

IN THE NEWS

Shalom: signal sent in assassination of Yassin

Israel's assassination of Hamas' founder sent a message to Palestinian terrorists, Israel's foreign minister said.

"By this action we sent a very strong message" that others "might be the next to get hurt if they will act to plan more terrorist attacks against more Israelis," Silvan Shalom told a meeting of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations in New York on Wednesday.

The U.N. Security Council debated Israel's assassination Tuesday evening, but did not reach a vote.

Supreme Court debates 'under God'

The Supreme Court debated whether the term "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance was lawful.

In the case, debated Wednesday, Michael Newdow argued that as an atheist, he was hurt when his daughter was told to "get up, put her hand over her heart and say her father is wrong."

State ousted Clarke because of Israel

The first Bush administration forced Richard Clarke out of the State Department in 1992 because it said he ignored Israeli arms transfers to China.

Clarke, a White House counter-terrorism expert at the time of the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, rattled the White House this week with allegations that the current President Bush ignored Clarke's warnings about Al-Qaida.

Clarke moved to the White House in 1992 after leaving the State Department after being accused of "looking the other way" when Israel transferred U.S. technology to China. The New York Times reported Wednesday.

In 1999, Clarke argued that he simply had refused to go along with a plan to pressure Israel to make concessions in talks with the Palestinians.

WORLD REPORT

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By targeting Hamas, Sharon hopes to boost the Palestinian Authority

By LESLIE SUSSER

JERUSALEM (JTA) — No one believes Israel is a safer place just after the assassination of Sheik Ahmed Yassin, leader of the terrorist group Hamas.

The question is whether the assassination and continued Israeli pressure on Hamas will contribute to stability over time.

In targeting Yassin, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon had clear political goals. He says he intends to crush Hamas so that when Israel withdraws from Gaza as Sharon plans, it will not seem to be forced out by terrorism. As such, Yassin's boast that Hamas would make Israel leave under fire may have cost him his life.

Sharon also hopes to tilt the balance of power in Gaza dramatically in favor of the more moderate Palestinian Authority so that when Israel pulls out, the Palestinian Authority will be strong enough to maintain law and order.

But will Monday's attack really help achieve such objectives?

In the short term, few doubt that there will be more terrorist attacks and that more young Palestinians will swell Hamas ranks.

The uncertainty is about the longer term. Advocates of the assassination say relentless pressure will eventually wear down Hamas and help the Palestinian Authority take control of the Gaza Strip after Israel's planned withdrawal.

These advocates point to the unilateral cease-fire declared by Hamas last summer after intense military pressure by Israel.

Opponents maintain that the pressure will backfire and that Hamas, with the "mar-

tyred" Yassin attracting more recruits than ever, will become stronger and even more radicalized.

If so, it could forge alliances with major players in the international terrorist network, such as Al-Qaida and Hezbollah, endangering not only Israel but Jews and possibly Westerners everywhere.

The immediate fear is that Hamas will redouble its efforts to carry out a so-called mega-terror attack to retaliate for Yassin's death.

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Palestinian terrorists have attempted such mega-terror acts before.

Indeed, the decision to kill Yassin came after terrorists tried earlier this month to generate such an attack by blowing up deadly stores of chemicals and gases at the Ashdod port.

They failed, however, killing "only" 10 Israelis in a double suicide bombing.

There are several precedents for strong terrorist reaction when Israel kills terrorist leaders. A similar assassination 12 years ago, of Hezbollah leader Sheik Abbas Musawi, resulted in a retaliatory attack on the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, killing 29 people.

Likewise, the killing of Hamas master bomb maker Yehiya Ayash in 1996 was followed by a wave of bus bombings that killed dozens of Israelis.

The August 2001 targeting of Abu Ali Mustafa, leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, was followed by the assassination of Israeli Cabinet minister Rehavam Ze'evi.

With the terrorist organizations con-
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ANALYSIS

■ *By taking aim at Hamas, Sharon hopes to boost Palestinian Authority*

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stantly trying to attack Israel, many regard their claims of specific retribution with skepticism. But some analysts warn that Sharon's pressure on Hamas is likely to backfire.

Reuven Paz, an expert on fundamentalist movements at the Herzliya Interdisciplinary Center, argues that it could trigger such widespread Palestinian support for Hamas that P.A. Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei's days in office could be numbered.

Pressure on Hamas also could also undermine local strongman Mohammed Dahlan, whom Israel eventually would like to see imposing order for the Palestinian Authority in Gaza.

Other analysts suggest that chaos after Yassin's assassination could adversely affect Sharon's projected withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. That might make it necessary to leave Israeli troops in Gaza, deferring plans for a full withdrawal from the strip indefinitely.

But Sharon appears determined to smash Hamas and avert the kind of disorder the analysts fear.

Beyond the political tactics surrounding the withdrawal, the government has defined Hamas as a strategic threat that must be destroyed.

That's because Hamas rules out any compromise with Israel, advocates the destruction of the Jewish state and its replacement with an Islamic theocracy, and is ready to use any means to achieve its goals.

Government spokesmen say Sharon in effect has declared war on Hamas.

The assassination of Yassin, whom Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz called Israel's Osama bin Laden, was only the opening shot.

From now on, the officials say, the Israel Defense Forces will focus almost solely on Hamas, targeting its leaders, militiamen and funding.

"No Hamas leader will be immune," Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared.

The Israelis believe they have a green light from Washington for all-out war against Hamas.

Unlike the Europeans, who condemned Yassin's assassination

as contrary to international law, American officials at first expressed tacit understanding for Israel's position, drawing parallels to the U.S. war against global terrorism.

Later in the day, however, U.S. spokesman called the attack "deeply troubling."

Since the eruption of the violent Palestinian uprising three and a half years ago, Hamas has committed 425 terrorist attacks, leaving 377 Israelis dead and 2,076 wounded. It has been responsible for 52 suicide bombings that claimed 288 Israeli lives.

According to the IDF intelligence chief Lt. Gen. Aharon Ze'evi, Yassin was directly involved in planning and approving military operations.

Some pundits, like Ha'aretz's Danny Rubinstein, claim that Yassin was a relative moderate within Hamas.

Unlike some of his potential successors, Rubinstein maintains, Yassin could have agreed to a temporary cease-fire with Israel and made it stick.

Also writing in Ha'aretz, Zvi Barel noted that Yassin insisted that the war against Israel not transcend Israeli-Palestinian borders, but his successors might not be similarly restrained.

Barel says new Hamas leaders will lack Yassin's authority and that Hamas could break up into small splinter groups,

some of which may ally themselves with global terrorist groups, among them the Al-Qaida network.

Hamas, Barel suggests, now could decide "to turn its back on years of strategy and begin operations outside the country, striking at Israeli, Jewish or American targets overseas."

Indeed, Abdel Aziz Rantissi, named Tuesday as Hamas' new chief for the Gaza Strip, vowed that the group would attack Israelis everywhere.

"We will fight them everywhere. We will hit them everywhere. We will chase them everywhere. We will teach them lessons in confrontation," Rantissi told thousands of mourners gathered in Gaza's main soccer

stadium on Tuesday.

Later in the week, however, Hamas officials said they would not make Americans into targets.

It's too early to say to what extent targeting an Islamic symbol like Yassin may have opened up a wider front for Israel with the Muslim world. Al-Qaida, at any rate, has vowed to avenge Yassin's assassination.

Israeli army officers describe the Yassin assassination as heralding "a new era in the fight against terror," which Israel has entered with its eyes wide open. But as the struggle with Hamas escalates, it could take on new forms, raising the stakes for both sides.

If that happens, will the Palestinian Authority and its main Fatah movement stand aside, happy to watch Israel create the conditions for the P.A.'s political hegemony?

Or will they feel forced by Palestinian public opinion to join Hamas in fighting Israel?

The answers to those questions could determine whether Sharon's bold attempt to single out Hamas succeeds or fails — in other words, whether new violence leads only to more carnage or to some sort of political accommodation.

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

'We will fight them everywhere. We will hit them everywhere. We will chase them everywhere. We will teach them lessons in confrontation.'

Abdel Aziz Rantissi

Hamas' new leader

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German Reform seeks aid from U.S. Reform Jews

By **TOBY AXELROD**

BERLIN (JTA) — The Union for Progressive Judaism in Germany is seeking help from U.S. Reform Jews in an attempt to win recognition and financing from the German government.

Claiming that Germany's main government-funded Jewish body refuses to admit Reform congregations, the union took its fight to Washington. Union members petitioned Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, for help, and Saperstein met with German Ambassador Wolfgang Ischinger on Tuesday.

The meeting — a continuation of contacts begun before German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder signed a historic contract in January 2003 placing the Central Council of Jews in Germany on equal legal footing with the nation's Protestant and Catholic churches — was an attempt to avert the threat of a lawsuit against the German government.

The union claims the government is legally required to support all streams of Judaism, even if the Central Council, which now gets \$3 million per year in federal funding, refuses to do so.

For its part, the Central Council says its doors are open to diversity. But critics say the issue is power, not diversity.

On Tuesday, Ischinger told Saperstein that high-level talks are planned between the German government and the Central Council to try to resolve the issue "in a spirit of reconciliation and partnership."

A background discussion for members of the German Parliament also is planned for Thursday.

"I hope our meeting will clarify some issues and make it clear that we are not ignorant of the fact that there is a concern out there," Ischinger told JTA in a telephone interview after meeting Saperstein.

Germany "intended to support all streams of Judaism," Saperstein said after the meeting. He said he understood Germany's wish to avoid mixing in internal Jewish affairs. But, he added, "where government money is concerned, there also is a serious concern that there not be discrimination."

The Central Council has avoided commenting on the current fracas. But council members say the group, which is secular in character, does support pluralism — without funding any so-called pluralistic religious organizations.

Most Central Council congregations are traditional, but the past decade has seen the acceptance of a few egalitarian congregations, the appointment of non-Orthodox rabbis — including two women

— and support for a non-Orthodox youth organization.

Katarina Seidler, deputy president of the Progressive Union in Germany, said it's high time that Reform communities got their due. She said they receive only minimal sums from the council for events co-sponsored with a Central Council congregation, and via the Jewish Central Welfare Council for integration of immigrants.

Rabbi Uri Regev, director of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, said he does not believe the real obstacle is theological.

"It's more a reluctance of the establishment that is administering large sums of public funds to see newcomers challenge their rule," he said.

Supporters of the Central Council say it's the union that is power hungry. Though Paul Spiegel, head of the Central Council, has not commented, others say there already are alternatives to Orthodoxy under the Central Council umbrella that can meet a small but growing demand for more progressive fare.

"The Central Council is the united roof for many different groups that also represent the same views as the union," said Michael Fuerst, who heads the Central Council's state association in Lower Saxony.

El Salvadoran Jews breathe sigh of relief after elections

By **BRIAN HARRIS**

SAN JOSE, Costa Rica (JTA) — Worries that El Salvador would immediately move its embassy in Israel to Tel Aviv from Jerusalem appear to be unfounded following the defeat of a former leftist rebel in Sunday's presidential election.

But the embassy may still be moved in the coming years.

The elections, which pitted two candidates united by a common Palestinian heritage but divided by a huge ideological gulf, had been expected to be close. But it turned into a landslide as voters chose to turn down former guerrilla leader Schafik Handal and the FMLN Party he represents.

Handal, 73 and the son of Palestinian immigrants, had vowed to move the El Salvador's embassy out of Jerusalem, Israel's capital city, where only El Salvador and Costa Rica have their embassies.

Antonio "Tony" Saca of the right-wing ARENA party won the vote with 57 percent support in heavy turnout, according to preliminary reports. Although the FMLN tried to make foreign policy an issue in the campaign, voters focused on local issues.

Saca, 39 and the grandson of Palestinian immigrants, has shown sympathy for Palestinian causes, but he was the favored

candidate of El Salvador's small Jewish community in part because he is seen as less likely to move the embassy in Israel.

"If the other party had won, we would have been in trouble," Claudio Kahn, president of El Salvador's tiny Jewish community, told JTA via telephone. "We are more at ease with this result."

However, local Jews are viewing Saca's victory cautiously.

Last year Saca, along with Handal, helped fund the building of "Palestine Plaza" in the capital city, San Salvador. A Palestinian Authority flag flies at the small park dedicated "to the millions of Palestinians expelled from their lands" by the creation of the Israeli state.

During the campaign, Saca also skillfully dodged committing himself to keeping the embassy in Jerusalem, instead saying that moving the embassy would do little toward resolving the Middle East's problems and that he sees no reason for El Salvador to wade into the troubles plaguing the Middle East.

Diplomatic observers in San Salvador say Saca, a former sports broadcaster and political novice, is unlikely to move the embassy very quickly out of fear of offending the United States, whose favor ARENA makes no secret of wanting, more than any other deciding factor.

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Another boy bomber caught

Israeli troops caught a 14-year-old Palestinian would-be bomber at a West Bank checkpoint. Wednesday's arrest at the Hawara checkpoint near Nablus followed the discovery last week of a bomb that had been slipped into the bag of a 10-year-old Palestinian porter there.

The army said the youth caught on Wednesday apparently planned to blow himself up among troops, but decided against it after they took cover and warned him to surrender.

Diplomatic mission impossible?

Israel suspended operations at its diplomatic missions in Qatar and Mauritania amid terror threats.

Israeli sources cited security concerns for the Foreign Ministry's announcement Wednesday that the missions, which function mainly as low-level diplomatic and trade liaisons, would be closed at least through Passover. Israeli and Jewish interests worldwide are on high alert for possible reprisals for Monday's assassination of Hamas founder Sheik Ahmed Yassin in Gaza.

Lebanese rocket crew hit

Israeli helicopter gunships killed two members of a Lebanese rocket crew before they could fire over the border.

Tuesday night's airstrike followed hours of shelling between Israeli and Hezbollah gunners. According to Israeli security sources, the three-man rocket crew, believed to be Palestinian, was about to fire Katyusha rockets from Lebanon into Kibbutz Menara.

Two of its members were killed and the third was wounded by Israeli missiles.

Camp David remembered

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon voiced hope for regional peace as Israel marked 25 years since the Camp David peace accords with Egypt.

The Knesset's special commemorative session Wednesday was overshadowed by Cairo's decision to shun the celebrations to protest Israel's assassination Monday of the founder of Hamas, Sheik Ahmed Yassin.

"Recently, we have seen a welcome though a slow process of a warming of relations," Sharon said in his address, alluding to Egyptian efforts to broker an Israeli-Palestinian truce. "This is the peace Israel is striving for — not only with Egypt and Jordan, but with all other Arab countries, and above all our neighbors Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority."

NORTH AMERICA

Americans back Yassin killing

Americans overall and evangelical Christians largely support Israel's killing of Hamas founder Sheik Ahmed Yassin.

In a March 22-23 poll by the Israel Project, which seeks to bolster support for Israel, 61 percent of 800 likely voters said Israel was justified in killing the leader of Hamas, a group that has killed hundreds of Israelis.

Of those surveyed, 74 percent rejected the idea that Yassin should have been immune because he was old and disabled.

Meanwhile, the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, which seeks to build interfaith ties and support for Israel, said 89 percent of 1,630 evangelicals who took an online poll in the same period supported Israel's move, while 2.5 percent opposed it and 8 percent were unsure.

Anti-Semitic attacks unchanged

More than 1,500 anti-Semitic incidents were reported nationwide in 2003.

The Anti-Defamation League's annual Audit of Anti-Semitic Incidents tracked 1,557 reports of Jews or Jewish institutions being targeted, with 40 percent involving vandalism and the rest harassment or threats. New York led 43 states that suffered anti-Semitic acts — it saw 364 — followed by California and Pennsylvania. The highest reports of anti-Semitic incidents typically correlate with the states with the most Jews. The full audit is available at www.adl.org.

Lawmakers want White House clarification

Lawmakers are asking President Bush to repudiate his spokesman's statement that the killing of Sheik Ahmed Yassin was "deeply troubling." Nineteen congressmen signed the letter Wednesday, referring to remarks that White House press secretary Scott McClellan made Monday. "For your spokesman to suggest anything other than full support for Israel's action is simply deplorable," the letter reads. "Mr. McClellan's statement is intolerable and should be corrected immediately."

UJC budget flat

The United Jewish Communities' budget committee approved its 2004-2005 budget.

The group voted unanimously Wednesday to approve the \$38.5 million budget, which is the same amount as UJC's budget last year. The budget must now go to the board of trustees for approval.

Orthodox calls for choice safeguards

In congressional testimony, an Orthodox Union official praised President Bush's faith-based initiatives but stressed the need for safeguards.

Nathan Diament, the O.U.'s director of public policy, appeared Tuesday before the House Committee on Government Reform's subcommittee on criminal justice, drug policy and human resources.

He said that for religious entities to provide social services, there should be readily available secular alternatives and assurance of a lack of religious discrimination.

Jewish leaders to dedicate Torah at Capitol

Jewish leaders will dedicate a Torah at the U.S. Capitol that memorializes U.S. and Israeli victims of terrorism.

Officials from the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations will be in Washington on Thursday to hold meetings with Senate Democrats and Republicans, as well as officials at the National Security Council and State Department. The Torah, which will be completed by a scribe at the Capitol, includes a breastplate memorializing victims of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks in the United States, and a cover featuring the more than 1,000 names of Israeli victims of terrorism.

WORLD

Hamas funds frozen

Britain froze the assets of five Hamas leaders. "This action has been taken because the Treasury has reasonable grounds for suspecting that four of the individuals are, or may be, persons who facilitate or participate in the commission of acts of terrorism," Britain's Treasury said in a statement Wednesday. It referred to Hamas political chief Khaled Meshaal and four other senior members of the Islamic terrorist group. Abdel Aziz Rantissi, successor to assassinated Hamas founder Sheik Ahmed Yassin, also was targeted in the seizure.

There were no figures available for the frozen assets.