

IN THE NEWS
A gracious guest?

U.S. policy in the Middle East should not depend on solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a U.S. official said.

A U.S. undersecretary of state, Marc Grossmann, made the comments Tuesday to reporters in Egypt after meeting with Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Maher.

"The effort for reform and the effort for dignity and the effort for individuality in Arab countries does not have to wait until there is a full peace," he said. His Egyptian host disagreed, calling the conflict "one of the basic obstacles to the reform process" in the Middle East.

**Israel asks U.S.,
Egypt help in Gaza**

The United States and Egypt want to know more about Israel's proposal for Egypt to help secure Gaza after an Israeli withdrawal.

Dov Weisglass, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's chief of staff, and Giora Eiland, Sharon's national security adviser, discussed the idea Monday in meetings with Condoleezza Rice, President Bush's national security adviser, and U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell.

The Israelis are ready for a total withdrawal, but say they need Egyptian help to keep arms smugglers from crossing the Gaza-Egypt border.

**Congressmen press
G-men on translators**

Four congressmen want the FBI to explain why it has not hired Sephardi Jews applying for Arabic translator jobs.

Reps. Anthony Weiner of New York, Peter Deutsch of Florida, and Frank Pallone and Robert Andrews of New Jersey, all Democrats, submitted a list in November of 59 New York-area Jews of Syrian origin who applied for translation jobs with the FBI in the months after the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. None were hired.

WORLD REPORT

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Israel may need Egypt's help to withdraw safely from Gaza

By GIL SEDAN

JERUSALEM (JTA) — After Israel's prime minister announced he was planning to withdraw unilaterally from the Gaza Strip, several weeks passed before Israeli officials realized they were neglecting an important detail: Egypt, Gaza's other neighbor.

Now Israeli officials apparently are beginning to realize that before making significant changes at home, it pays to consult with one's neighbors.

The southwestern corner of the Gaza Strip borders Egypt's Sinai Desert. Israeli forces currently are deployed along that 12-mile corridor, known as the "Philadelphia Axis." Israel retained control of the corridor after the Palestinian Authority took over the Gaza Strip in 1994.

A complete withdrawal from Gaza would mean giving up that control, which could be trouble for Israel.

Time and again, Palestinians have dug tunnels under this Israeli-controlled border area, which in some places is several hundred yards wide, to smuggle arms into Gaza from Egypt. Those arms include rockets with the capability of reaching Israeli towns and cities.

Every so often, the Israeli army pushes into the southern Gaza town of Rafah to destroy the arms-smuggling tunnels, which appear to run largely unimpeded on the Egyptian side.

If this is the case when the Israel Defense Forces retains ultimate control over the area, one can only imagine the scope of arms-smuggling operations into Gaza once

the soldiers leave that line.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has indicated that he intends to have Israeli soldiers leave "Philadelphia" as part of the overall departure from Gaza, but it is now clear that no such move can take place without full Egyptian cooperation.

When the United States was pressing Israel to withdraw from the Palestinian-populated Gaza Strip in cooperation with the Palestinians and the Egyptians, Israel said the Palestinians were uninterested in cooperating.

However, Israel had no problem with the idea of coordinating the withdrawal with the Egyptians.

Negotiations between Israel and Egypt already have begun. Meir Dagan, head of the Mossad security agency, visited Egypt recently for

discussions on the matter.

This week, Sharon's two envoys in Washington told U.S. officials that Israel wants U.S. help persuading Egypt to secure the Gaza Strip once Israel withdraws. Sharon's chief of staff, Dov Weisglass, and his national security adviser, Giora Eiland, met Monday with Condoleezza Rice, Bush's national security adviser, and Secretary of State Colin Powell.

The United States says it is ready to help, but an administration official expressed doubts that the Egyptians would want to assume responsibility for pursuing Palestinian terrorists.

Nadil Fahmy, Egypt's ambassador to Washington, said his country was interested in the proposal but needed to know more. Egypt would participate if the withdrawal

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■ Israel may need a friend in Egypt when it comes to Gaza pullout

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were part of negotiations with the Palestinians, Fahmy told JTA.

"It has to be in the context of resolving the conflict on the basis of a two-state solution and ending the occupation," he said.

While Egypt endorses an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, it is concerned over possible repercussions. In an interview with an Egyptian media agency last week, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak recalled that his predecessor, the late Anwar Sadat, had rejected the idea of taking over Gaza back

in 1978, during Egypt's negotiations with Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin.

Mubarak said that proposals that Israel transfer control of the strip to Egypt — as Israeli Cabinet minister Effi Eitam, leader of the National Religious Party, has proposed — simply are "not serious."

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The Egyptians truly are concerned.

They are well aware of the possible complications of any close involvement with the 1.3 million Palestinians on their northern border.

If Hamas takes over Gaza after an Israeli withdrawal, Egypt is worried that it could provide a boost to the radical Islamic fundamentalist movement

inside Egypt itself. After years of unrest among Egypt's Islamic fundamentalists, Mubarak's government only recently has succeeded in curbing fundamentalist elements in the country.

Aside from Egyptian reticence, there remain other major problems to a possible Egyptian takeover of security responsibility along the Gaza border.

According to the terms of Egypt's peace treaty with Israel, both countries can deploy only limited forces along the border. An amendment of that treaty would be required for Egypt to take over ef-

fective control of the border. That will be one of the issues on the agenda of Israeli Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz's trip to Egypt next month.

After meeting with Mubarak last week in Cairo as the head of a Labor Party delegation, party leader Shimon Peres said Egypt eventually would take over responsibility for the Gaza Strip border.

Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, a former Israeli defense minister, said after the meeting that the Egyptians assured the Israeli delegation that they would ban arms-smuggling into Gaza.

However, they have not done so thus far.

Additionally, in exchange for Egypt's cooperation, Israel would have to pledge that the Gaza withdrawal would be the first step of a larger pullout from West Bank areas coordinated not only with Egypt, but with the Palestinian Authority as well.

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Coordination these days between Israel and the Palestinian Authority is problematic, to say the least.

Although P.A. President Yasser Arafat initially rejected Sharon's Gaza pullout plan, the Palestinians now are saying they should be partners to the withdrawal.

Jibril Rajoub, Arafat's national security adviser, recently dismissed concerns that Hamas would take over Gaza once Israeli forces left.

"We will fight them and prevent them," Rajoub told a group of Israeli military reporters that he summoned to

his Ramallah office last week. "Hamas will not be able to control Gaza," he said, noting, "Palestinians want a secular and democratic system of governance, not a fundamentalist one."

But can the Palestinian Authority really take over control of Gaza?

Judging by the internal crisis in the Fatah, Arafat's ruling party, the extent to which the Palestinian Authority controls anything in the Palestinian-populated areas is highly dubious.

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Over the weekend, Fatah ended a contentious four-day debate on reform by calling for a cease-fire with Israel — this just days after Fatah's armed faction, the Al-Aksa Brigade terrorist group, perpetrated a bus bombing in Jerusalem that claimed eight victims.

Some P.A. officials called for dismantling the Al-Aksa Brigade, but Arafat's security adviser told reporters that the issue never reached the agenda in the Ramallah meetings of the Fatah Revolutionary Council.

The meetings were called for by Fatah's young guard in part in protest over the party's failure to hold new elections for the Fatah Central Committee. The current 16-member committee, which is widely believed to wield the real power in the Palestinian Authority, was elected in 1989.

This is the first time in three years that the council — which is supposed to meet every three months — has met.

Earlier during the meetings, Arafat reportedly hurled a microphone at Fatah official Nasser Yousef for suggesting the P.A. security forces are inefficient. Yousef, whom Arafat called a traitor, threw a pen at Arafat.

The growing internal criticism of Arafat and his entourage is a sign that the P.A. leader is losing his grip on the heart of the West Bank, not to mention the Gaza Strip. Critics also are complaining about the lack of a clear political vision and strategy for dealing with Israel.

Over the weekend, Nablus Mayor Ghassan Shaqa announced he was resigning to protest the P.A.'s failure to bring order to his increasingly lawless West Bank city.

"Our society is destroyed," Shaqa said, "and the Israeli occupation is not solely responsible for this." ■

(JTA Washington bureau chief Ron Kampeas contributed to this story.)

Can the Egyptians assume responsibility for the pursuit of Palestinian terrorists — and do they even want to?

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Reform figure says Conservative Judaism doomed

By JOE BERKOFSKY

NEW YORK (JTA) — A top Reform rabbi is predicting the death of Conservative Judaism, drawing protests from the Conservative movement's leadership.

The objections surfaced this week in response to an essay by Rabbi Paul Menitoff, executive vice president of the Reform movement's Central Conference of American Rabbis. The essay argued that within several decades Conservative Jews likely will move either to the more liberal Reform movement or to the more traditional Orthodox world.

Major wedges between the modernist movements will force this exodus, Menitoff argued, including the Conservative movement's opposition to intermarriage; its ban on ordaining homosexual rabbis and on same-sex marriages; and its opposition to patrilineal descent, all of which the Reform movement supports.

The Conservative movement may continue to attract those for whom Orthodoxy remains "too restrictive" and Reform "too acculturated," but a more likely outcome will be "the demise of the Conservative movement," Menitoff wrote.

"If the Conservative movement capitulates regarding these core differences between Reform and Conservative Judaism, it will be essentially obliterating the need for its existence," he wrote.

Conservative leaders called the argument "delusional" and the product of "immature" analysis.

"His description of the future is rather silly," said Rabbi Joel Meyers, executive vice president of the Conservative movement's Rabbinical Assembly.

The essay "is an immature look" at the currents shaping American Jewry, he said, "or maybe it's wishful thinking."

Unusual in its bluntly pessimistic predictions, Menitoff's essay comes as Conservative Jewry faces major challenges.

In the past few years, the movement has been split over some major issues, and some rabbis have accused the movement's leadership of lacking vision.

Menitoff's predictions came in a January missive to the Central Conference of American Rabbis' 1,800 members.

Within a few decades, "you'll basically have Orthodox and Reform," he said. "This is in no way an attack, it's just a reasonable analysis of how things could work out."

Some signs lend weight to Menitoff's theory. Last September, the 2000-01 National Jewish Population Survey found that of the nation's 4.3 million Jews with some religious or communal connections, the largest group — 39 percent — identified as Reform, while 33 percent called themselves Conservative.

That represented a major decline from the 43 percent the Conservative movement polled in the 1990 NJPS. By contrast, the Reform movement rose during that period from 35 percent, and Orthodoxy grew to 21 percent from 16 percent. The Reconstructionist movement rose to 3 percent from 2 percent.

Menitoff also pointed to the disparity between attendance at the Conservative movement's 2003 biennial convention in Dallas, which some 500 people attended, and the Reform summit in Minneapolis, which drew nearly 5,000.

Conservative movement officials rejected Menitoff's point.

"That's just not a measure of success — their convention is structured differently than ours," said Sarrae Crane, director of the Conservative convention, which is aimed principally at the movement's leadership.

Though Menitoff lamented the blurring of denominational lines as the result of "extreme assimilation" — 44 percent of Jews do not align with any movement, according to the NJPS — his Conservative counterparts felt they were being attacked.

"It's his delusional thinking that creates this scenario," said Rabbi Jerome Epstein, executive vice president of the United Synagogue, the Conservative movement's congregational arm.

"The Talmud says prophecy has been taken away from the prophets and given to children and fools," said Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, dean and vice president of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies. "No one can predict the future."

Many pointed out that a century ago, many predicted the death of the Orthodox movement and were proven wrong.

"I would tell him to be very cautious," Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, chancellor of

the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, said of Menitoff. Many once said "Orthodoxy would not be able to withstand reasoned science and critical scholarship," Schorsch said, but "all the

pundits proved to be rank amateurs."

Conservative leaders also maintain that their movement's communal organizations are thriving.

Of the approximately 120,000 students in Jewish day schools, more than 50,000 are in the Conservative movement's

70 Solomon Schechter day schools, while 8,000 youngsters attend the movement's Camp Ramah system each summer.

Another 20,000 youngsters participate in the movement's United Synagogue Youth organization, and many adults are "engaged in lifelong Jewish study," Schorsch said.

Rela Mintz Geffen, president of the non-denominational Baltimore Hebrew University and a Conservative scholar, also rejected Menitoff's argument.

If "there are clear lines of demarcation" between all of the movements, and they maintain theological differences, "I don't think they will merge," she said.

More likely, she added, is that traditionalists in the Conservative movement might merge with the modern Orthodox movement.

But Rabbi Avi Shafran, director of public affairs for the fervently Orthodox Agudath Israel of America, agreed with Menitoff. In 2001, Shafran wrote in *Moment* magazine that the Conservative movement was a "failure."

"It does seem the Jewish community is heading for a crystallization between those who affirm the full truth of the Jewish religious tradition and those who, to one degree or another, don't accept that," Shafran said.

One of Menitoff's Reform colleagues, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, disputed the essay as well.

Conservative Judaism is "a movement filled with so many vibrant congregations that whatever its problems, I don't believe its future is threatened," said Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, the Reform movement's congregational arm.

Menitoff's
'description of the
future is rather silly.'

Rabbi Joel Meyers

Conservative Rabbinical Assembly

NEWS IN BRIEF

NORTH AMERICA

Israel: Settlers must go

Israeli settlers at six illegal outposts in the West Bank have until Thursday to evacuate, state prosecutors said. After then, the prosecutors told the High Court of Justice on Tuesday, settlers at Hazon David, Tal Binyamin, Bat Ayin West, Ginot Aryeh, Havat Shaked and Havat Maon will be evacuated by force.

Gunned down in Gaza

A Palestinian journalist and Yasser Arafat loyalist was gunned down in Gaza City. Palestinian police had no immediate suspects in the slaying of Khalil Zebin, 59, outside his office Tuesday.

The killing comes amid growing evidence of lawlessness in Palestinian-populated areas. Palestinian journalists increasingly have come under attack in Gaza by gangs believed to be linked to the Palestinian Authority president's Fatah movement, who are unhappy with media criticism of the dominant faction.

Arafat called the incident a "filthy assassination."

West Bank man killed

Israeli forces killed a Palestinian man who tried to resist arrest. It was not immediately clear if the 27-year-old man killed in a village near Hebron on Tuesday was wanted by Israel.

Witnesses said villagers rioted after his killing, pelting Israeli troops with rocks.

War on apathy

Israeli soldiers are undergoing crash courses in Zionism.

On Tuesday, the army said its Education Corps had been authorized to inculcate Zionism and other Jewish values in courses throughout the armed services.

The Israeli army's chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Moshe Ya'alon, said the initiative, coordinated with the Jewish Agency for Israel, would boost morale and fight apathy among soldiers. "Many of the youths conscripted into the Israel Defense Forces come with a weak or incomplete 'anchor' of Zionist values," he told the Yediot Achronot daily. "Instead of a sense of belonging and national identity, this often breeds ignorance and cynicism."

There also is a section on Christmas and Ramadan for the benefit of non-Jewish soldiers.

Victim's dress becomes Torah cover

The wedding dress that an Israeli terror victim never got to wear was remade into a curtain for a Torah ark.

A ceremony Thursday will mark the transformation of Nava Applebaum's dress, which will be used at Rachel's Tomb in Bethlehem. At the ceremony, the Kever Rachel Fund will establish a fund for Israeli couples who are having trouble paying for a wedding and the costs of setting up a house.

Applebaum was killed on the eve of her wedding, along with her father and five others, in a September 2003 suicide bombing at a Jerusalem cafe.

Unjust desert

The bodies of an Israeli couple were found in the Sinai Desert.

The couple apparently got lost while hiking in the popular vacation spot in January. Authorities said the couple appeared to have died from dehydration, not violence. The bodies were to be repatriated later this week.

Iran tipoff

Israeli code-breakers tipped off the United States about Iran's nuclear buildup, according to a U.S. report. The New Yorker magazine

said this week that Israeli military intelligence intercepted encrypted communications between Iran and Pakistan a few years ago and passed the information on to Washington.

Israeli officials declined to comment on the report, which came amid heightened international scrutiny of Tehran's nuclear program and Pakistani non-conventional weapons proliferation.

Settlements grow

Construction in Israeli settlements increased by 35 percent in 2003, Israel said.

The findings published by the Central Bureau of Statistics on Tuesday ran counter to an overall slump in Israeli residential development — as well as the U.S.-led "road map" peace plan, which calls for a halt to settlement expansion.

Earlier figures showed that the settler population is growing steadily thanks to a combination of ideological motivation and cheap housing.

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E.U. presses Libya

The European Union called on Libya to join a free trade zone it has boycotted because of Israeli membership in the group.

The European Commission said Monday that Tripoli immediately should send officials to Brussels to prepare its application to the group, whose purpose ultimately is to create a free-trade zone bringing together all the countries of North Africa and the Middle East.

Libyan President Muammar Gadhafi recently expressed a desire to join the process, but he cannot take part unless he agrees to recognize Israel.

Group presses Lithuania

The Simon Wiesenthal Center demanded that Lithuania take action against a newspaper for allegedly anti-Semitic content.

The center says the newspaper Respublika has published a series of anti-Semitic articles claiming that Jews control the world.

The group also says the articles included anti-Semitic illustrations.

Nazi case draws demonstrations

Demonstrations for and against a pardon for a convicted Nazi war criminal are planned for Rome.

The Rome Jewish community and an association of World War II deportees issued a call for a Saturday counterdemonstration after supporters of Erich Priebke received official permission over the weekend to stage a rally urging amnesty for the former SS officer. Priebke, 90, is serving a life sentence for his role in the massacre of 335 Romans, including 75 Jews, in March 1944.

Two right-wing members of Parliament will take part in the pro-Priebke rally, and organizers announced Monday that Priebke's wife would fly in for the occasion from Argentina.

NORTH AMERICA

Judas follows Jesus

ABC will broadcast "Judas," a made-for-TV movie, next week.

The two-hour movie, to be shown at 9 p.m. on March 8, will focus on the figure who, according to the New Testament, betrayed Jesus.

The film, which follows on the heels of the controversial "The Passion of the Christ," portrays a Judas convinced that Jesus will lead the Jews to victory over the Romans.

But Judas only grows disillusioned, and he ultimately reveals Jesus' identity to the High Priest Caiaphas and the Roman leader Pontius Pilate.