

IN THE NEWS

E.U. anti-Semitism forum off for now

The European Union may postpone a seminar on anti-Semitism after Jewish leaders accused the European Commission of anti-Semitism.

A spokesman for the European Union's executive branch, Reijo Temkinen, told JTA that the commission's president, Romano Prodi, wants next month's seminar — agreed to at a meeting between Jewish leaders and E.U. leaders last month — delayed because of tensions.

In an article Monday in London's Financial Times, Edgar Bronfman and Cobi Benatoff, presidents respectively of the World Jewish Congress and European Jewish Congress, criticized the commission, saying "anti-Semitism could be expressed in two ways: by action and by inaction. Remarkably, the European Commission is guilty of both."

Palestinian groups pick terror over aid

Some Palestinian nonprofits will forfeit U.S. aid rather than promise not to associate with terrorists. The groups are refusing to sign a pledge stating that they will not transfer money to groups involved in terrorism.

Some Palestinian officials have recommended taking money instead from Japan or the European Union, which do not require an anti-terrorism pledge.

Likud faithful cool on Sharon

Ariel Sharon was booed when he told Likud Party members they must be ready to give up some West Bank towns.

He also said at his party's convention Monday that he would be willing to help establish a Palestinian state if the Palestinians crack down on terrorist groups. Sharon reiterated that Israel would have to relinquish some settlements to disengage from the Palestinians if peace talks do not progress in coming months.

WORLD REPORT

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Coolness to Assad overture shows how Iraq changed region

By LESLIE SUSSER

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Once upon a time, a Syrian president calling for peace talks would have been met by Israeli leaders rolling out the red carpet.

But Bashar Assad's recent overtures toward Israel, first made in an interview with the New York Times, have failed to excite Israeli decision-makers.

The chief of Israel's military intelligence branch, Maj. Gen. Aharon Farkash Ze'evi, says Assad is serious and should be put to the test, but Prime Minister Ariel Sharon doubts the Syrian leader's sincerity and questions whether giving up the strategic Golan Heights in return for peace with Syria is as much in Israel's interest as it once was.

At the same time, right-wingers in Sharon's Likud Party who fear the prime minister may be sucked into negotiations against his better judgment are doing what they can to prevent talks with the Syrians.

As Israeli leaders weigh the pros and cons of reopening negotiations with Damascus, Ze'evi and other generals make a strong case for taking up Assad on his offer to negotiate.

They say Israel should exploit favorable geopolitical conditions that may not recur to get a good deal from a weak Damascus: America is in Iraq, Iran is being cautious and there is a lot of international pressure on Syria, especially from the United States.

Together, the factors add up to a window of opportunity that shouldn't be missed, the generals say.

If Assad is not serious about peace, they say, negotiations will soon expose his insincerity — so Israel has nothing to lose.

The generals also argue that if the Palestinians aren't ready for peace moves and Sharon instead opts for "unilateral disengagement," negotiations with Syria could soften the expected international criticism.

But Sharon and most of his Cabinet have doubts about the wisdom of renewing a peace process with Syria. The prime minister doesn't think Assad is serious about peace, and even if he were, the price — the return of the Golan — is too high.

In recent Cabinet meetings, Sharon has made his reservations plain. When Ze'evi reported that Assad was serious, Sharon asked him caustically whether the Syrian president still backs the Hezbollah militia in Lebanon and Palestinian terrorists in Damascus. Ze'evi acknowledged Assad is.

Sharon also told his ministers that he rejected Assad's contention that "80 percent" of the disputed issues had been resolved in prior negotiations with Assad's late father. Those talks foundered on Syria's demand that it be allowed to retain land at the foothills of the Golan, which it conquered in Israel's 1948 War of Independence but which Israel took back in the 1967 Six-Day War.

If talks with Syria are renewed, Sharon said, they must begin from scratch.

Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a former prime minister, was even more blunt. He argued that since his secret negotiations in the late 1990s with Hafez Assad, the "world had changed," and Netanyahu's offer to cede the Golan in return for peace — an offer later repeated by former Prime Minister Ehud Barak — was no longer valid.

Netanyahu spelled out why: After the

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■ Israel's coolness to Assad overture shows Syria's weakened position

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American war in Iraq, he said, Syria had become an insignificant and isolated backwater, on the verge of expulsion from the international community. Thus, Netanyahu said, there's no reason to make a deal that entails major Israeli concessions.

The argument was similar to that of the generals — but the conclusion was reversed.

There are other reasons for the government's lack of enthusiasm. Government officials claim that it would be difficult domestically for Israel to negotiate concessions simultaneously on the Syrian and Palestinian tracks. Advocates of a Syrian move counter that the Palestinian process is not going anywhere.

More importantly, Syria today has considerably less to offer than it did in the talks with Barak four years ago at Shepherdstown, W. Va.

At the time, the thinking was that peace with Syria would bring peace with the entire Arab world. That made sense because Israel and the Palestinians were going through a quiet phase and looking ahead to final-status negotiations of their own. The general mood was one of imminent accommodation.

Now that Israelis and Palestinians are locked in a violent struggle, however, there is no way Syria could presume to deliver the Arab world.

Moreover, peace with Syria in 2000 would have nullified the dreaded "eastern front" and the prospect of a major land war against both Syria and Iraq. Now that

Iraq has been taken out of the equation, Syria is in no position to launch such an attack on its own.

That means that Sharon has less incentive to give up strategic assets for a peace agreement.

Such dilemmas, though, are still a ways off, since Sharon suspects Assad's statements are aimed primarily at improving his image in Washington — and Sharon doesn't want to be duped into helping him.

Assad, the theory goes, has been shaken by the proximity of U.S. forces in Iraq and by the Syria Accountability Act that President Bush recently signed into law, which provides for more sanctions against Damascus if it continues to support terrorism.

Assad's peace talk is meant simply to get Washington to ease up, Sharon believes.

That reading is, to a large extent, shared by the United States. In late December, U.S. State Department official David Satterfield told a senior official in Israel's U.S. embassy that Washington believed Assad simply is trying to influence U.S. and international opinion. Satterfield said that if Assad were serious, he would have taken steps like clamping down on terrorist groups based in Damascus.

Still, Israel continues to explore the issue, and it has asked U.S. and European diplomats visiting Damascus to relay their impressions. A Likud legislator,

Majallie Whbee, also is due to meet Assad soon.

Whbee, a Druse who has played the go-between with other Arab governments before, is close to Sharon, but Sharon denies that Whbee is an official emissary.

Nevertheless, Likud right-wingers are worried. Agriculture Minister Yisrael Katz's much publicized announcement of new projects and settlements on the Golan clearly was designed to nip in the bud any chance of talks with Syria.

Sharon insists that Katz's announcement was not coordinated with the government and was inaccurate, and he says it gravely harmed Israel's image abroad.

Sharon's bureau chief, Dov Weisglass, insists that no new settlements will be built on the heights, which Israel annexed more than two decades ago, and that the budgets Katz mentioned are intended to develop tourism on the Golan, not to stifle possible negotiations.

So where do things stand? Sharon says he wants tangible indications from Assad that he really wants to make peace, such as a crackdown on Syria-based terrorist groups and an end to the arms flow from Iran through Damascus to Hezbollah.

If Assad meets those conditions, Sharon will be on the spot — forced to make a major strategic decision, either way.

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

Sharon has less incentive to give up strategic assets for a peace deal.

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Israel huffy on The Hague

By DAN BARON

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel reportedly will not recognize the authority of the International Court of Justice to rule on the West Bank security barrier.

But according to a report in Ha'aretz, Israel still will file an affidavit defending the fence as a vital security precaution. The court is set to meet Feb. 23 at The Hague to discuss the fence following a U.N. General Assembly resolution asking for the court's opinion.

The ruling will not be legally binding but could prompt U.N. sanctions if the court finds that the fence is illegal.

Israel also has protested to the countries that supported the resolution, which passed by a vote of 90-8 on Dec. 8. Many of the backers of the resolution come from the Middle East and do not maintain diplomatic ties with Israel. The United States opposed the measure, and most European countries abstained from the vote.

U.S. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said that the resolution would not enhance Israeli-Palestinian peace.

"We think that the resolution could undermine rather than encourage direct negotiations between the parties," he said, explaining the U.S. vote.

E.U. anti-Semitism forum may be off for now

BY PHILIP CARMEL

PARIS (JTA) — Just last month, they thought they had turned over a new leaf. But now it seems that relations between the European Union and Jewish leaders have sunk to a new low.

On Monday, the European Commission said it would postpone a conference on anti-Semitism — announced after break-the-ice talks last month — after two senior Jewish leaders wrote an Op-Ed accusing the European Commission of anti-Semitism.

Edgar Bronfman, the president of the World Jewish Congress, and Cobi Benatoff, the president of the European Jewish Congress, wrote that anti-Semitism could be expressed by both action and inaction.

"Remarkably, the European Commission is guilty of both," they wrote in the Op-Ed, printed Monday in Britain's Financial Times.

The anti-Semitism initially was manifested by the release of "a flawed and dangerously inflammatory poll which purported to name Israel the greatest threat to world peace," Bronfman and Benatoff wrote.

It was then compounded by the commission's decision to withhold a study by an E.U. monitoring center "that reported on the involvement of Muslim minorities in incidents of mounting anti-Semitism," they wrote.

"Let us not mince words: Both of these actions were politically motivated, demonstrating a failure of will and decency," the Op-Ed said.

Reijo Temkinen, senior spokesman for the European Commission, sharply denied the allegations.

"We have never, ever censored a study into anti-Semitism, and you won't find a single person who will tell you otherwise," he told JTA.

The study was ordered not by the commission but by E.U. member states, Temkinen said.

But he admitted that the commission was represented on the board of the Vienna-based research body that oversaw the study.

Similarly, he pointed out, the poll the Jewish leaders cite, which found that 59 percent of Europeans regard Israel as a threat to world peace — more than any other country — "is a reflection of public opinion, not of E.U. policy."

Temkinen also said he was "shocked" by the timing of the article by Bronfman and Benatoff.

"I don't know where it comes from," he said in a telephone interview from Brussels. "They were present at the meeting" with the European Commission's president, Romano Prodi, in Brussels last month.

Jewish leaders had requested the meeting following months of disagreements between the European Jewish Congress and the European Union.

A delegation led by Benatoff agreed with Prodi that the commission would convene a special seminar on European anti-Semitism, to be held in February.

However, Temkinen said Prodi now wants the seminar slated for next month "to be put on hold," since "the atmosphere is not conducive."

"It takes two to tango," Temkinen said. "The basis for dialogue is not to accuse one another publicly."

Elan Steinberg, executive vice president of the World Jewish Congress, denied that the article by Bronfman and Benatoff had backfired.

"Quite the contrary — it was a wake-up call, and a necessary one, to the unchecked threat that anti-Semitism is posing to Europe," he said.

"Soothing words at this point are insufficient," he said. "The defense of the Jewish people is not taken lightly, and we are facing the greatest surge of violent anti-Semitism outside of Israel since the Second World War."

The call to postpone the seminar stunned EJC heads in Paris, especially as it appeared to contradict directly Temkinen's own comments to a Brussels news conference minutes earlier.

Agence-France Presse reported that Temkinen said the seminar would go ahead as planned "to offer to the different parties the occasion to debate the theme of anti-Semitism, following the different

commentaries which have arisen in recent months."

After learning from JTA of Prodi's threat, the EJC's executive director, Serge Cwajgenbaum, contacted the European Commission, which confirmed the postponement.

Steinberg in New York said Jewish groups still had several options: They could hold the seminar on their own, without the European Commission. Alternatively, Italy had expressed a willingness to sponsor it, he said.

Cwajgenbaum said the Op-Ed by Bronfman and Benatoff had not personally accused commission members of anti-Semitism.

"The commission, as the executive branch, is collectively responsible for the inaction in taking a stand on anti-Semitism over a period of three years," Cwajgenbaum said. "We are saying they are collectively responsible, not collectively guilty."

However, while "we have some good friends on the commission," he said, "some commissioners have been very negative concerning Israel."

Cwajgenbaum wouldn't specify which commissioners he considered hostile, but it's known that some senior figures — such as External Affairs Commissioner Chris Patten — have angered Jewish leaders by blocking their demands.

Last year, Patten personally lobbied European political leaders to block a motion by more than 150 European Parliament members to enforce strict controls on E.U. funds to the Palestinian Authority, said French E.U. legislator Francois Zimeray, who sponsored the demand.

"They systematically condemn Israel," Zimeray said, "while closing their eyes to the abuse of human rights in Arab states, such as the Syrian Anschluss of Lebanon," a reference to the Nazi invasion and occupation of neighboring Austria at the beginning of World War II.

But Zimeray also stopped short of accusing commissioners of anti-Semitism. "Nobody can say that their hearts and minds are anti-Semitic, and I'm sure the very idea revolts them," Zimeray said. "But they should be judged on facts, not just feelings."

Bronfman and Benatoff's "article is very strong, but very true," he added.

The E.U.'s executive branch is accused of anti-Semitism.

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Israeli labor strikes over

Three months of Israeli labor discord is over. Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Histadrut labor federation chief Amir Peretz signed a deal ending three months of strikes after the Treasury agreed to reverse some cuts to public spending planned in the 2004 austerity budget.

The Histadrut had been especially concerned about dwindling retirement perks for public-sector employees.

By ending 98 days of strikes that at times paralyzed the country, Netanyahu has bolstered his chances of passing the budget in the Knesset on Wednesday.

Gaza women protest French ban

Palestinian women in the Gaza Strip protested a French proposal to ban head scarves in state schools.

Monday's protest by an estimated 300 women, many of them supporters of Islamic Jihad, came after French President Jacques Chirac said last month that he backed proposals to ban visible religious signs in state schools and public institutions.

Last week, Israeli Arab women protested the ban.

Settlers get more time

Israel's High Court of Justice delayed the evacuation of four illegal settlement outposts in the West Bank.

The court ruled that settlers have 15 days to appeal Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's decision to dismantle the illegal outposts of West Bat Ayin, Ginot Aryeh, Havat Shaked and Magen David. The court ruled that the six days initially given the settlers was too little.

Jewish extremists dedicate seminary

Israeli settlers dedicated a rabbinical seminary at an illegal West Bank outpost. The seminary at West Tapuach was dedicated Sunday by followers of the late Rabbi Meir Kahane. During the ceremony, children yelled "Expel the Arabs," The Associated Press reported.

Kosher chefs get school

There's a new school for kosher chefs in Israel. The Kosher Culinary Academy, which opened for classes Sunday, is based at the Holyland Hotel in Jerusalem.

The 10-month, full-time curriculum — only open to men at this point — is in English. The academy plans to open a professional course for women, as well as classes for beginners, later in the year. More information is available at www.kosherculinaryacademy.com.

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Osama blasts peace plans

An audiotape, purportedly by Osama bin Laden, blasted new Israeli-Palestinian peace initiatives.

In a tape broadcast on Al-Jazeera on Monday, the voice urged followers to oppose "conspiracies," including the "deceptions of the 'road map' and the Geneva initiative."

Experts have not determined whether the voice on the tape really is bin Laden's.

Wanna buy Goering's boat?

The former yacht of Nazi Hermann Goering is up for sale in Egypt. German boat dealer Christopher Brunner-Schwer told Der Spiegel magazine that he hopes to make a fortune selling the boat, posted for sale by the American widow of an Egyptian oil agent.

"Arabs like the boat's history," he said, "and that is raising the price."

Anchored today in El Gouna, the Carin II was built in 1937 and reportedly was a favorite place for secret meetings involving top Nazi officials, including Heinrich Himmler, Martin Bormann and Adolf Hitler.

Years after the war, it was purchased by former Stern magazine journalist Gerd Heidemann, who later became notorious as the middleman in the 1983 fake Hitler diaries scam.

Heidemann then turned the boat into a floating shrine to the Nazis.

After he was charged in the Hitler diary case, he was forced to sell the boat at auction in 1988, at which point it was purchased by Egyptian oil agent Mustafa Karim.

According to Brunner-Schwer, wealthy Arabs have inquired about the boat.

NORTH AMERICA

Got white supremacists?

A white supremacist group is advertising for new members on the Florida Turnpike.

The billboard near Orlando reads "WHO RULE\$ AMERIKA?" and then gives a Web site address, according to the Orlando Sentinel newspaper.

The address links to the page of the National Alliance, which was founded by the late William Pierce.

Pierce wrote "The Turner Diaries," an inspiration for Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh.

Georgian Jews have high hopes

By PETER EPHROSS

NEW YORK (JTA) — Jews in the former Soviet republic of Georgia have high hopes for their country's new president.

Mikhail Saakashvili, elected Monday following a bloodless coup that ousted Eduard Shevardnadze, praised Georgia's relationship with Israel and the Jewish people in a Dec. 26 appearance at a Shabbat prayer service in Tbilisi.

The service was hosted by Israel's ambassador to Georgia, according to Mark Levin, executive director of the NCSJ: Advocates on Behalf of Jews in Russia, Ukraine, the Baltic

States & Eurasia. Younger Jews in particular are supporting Saakashvili, who has portrayed himself as a liberal capable of ensuring the country's future.

Throughout the Caucasus region, and in Georgia in particular, anti-Semitism has had far less of a historical presence than in Europe.

During their 2,600-year presence in Georgia, Jews have been allowed to own land and prosper.

However, many Jews fled Georgia during the country's civil war and economic crisis from 1989 to 1995, reducing the country's Jewish population to 10,000. ■