

IN THE NEWS

Mubarak rejects Egyptian role in Gaza

Hosni Mubarak rejected the idea of Egypt maintaining security in the Gaza Strip.

Taking charge of security in Gaza if Israel withdraws would be a "trap set for us, because we would find ourselves in a situation of confrontation with the Palestinians," the Egyptian president told the French daily *Le Figaro* on Monday. "And if there is a problem, we could find ourselves in conflict with the Israelis."

Israeli officials said Israel and Egypt recently discussed an Egyptian security corridor in Gaza.

Annan has a new peace plan

U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan reportedly is promoting a new plan for peace between Israel, Syria and Lebanon.

Israel's daily *Ma'ariv* reported that it would require all three parties — as well as Syria's Lebanese proxy militia, Hezbollah — to halt violence and abide by an international monitoring committee. With calm restored, negotiations then would start on the basis of U.N. resolutions, *Ma'ariv* said.

According to the newspaper, Syria has responded positively to the plan but Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is cool, preferring to put his trust in Washington as the chief power broker in the Middle East.

Jorg Haider wins election

The party of far-right Austrian leader Jorg Haider won a surprise victory in a regional election.

Sunday's victory by Haider's Freedom Party paves the way for him to retain his job as governor of Carinthia province; it also increases the possibility that he will make a national comeback.

Several years ago, Haider praised Hitler's "decent employment policies" and described Nazi Waffen SS troops as "men of character." He later apologized for the remarks.

WORLD REPORT

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Sharon seeks help of Egypt, U.S. to prevent chaos on Gaza pullout

By LESLIE SUSSER

JERUSALEM (JTA) — If Israel pulls its troops out of Gaza, how can Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon be sure that Hamas won't seize power in the ensuing chaos?

That's one of the key questions troubling Israeli policy planners. So far, they have come up with a number of answers: Military force to clip the wings of the Islamic terrorist group before the pullout; diplomatic efforts to convince Egypt to play a peacekeeping role after the withdrawal, and encouraging Britain to train Palestinian Authority police forces to maintain law and order.

It remains to be seen, however, whether these steps will satisfy the Bush administration, which also is wary of the potential for chaos in Gaza after an Israeli withdrawal.

Early Sunday, a large Israeli force entered the Bureij refugee camp in Gaza, hunting for known Hamas and Islamic Jihad terrorists. In the ensuing firefight, 14 Palestinians were killed, mostly armed fighters identified with Hamas.

According to Israeli military analysts, the operation was not in retaliation for attempted terrorist attacks the previous day at a border crossing between Gaza and Israel proper. Rather, it was part of an ongoing policy designed to keep terrorists off balance in the limbo period between Sharon's declaration of intent and the actual Israeli pullout, perhaps some time later this year.

Such relatively large-scale military actions are likely to be stepped up in the interim period. The Israeli army's chief of

staff, Lt. Gen. Moshe Ya'alon, says that mere talk of withdrawal could be encouraging the Palestinians to intensify attacks to give the impression that Israel is fleeing under fire.

To counter this, Israel hopes to inflict a heavy defeat on the terrorists before leaving. The message is that the Palestinians will be making a big mistake if they think more terrorism will force further Israeli withdrawals.

At stake is the credibility of Israeli deterrence.

Before Israel withdrew unilaterally from Lebanon in May 2000, Sharon urged then-Prime Minister Ehud Barak to hit Hezbollah hard so that the Syrian-backed Shi'ite militia couldn't claim a victory that would inspire other Arab groups to attack Israel.

But Barak ignored that advice. Because of that, Sharon believes, Arabs widely perceived the Lebanon withdrawal as an Israeli defeat — one that encouraged the Palestinians to take up arms to achieve similar results. The result: the intifada, now nearly three and a half years old.

Now, with the drawn-out intifada shaping up as a test of national wills, many Palestinians are touting Sharon's announcement of a Gaza withdrawal as vindication of their strategy of violence.

Sharon wants to do all he can to counter that impression.

Focusing the army's attack on Hamas and Islamic Jihad also is an attempt to make it easier for relative moderates, like Fatah strongman Mohammed Dahlan, to take over after Israel leaves and establish a modicum of law and order. But Sharon doesn't trust

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Dahlan or any other Palestinian figure to stop the smuggling of arms into Gaza from Egypt after Israel leaves.

Nor does he want to leave Israeli forces on the sensitive "Philadelphia Axis," which runs for about five miles along the border between Egypt and Gaza and is the scene of frequent clashes.

For years, the Palestinians have used a system of tunnels to smuggle arms and explosives from the Egyptian side of the border into Gaza. Sharon's solution lately has been to appeal to Cairo for aid in shutting off the smugglers' traffic.

If the Egyptians agree, close aides say Sharon is ready to make the necessary changes in the 1979 Israel-Egypt peace agreement to allow Cairo to move heavier forces into place.

Israel recognizes that controlling the Philadelphia route "would require a different force structure and a different deployment on the Egyptian side," a senior Israeli official told JTA.

Sharon favors an Israeli pullout from all of Gaza, but aides say he will go that far only if Egypt undertakes to police the Philadelphia route. In other words, the outcome of talks on the Philadelphia issue could determine the scope of Israel's Gaza pullback.

The signs are not good. In a recent interview with the French newspaper *Le Figaro*, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak was highly skeptical about a proposed Egyptian role in Gaza, warning that it could lead to clashes with the

Palestinians and even with Israel.

Israeli officials had hoped Egypt would step up in order to impress Washington and be recognized as a major regional player. But it seems it will take a lot of persuasion from Washington to get Mubarak to agree.

The leader of the Israeli opposition, Labor Party chairman Shimon Peres, saw Mubarak a few weeks ago and said he thought Egypt would be ready to police the border, but only from its side.

The Egyptians are keen to prevent chaos after an Israeli withdrawal because it could have dangerous repercussions on the Egyptian street — but they would like to see the Palestinian Authority take charge.

They have, therefore, been pressing the Palestinians to organize their forces on the ground and make sure Hamas has no chance of taking over in the Gaza Strip. Britain also has been helping the Palestinian Authority formulate a security plan and says it is ready to help train Palestinian police.

Similar offers have been made in the past, however; what has been lacking is any Palestinian will to meet their security

obligations — a situation that, if it continues, could turn Gaza into a tinderbox after an Israeli withdrawal.

American envoys are due in Israel again soon to get a more detailed account of Israeli plans and of how Israel sees the Palestinian Authority's future vis-a-vis Hamas.

Israeli officials argue that the Palestinian Authority can raise close to 50,000 armed men, as opposed to the couple of thousand that Hamas and Islamic Jihad can summon. Together with Egyptian, British and American help, that should be enough to

keep the fundamentalists at bay, Israeli officials say.

If the Americans feel it's too much of a risk, however, President Bush could ask Sharon, when they meet in Washington next month, to defer the withdrawal until after U.S. elections in November.

Given the pressure from the Israeli right against withdrawal and the apparent Egyptian refusal to get too deeply involved, Sharon may be happy to go along — and use the extra time to refine his withdrawal plans.

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

An Egyptian role in Gaza could lead to clashes with the Palestinians and even with Israel.

Simon Wiesenthal becomes a knight

LONDON (JTA) — Britain's Queen Elizabeth II has awarded an honorary knighthood to Simon Wiesenthal, the legendary Nazi-hunter who tracked down more than 1,000 war criminals, including Adolf Eichmann.

"An honorary knighthood is a rare honor for the Queen to bestow, a special award for a very special man," said John Macgregor, Britain's ambassador to Austria, where Wiesenthal lives.

Announcing the award last month, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw praised Wiesenthal's "untiring service to the Jewish communities in the U.K. and elsewhere by helping to right at least some of the awful wrongs of the Holocaust."

"If there is one name which symbolizes this vital coming to terms with the past it is Simon Wiesenthal's," Straw said.

The award will be given to Wiesenthal

in Vienna later this year.

Wiesenthal, 95, was born in what is now Ukraine and worked as an architect in Lvov before World War II. But first the Soviets and then the Nazis invaded Poland during the war, and Wiesenthal was sent to a concentration camp.

He and his wife survived the war — but they lost an estimated 89 members of their families. When the Holocaust ended, Wiesenthal devoted himself to tracking down the perpetrators of the Final Solution from the Jewish Documentation Center, a simple three-room office in Vienna.

"I am forever asking myself what I can do for those who have not survived," he wrote in his autobiography, "Justice Not Vengeance." The answer, he wrote, is, "I want to be their mouthpiece, I want to keep their memory alive, to make sure the dead live on in that memory."

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White House ponders sanctions to punish Syria

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The United States no longer wonders whether or not Syrian President Bashar Assad is a reliable diplomatic partner.

The question now, according to an official close to government deliberations on whether to sanction Syria, is why Assad is proving so hopeless.

"The debate on Bashar Assad is not 'Can we work with him.' It's more, 'Why is he such a disaster?' " one official said Tuesday. "Is he incapable or unwilling?"

Assad, a London-trained ophthalmologist, was regarded as pro-Western when he assumed power upon his rejectionist father's death in 2000.

Since then, however, Assad's policy decisions have stunned Americans, especially in two areas: He granted Hezbollah greater power in Lebanon just when Israel's withdrawal would have allowed him to quash the terrorist group, and he ended a decades-long feud with Saddam Hussein exactly when the United States was urging countries to distance themselves from the Iraqi dictator.

Officials don't know whether Assad is making the decisions on his own or whether he is in thrall to his father's old guard. Whatever the case, Assad's poor performance helped ruin his recent efforts to reach out to Israel to renew talks through back channels such as Turkey.

Bush administration officials have discouraged Israel from taking up the offers, believing them to be red herrings designed to distract the West from Syria's continuing support for terrorism.

"Everything the Syrians are doing lately is taken with a grain of salt and a view to the Syrian record of supporting international terror and its behavior vis-a-vis the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq," the administration official said.

Israel still regards Syria as its most immediate enemy. The Arrow anti-missile system, which is expected to provide Israel with carpet protection against missiles by the end of the decade, was planned with a belief that Syria has more than 300 missiles in its arsenal, according to Gen. Arieh Herzog, who heads Israel's missile defense program.

One concern Herzog underscored in a recent interview is Syria's recent development of Scud C missiles, which have a

range that allows them to hit Israel from anywhere on Syrian territory.

Senior officials at the Pentagon, the State Department and the White House's National Security Council are discussing what to report to Congress by its May deadline on whether Syria is complying with last year's Syria Accountability Act.

That act, which the president signed in December, imposes trade sanctions on Syria and gives the president a range of other possible punitive measures unless Syria ends its support for anti-Israel terrorist groups, pulls its troops out of Lebanon, ends its weapons of mass destruction programs and keeps anti-U.S. insurgents from crossing its borders into Iraq.

At the White House's insistence, the bill allows the president to suspend its stipulations every six months for reasons of national security, but he must explain why in a report to Congress.

In testimony to the U.S. House of Representatives last month, Secretary of State Colin Powell said the officials were examining the sanctions options "to see how to use the lever."

If Syria fails to meet the conditions, the act calls on President Bush to suspend the export of anything that could be used for weapons manufacturing and to choose two from a list of six possible sanctions.

Recent pronouncements suggest that a negative report to Congress — followed by sanctions — may be inevitable.

Administration officials have confirmed reports that Syria used planes providing earthquake relief to Iran in December to bring back weapons for Hezbollah.

Last month, U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who was party to the sanctions talks, told the Senate that Assad's "is a regime that has been almost consistently unhelpful."

"We know that he is working with Iran in funding Hezbollah and bringing them down through Damascus into Lebanon, into Israel," Rumsfeld said. "We know he's testing chemical weapons."

Assad also was refusing U.S. administrators in Iraq access to Iraqi government

money in Damascus, he said.

Even officials at the State Department, usually the strongest advocates for continued engagement with Syria, are sounding a note of despair.

"Syria can take the road to a meaningful involvement in the Middle East or can take the road which leads to more isolation," Richard Armitage, the deputy secretary of state, said in a recent interview with the Gulf News newspaper. "So far, I don't think that President Assad has made up his mind."

One immediate sign of goodwill, Bush administration officials have suggested, would be for Syria to emulate Libya and open its weapons of mass destruction systems to immediate inspection.

Bush was never enthusiastic about signing the sanctions bill — he did so on a Friday evening, Dec. 12, a time when he typically slips in legislation he'd rather not deal with.

But in an election year, with Democrats eager to undercut Bush's reputation as close to Israel, he might have little choice but to impose sanctions.

That leaves the question of what sanctions to introduce. The ban on the export of any item that could be converted to weapons use is required in any case, but Bush also must choose two sanctions from a list of six.

Armitage counted out one possible sanction — the recall of the U.S. ambassador to Damascus, Margaret Scobey.

"We don't want to have a hostile relationship" with the Syrians, Armitage said.

Three options relate to trade: One would block U.S. exports to Syria, one would ban U.S. investment in Syria and one would ban any transaction in which the Syrian government has an interest.

Those could present problems to the U.S. oil industry — traditional backers of Bush — which reportedly has \$600 million invested in Syria.

That leaves two weaker options for Bush: keeping Syrian diplomats in the United States within 25 miles of their missions, and banning Syrian flights from U.S. airspace.

'We don't want to have a hostile relationship' with the Syrians.

Richard Armitage

U.S. deputy secretary of state

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Gaza tensions

Palestinians said Israeli troops killed a 16-year-old in the Gaza Strip.

Monday's reported killing came amid Hamas vows to avenge an Israeli raid Sunday that killed 14 Palestinians, most of them Hamas fighters, in two of the terrorist group's Gaza strongholds.

Israeli military officials said operations in Gaza were being stepped up to counter increased terrorist activity following Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's announcement that most Israeli settlements in Gaza would be evacuated by the end of the year.

Kosher recruits

Women reportedly are being recruited as kosher inspectors for Israel's military.

Israel's daily Yediot Achronot said the plan by the army rabbinate, intended to free up male conscripts for other duties such as administering Jewish services, had been decided on in secrecy to forestall opposition from fervently Orthodox rabbis. Military chaplains gave their approval on condition that the first female recruits hail from respected religious high schools.

Operation safe bus

A U.S.-based interfaith group will provide Israel with security equipment for public buses.

Responding to the threat of suicide bombings on Israeli public buses, the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews will outfit 1,000 security guards with explosives detectors and other equipment, including baggage-screening devices.

The \$7.2 million project will cover Israel's 6,000 public buses, and individual donors can "secure a seat" for \$24. "We are launching a practical way to protect innocent victims of random terror — one seat at a time, one bus at a time," said Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, the group's president and CEO.

Better than a pen-and-pencil set?

A mutual fund that invests in Israeli companies is offering an \$18 free stock gift to U.S. children having a Bar or Bat Mitzvah.

The Blue and White Fund invests in Israeli firms that are traded on U.S. stock exchanges.

Only individuals with a Bar or Bat Mitzvah invitation or proof from a rabbi are eligible.

NORTH AMERICA

Denver synagogue vandalized

More than 100 people cleaned swastikas off a Denver synagogue.

Sunday morning's cleaning at the BMH-BJ Congregation came after the swastikas were painted on the synagogue last Friday night.

The synagogue's rabbi, Daniel Cohen, said the vandalism may have been sparked by Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ," which critics say blames Jews for the death of Jesus.

Group: Aid cuts hurt women

Recent U.S. Senate budget cuts in global aid affect women the most, the American Jewish World Service said.

On Monday, International Women's Day, the Jewish humanitarian agency called on Congress to reverse the Senate budget outline that included a \$1 billion reduction in anti-poverty programming.

Without increased support for educational initiatives, AIDS and HIV treatment, and safe drinking water, women in developing countries are at tremendous risk, the Jewish group said.

Canadian Shabbat vote controversy

Jewish members of Canada's Conservative Party are protesting the scheduling of elections for a new party leader on the Sabbath. An advance poll for the Saturday, March 20, vote is scheduled for Saturday, March 13.

"We are seriously concerned about this," B'nai Brith Canada wrote to the party's governing council, adding that many observant Jewish voters could be disenfranchised.

All three leadership candidates have expressed concern and asked the council to review the rules and perhaps extend the hours of the advance poll to include Friday afternoon.

N.Y. federation leader dies

Peggy Tishman, a former president of the New York Jewish federation, died last Friday at 84.

Tishman served as the first president of the newly formed UJA-Federation of New York from 1986 to 1989.

She also was a board member of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and president of the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York.

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Romanian Jewish leader dies

Dr. Nicolae Cajal, chairman of Romania's Jewish community, died Sunday in Bucharest at the age of 84.

Cajal, a virologist, was a leading scholar known for his close links to the country's top politicians. He had been the president of the country's 6,000-strong Jewish community since 1984.

Remark riles memorial board

The architect of Berlin's Holocaust memorial apologized for an offhand remark about the company that manufactured the gas used in concentration camps.

At the last meeting of the memorial's board of trustees, Peter Eisenman reportedly said his New York dentist had asked him in reference to his gold fillings, "Do you know that you have Degussa in your mouth?"

The Degussa firm, in charge of graffiti-proofing the memorial under construction, was nearly dropped from the project because of its ties with the firm that made the Zyklon-B poison gas used in Auschwitz.

Eisenman, who is Jewish, said he meant no offense by the remark, but some of the trustees were upset.

Aufbau in trouble

A 70-year-old German Jewish newspaper begun in New York by emigrants from Nazi Germany may close.

Andreas Mink, the Aufbau's editor in chief, has told the German news magazine Der Spiegel that the paper, which since May 2002 also has been published in Berlin, has enough funds to run only through the end of March.

Talks with German publishing firms have fallen through, and Mink said he is seeking other support. A donation saved the paper from extinction a few years ago.

Bolivian Jews press for legal protection

Bolivian Jewish leaders are pressing government officials and legislators to pass an anti-discrimination law.

Led by the Latin American Jewish Congress' assistant director, Claudio Epelman, and the Bolivian Jewish community's president, Miguel Apt, the group met with the foreign minister and members of the National Congress.