombing. "I will think about all of you when I do my Bat Mitzvah," wrote Erin Bloodgood of Germantown, Md., in a letter to Shtier's relatives.

The letters and drawings, the result of an e-mail appeal launched by the Reform movement, will be presented to Shtier's family in Israel next month. Shtier was killed among with several other family members in the bombing.

Conservatives urge Jewish law

The head of the Conservative movement's congregational arm wants Conservative Jews to observe Jewish law. "The sad truth is that halachah," or Jewish law, "which is a foundation block of our ideology, is irrelevant to most Conservative Jews," Rabbi Jerome Epstein, executive vice president of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, told the group's 2003 biennial in Dallas this week. Conservative Judaism believes halachah is binding though evolving, but Epstein said there is a "chasm between what we say and what we do."

In response, Epstein announced the creation of a new commission of educators, lay persons and rabbis to convince the movement's members "to grow in their commitment" to Jewish law.

Argentine swears by Bible

The new governor of an Argentine province swore allegiance on the Hebrew Bible.

On Wednesday, Jose Alperovich became the first Jewish governor of the northwest province of Tucuman. Alperovich was able to swear his oath of office on a copy of the Hebrew Bible after the regional constitution, which required officials to take a Christian oath, was overruled.

Latin American Jews gather

Latin American and Caribbean Jewish leaders gathered in Guatemala to discuss Jewish education, poverty and demography.

The Ninth Meeting of Leaders of Latin American and Caribbean Jewish Institutions and Communities, in the picturesque city of Antigua, has drawn scholars, rabbis, teachers, community leaders and youth from 22 countries.

The event, which continues through Saturday, is sponsored by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and Guatemala's Jewish community.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Ombudsman post raised for Holocaust-era insurance group

By Matthew E. Berger

WASHINGTON, Oct. 30 (JTA)—The commission responsible for Holocaust-era insurance claims is considering appointing an ombudsman to bolster its credibility following recent criticisms and lawsuits.

The International Commission for Holocaust Era Insurance Claims agreed Wednesday to explore the ombudsman idea, proposed at ICHEIC's annual meeting by several representatives of Jewish organizations that sit on the commission.

ICHEIC and its chairman, former Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger, have been accused of not working fast enough to provide payments for Holocaust survivors and their heirs.

Last month the commission was sued by three Holocaust survivors in California. One member of the commission, California Insurance Commissioner John Garamendi, called on Eagleburger to resign.

Garamendi was offered the floor at the beginning of Wednesday's annual meeting to bring up any motions he wished, but he declined, participants told JTA.

Instead, Garamendi made comments and asked questions throughout the morning session, questioning the number of payments being reviewed and asking why so many claims have not been paid.

He left during the lunch break, hours before the meeting officially broke up, and was unavailable for comment later in the day.

Other commission members said Wednesday that they hoped reforms being implemented by ICHEIC will speed the payment process. While survivors' frustrations are valid, they said, ICHEIC's task is more difficult than it appears because many of those seeking funds have no proof, just recollections of having purchased an insurance policy.

"Every conversation we have with ICHEIC is one that scrutinizes the process and creates changes," said Greg Serio, the New York state insurance superintendent. "There's no blueprint for this."

The Jewish leaders believe that creating an ombudsman position would help survivors and their heirs seek redress from ICHEIC and illuminate the actions of insurance companies, which have been accused of slowing the payment process.

"I think it can work because he will be independent, he will have a high profile and he will be directly answerable to the chairman," said Elan Steinberg, a senior adviser to the World Jewish Congress who is crafting the ombudsman's job description.

The position also could address the concerns of ICHEIC critics who accuse the commission of being too close to insurers and of not working for survivors' interests.

Jewish groups, who met privately with Eagleburger before the Wednesday meeting, also asked that \$132 million in humanitarian aid for Holocaust victims — which was supposed to be transferred to the Claims Conference in 10 annual installments — be expedited. The money now will be transferred within five years and will be "front-loaded" to tackle immediate needs.

"I know what the need is now," said Israel Singer, chairman of the World Jewish Congress, which is part of ICHEIC. "We are not going to leave this money for a period when the survivors are dead."

Singer, who also is president of the Claims Conference, said the humanitarian fund will not take money away from policyholders seeking redress from the commission.

"We have to fight for policyholders like there were no humanitarian needs, and we have to fight for humanitarian aid like there were no policyholders," he said.

ICHEIC officials told commission members of several reforms implemented in the past year, including moves to speed the review of claims processed in Europe and improved coordination with state governments in Germany.

It also plans to increase communication and outreach to possible policyholders, exploring ways to reach the survivors and their heirs, and to publicize the work ICHEIC is doing. □

Jewish vote seen as key in race for Philadelphia mayor

By Joshua Runyan
Philadelphia Jewish Exponent

PHILADELPHIA (JTA) — Election Day looms just around the corner here, and the mayoral race that has garnered national attention of late is eerily shaping up to be just as close as it was four years ago.

But it hadn't been so tight until recently. One month ago, prior to the discovery of a listening device in the office of Mayor John Street, political polls had Republican Jewish candidate Sam Katz enjoying a 10 percent lead over the Democratic incumbent.

The bug presence and the ensuing revelation that Street has become a subject of a federal investigation into possible corruption at City Hall has, surprisingly, placed the black mayor on top in a city where Democrats outnumber Republicans by a margin of more than 4-1. An estimated 957,000 city residents are registered to vote.

Katz, a businessman who lost in 1999 to Street by less than 10,000 votes, had been chipping away at the mayor's base by casting himself as a crusader against political cronyism. But for the Democratic core of Philadelphia, the investigation has cast Street as a victim of a Republican-controlled and racially motivated U.S. Justice Department.

According to the latest poll, conducted by The Philadelphia Inquirer, Street leads Katz among likely voters, 46 percent to 41 percent.

With indicators pointing to another nail-biter on Nov. 4, both campaigns are working furiously. Utilizing campaign funds amassed over the past year — at the last tally, the Street campaign had raised \$10.3 million to Katz's \$9.7 million — each camp is wooing communities that did not endorse either candidate the last time around. The Jewish community, for instance, has seen a recent flurry of attention.

Katz crisscrossed the sprawling city Sunday, visiting two area synagogues. The Street campaign, announced an endorsement Monday from the Shomrim of Philadelphia and Delaware Valley, a Jewish police and firefighters association.

Katz garnered 82 percent of the Jewish vote in 1999, but by the candidate's own admission, failed to turn out enough middle-class Jewish voters and Russian immigrants in Northeast Philadelphia. Street's ally, Rabbi Solomon Isaacson of Congregation Beth Solomon Suburban, helped the Democrat win votes in the Northeast in the last election.

The Republican promised that will not happen again.

"The big hole four years ago was the Russian Jewish voter, and I'm going to get all of that," predicted Katz, who has serenaded groups of Russians in their own language. "I've got signs in Russian" and a campaign leaflet in Russian.

Isaacson has promised to again bring out Jewish votes for Street. The Street campaign held a rally Tuesday with the Northeast Philadelphia Russian community.

Street adviser David Hyman, a former president of the local chapter of the American Jewish Committee, expressed confidence that more Jews will cast their lot with the Democrat.

"There is an opportunity for the mayor to significantly increase the amount of Jewish votes he receives," Hyman said. "In the areas of education and neighborhood improvement, Jewish voters, like

other voters, are happy with what's been going on in the city."

Hyman also alluded to the "more partisan environment" in the wake of the ongoing federal investigation. With many Democrats accusing the Republican Attorney General John Ashcroft of attempting to influence the election from Washington, Hyman was skeptical that Jews, who traditionally support Democratic candidates, could bring themselves to vote Republican.

Katz, however, appears to enjoy at least the same amount of Jewish backing as he received four years ago.

According to Larry Ceisler, a Democratic political analyst, the Jewish vote tends to track the vote of the larger white community. And recent polls have shown Katz receiving more than 70 percent of the white vote, with Street the choice of only 17 percent of white voters. The rest remained undecided.

Such indicators are not a significant departure from the 1999 election result, when Street won 16 percent of wards where the majority of voters were white, and also won 17 percent of the Jewish vote.

"I'm voting for Katz," David Silver, a professor at the University of Delaware, said. "Katz is going to do the type of things which can turn the city around: lower taxes, trying to rebuild population growth."

Street still can count on some turnout among the Jewish community. Retired police Captain Alan Kurtz, a member of Shomrim's executive board, explained his group's endorsement of Street as speaking to Street's record of accomplishment.

"I think the last four years have been an enlightenment for some Jewish voters who have a reflex to vote for a Jewish candidate," Kurtz said. "I did some soul-searching, and I feel John Street will be the better mayor."

But at least one Jewish voter is troubled by how the mayoral election could impact the 2004 presidential race.

"My inclination is to vote for Katz, because I think he would do a lot more for the city than Street," explained Albert Waxler, a lifelong Democrat. He said his problem is President Bush.

"If Pennsylvania went Republican because of a Republican mayor in Philadelphia, I would never forgive myself. I think about it all the time," Waxler said. Pennsylvania's 21 electoral votes in 2000 went to Democratic candidate Al Gore.

Judging by the appearances of big-name party stars — Terry McAuliffe, chairman of the Democratic National Committee, and Democratic strategist James Carville campaigned for Street last week; while Rudy Giuliani, the former Republican mayor of New York, headlined a Katz fund raiser — many see national implications in who will be mayor of America's fifth-largest city.

The appearance of Giuliani notwithstanding, the Republican National Committee is not sharing the concern of their counterparts in the Democratic Party.

"We see this as a very local race," said Pamela Mantis, a Republican committee spokeswoman. "We've basically let Katz run it at a local level. The Democrats are acting very desperate."

According to Matt Brooks, however, executive director of the Republican Jewish Coalition, "it's a top priority race" for his organization. "Everyone's talking about it."

Deputy executive director of the National Jewish Democratic Caucus David Harris called denying the weight of this election "comically understating reality."

"Pennsylvania is a battleground state, and Philadelphia is a big city," he said. "We are taking a very close look at it." □