

IN THE NEWS

Sharon considers limited withdrawal

Ariel Sharon reportedly is considering a revised plan to evacuate only three Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip.

Kfar Darom, Netzarim and Morag would be evacuated in Gaza, and Ganim and Kadim would be dismantled in the West Bank under a new plan Sharon is considering, Ha'aretz reported.

Sharon may cancel trip to Washington

Ariel Sharon is considering canceling an upcoming trip to Washington, aides said.

The Israeli prime minister is scheduled to speak at the annual American Israel Public Affairs Committee conference in mid-May. Following conflicting reports about Sharon's intentions Tuesday, his spokesman, Ra'anana Gissin, told JTA that no final decision had yet been made.

An AIPAC spokesman said Sharon still would appear at the conference.

In the past, some Israeli prime ministers have spoken to the conference via satellite hook-up.

Universities protest to Ford Foundation

Nine U.S. universities are objecting to new Ford Foundation rules designed to prevent grants from being used to assist terrorist groups.

Following a JTA investigation last fall of the foundation's funding of radical anti-Israel groups, the foundation passed a new provision pledging to withdraw funding if any of a university's expenditures promoted "violence, terrorism, bigotry or the destruction of any state."

In recent days, however, provosts at Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Cornell, Columbia, Stanford, the University of Pennsylvania, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of Chicago challenged the new provisions, saying they could limit academic freedom, The Wall Street Journal reported.



WORLD REPORT

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In outreach to Jewish community, Kerry stresses his ties with Israel

By RON KAMPEAS and MATTHEW E. BERGER

WASHINGTON (JTA) — A Kerry administration would avoid the pressure other presidents have used to nudge Israel in peace negotiations, and would consult closely with the Jewish state before launching any new Middle East peace initiative.

Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.), the presumptive Democratic nominee for president, outlined his approach to Middle East peacemaking in an interview with JTA on Monday, the same day he launched his campaign to win Jewish votes with a major policy speech in Washington to a conference of the Anti-Defamation League.

Kerry has been working hard to mitigate the effect in the Jewish community of President Bush's extraordinary concessions to Israel last month, when the president recognized some Israeli claims to the West Bank and rejected any right of Palestinian refugees to return to Israel.

The Jewish vote could play a crucial role in 10 swing states in what is likely to be a close election this fall, and Kerry is on a fund-raising drive that needs a strong turnout among the Democrats' broad base of Jewish donors. His ADL speech sounded a range of notes aimed at pleasing Jewish ears — on civil rights, anti-Semitism and Israel.

"For the entire 20 years that I have been in the United States Senate, I'm proud that my commitment to a secure Jewish state has been unwavering; not even by one vote or one letter or one resolution has it wavered," Kerry said to the applause of the ADL audi-

ence. "As president, I can guarantee you that that support and that effort for our ally, a vibrant democracy, will continue."

That's a guarantee that Bush — or for that matter, almost any of his predecessors — easily could make. In his subsequent interview with JTA, Kerry sought to elaborate on what would distinguish his presidency vis-a-vis Israel.

"I'm very sensitive to the push-back that came from overly aggressive presidents who tried to just advance the title" of a peace process, "without the substance," Kerry told JTA. "There's always been a feeling of concessions driven without a return on it. I will never voice a concession that somehow puts Israel's judgment of its security at risk."

The only president Kerry cited specifically was President Clinton. He praised Clinton for his efforts as an "honest broker" between Israelis and Palestinians, but acknowledged, "Some people, obviously there are a few people, who felt he pushed too hard."

Clinton pressed Israel into offering unexpectedly broad concessions at the Camp David summit in 2000.

Kerry also said his belief in a multilateral approach to foreign affairs did not apply to Israel.

"The multilateral community has always been very difficult with respect to Israel, and we have always stood up against their efforts to isolate Israel," he said.

Kerry said his criticism of what he calls the Bush administration's unilateralism has to do with the administration of Iraq, environmental issues and containment of

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North Korea. "None of that changes my record being wary" of "the way the U.N. has been used as a sort of battering ram with respect to Israel," Kerry added.

Kerry reiterated his endorsement of Bush's recent statement of support for Israel's disengagement plan from the Palestinians in exchange for Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's commitment to withdraw from the Gaza Strip and a portion of the West Bank.

"'Right of return' is a non-starter. We need to get a note of reality into these discussions," Kerry said.

Likewise, refusing to recognize the permanence of some settlements is "disingenuous," Kerry said.

Sharon's Likud Party rejected the prime minister's plan in a vote Sunday, a blow to the Bush administration's hopes of claiming at least one victory for its otherwise battered Middle East posture.

Kerry suggested that if Bush made mistakes, it had to do with how he framed the deal, which caught U.S. allies in Europe and the Middle East off guard.

"There might have been ways in which the administration might have done diplomacy around this in a more effective way," he said.

Kerry said he would encourage America's Arab allies to get more involved in developing alternatives to Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat. He faulted the Bush administration for not seizing the moment immediately after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, when Arab

nations might have been more susceptible to persuasion.

"There was an opportunity to perhaps take advantage of their sensitivity to being hauled over the front pages of every newspaper of the world when it happened," he said. "There were some opportunities there to advance the accountability factor, the transparency factor, perhaps to get them to do a more overt effort to helping some kind of legitimate entity to emerge with which Israel could, in fact, negotiate." Kerry said he pressed those issues with Arab leaders when he toured the region in January 2002.

If elected, Kerry said, his first step with regard to the Middle East would be to consult with Israeli and U.S. Jewish leaders.

"I'm not about to go off on some grand design. We've got to see where we are in terms of security, in terms of where is the government of Israel at that point in time," Kerry said.

He also backed off an earlier commitment to send a presidential envoy to the region. The people he proposed — Clinton, President Carter or former Secretary of State James Baker — angered some supporters of Israel.

Kerry also agreed with the policy of isolating Arafat, whom Israel and the Bush administration accuse of ties to terrorism.

"He's where he appropriately belongs now, which is on the sidelines," Kerry said.

Kerry demonstrated a fluency with the issues, citing 1st-century Jewish historian Josephus Flavius and tossing in an allusion to the efforts of Menachem Begin, the late Israeli prime minister, to return the Gaza Strip to Egypt during peace negotiations in the 1970s.

Meeting afterward with Daniel Ayalon, Israel's ambassador to Washington, Kerry also showed an interest in internal Israeli politics, asking why Sharon had risked putting his withdrawal plan to a Likud Party vote instead of taking it to the entire Israeli public.

Kerry reached out to Sharon for a meeting on his recent U.S. trip but was rebuffed.

Kerry's speech to the ADL came ahead of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee annual meeting, which will feature a top Bush administration official, but not Kerry. AIPAC never invites an opposition presidential candidate to speak when an incumbent is running for re-election.

In his speech to the ADL, Kerry sought to extend a prominent campaign theme — that Bush's conservative agenda has divided the country — into one that resonated with an organization championing

dialogue and conciliation.

He celebrated the "notion that we don't try to have a politics that goes down to the lowest common denominator, but rather lifts people up to the highest common denominator; that doesn't try to drive wedges between people in order to govern and conquer, but recognizes the words of Abraham Lincoln — that a house divided against itself cannot stand," Kerry said in his speech.

"And we should ask ourselves in this country why it is that we are so divided today," Kerry said.

Democrats worry that Bush, who has impressed many in the Jewish community with a gut-level affection for Israel and its leaders, could cut into the community's traditional support for the Democrats.

Despite a pro-Israel voting record, Kerry acknowledged the difficulty of conveying his visceral attachment to Jewish causes.

"I want to share with you more personally why that is so," he said in his speech, after repeating his commitment to Israel. "Because you often hear those words, but it's important to understand sort of how they connect to somebody, what it means."

Kerry recalled shouting "Am Yisrael Chai!" atop Masada, and he spoke about the scourge of revived anti-Semitism.

Afterward, some Jewish organizational leaders suggested Kerry had really connected with them, but others said they wanted to hear more substance on the Middle East.

"There was not a lot of red meat in there," one said. "It was a lot more personal than political."

If elected, Kerry said, his first step with regard to the Middle East would be to consult with Israeli and U.S. Jewish leaders.



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After Likud vote, Bush backs off Israel pledges

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Bitten once by Israel's notoriously unpredictable political culture, the Bush administration is shying away from the commitments it made to secure an Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip.

On Tuesday, the United States signed on to a statement by the "Quartet" — the four-member alliance guiding the faltering "road map" peace plan — that drew back from President Bush's historic recognition last month of some Israeli claims in the West Bank and his rejection of any "right of return" for Palestinian refugees to their former homes in Israel.

"No party should take unilateral actions that seek to predetermine issues that can only be resolved through negotiation and agreement between the two parties," said the statement, released after Tuesday's meeting in New York of U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell and counterparts from the United Nations, European Union and Russia.

"Any final settlement on issues such as borders and refugees must be mutually agreed to by Israelis and Palestinians," the statement said.

Mutual agreement on borders and refugees, and a mention in the statement of a 2002 Saudi Arabian peace initiative, effectively means a return to the "all-on-the-table" status quo before the April exchange of letters between Bush and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

Administration officials suggested that the overwhelming rejection of the plan Sunday by Sharon's Likud Party left them little choice.

"We gave Sharon the letter to shore him up politically back home, and we're left holding the bag," one official said. "It's not helpful."

It wasn't just the dramatic rejection in the Likud referendum — by 60 percent to 40 percent — that stunned the Bush officials; they now are questioning the wisdom of Sharon, whom they had considered an astute political player.

"No one knows why he didn't hold a nationwide referendum instead of a Likud vote," the official said.

The Bush administration made clear that its own backtracking did not let Sharon off the hook. Top White House

staffers rushed to call Sharon after Sunday's vote to confirm his commitment to withdrawal.

The message: Turn the Likud vote into a bad dream, and let's move on.

"The population of Israel by and large appears to be supportive of the Gaza withdrawal plan," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said Monday.

"Prime Minister Sharon says he still wants to move forward, and we still think it's a good idea."

Since the prime minister's defeat, Sharon has floated plans for a smaller withdrawal that is not likely to satisfy the Americans.

The Quartet statement pointedly "took positive note of the announced intention of Israeli Prime Minister Sharon to withdraw from all Gaza settlements and parts of the West Bank."

The statement also underscored the Bush administration's commitment to consolidating the withdrawal plan.

It committed the Quartet to securing financial assistance for the Palestinian Authority after a withdrawal, rebuilding Palestinian Authority security forces and supervising elections.

Getting the Quartet to sign on to the withdrawal was a diplomatic coup for Powell, who never appeared happy with Bush's concessions to Israel and who had rushed to reassure U.S. allies that the concessions were not as far-reaching as Sharon claimed.

Next on the diplomatic clean-up list was the Arab world. Jordan's King Abdullah II, perhaps America's best friend among Arab leaders, abruptly canceled a visit the week after Bush's announcement.

This week he's coming back, however, and an administration official said he would win his own letter of commitment from Bush — though Bush would not meet Abdullah's demand to pledge compensation to Palestinian refugees for homes lost in Israel's 1948 War of Independence.

"We are in conversation with our

other Arab friends to see what assurances and comments they may need from us to make sure that they know that the president has not abandoned them, has not abandoned the hope for the creation of a Palestinian state," Powell said Tuesday in New York.

Abdullah is scheduled to visit the White House on Thursday, but administration officials have indicated that no letter of understanding will be forthcoming until after the visit.

The political fallout with Israel

probably will last at least until mid-May, when Sharon is scheduled to return to Washington.

On Tuesday, however, it was unclear if Sharon indeed would come.

Bush administration officials were mindful of the domestic political fallout of any breach with Israel in an election year, especially after the pro-Israel appearance Monday by the presumptive Democratic nominee, Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.), at an Anti-Defamation League conference.

Condoleezza Rice, Bush's national security adviser, hastily arranged her own ADL appearance Tuesday, and her deputy Stephen Hadley suddenly agreed to appear Thursday at another pro-Israel event.

"It is still our view that a courageous step toward peace ought to be supported by the international community and the United States," Rice told the ADL.

It was probably not lost on the administration that any U.S.-Israel tensions arising from the Likud's rejection of the plan was a gift to critics of the U.S.-Israel alliance.

Some 60 diplomats known for their opposition to Israel signed a letter to President Bush linking Arab anger at the United States to U.S. support for Israel, as well as the difficulties of administering Iraq.

"I think we have put the people in that part of the world at serious risk," said Edward Peck, a former chief of mission at the U.S. embassy in Iraq and a signatory of the letter.

'Any final settlement on issues such as borders and refugees must be mutually agreed to by Israelis and Palestinians,' said a new U.S.-endorsed statement.

NEWS IN BRIEF

NORTH AMERICA

Diplomats blast Bush

Some 60 former U.S. diplomats signed a letter criticizing President Bush for backing Israel too strongly.

Bush's endorsement of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's plan to withdraw from the Gaza Strip, which recognized some Israeli claims in the West Bank and rejected any "right of return" to Israel for Palestinian refugees, "reverses longstanding American policy in the Middle East" and threatens U.S. interests, the letter said.

The letter was spearheaded by officials of American Educational Trust, a Washington lobby group strongly critical of the U.S.-Israel alliance.

None of the signatories have played a central role in negotiating Israeli-Palestinian peace deals.

Bombed bus will go to Washington

The burned-out shell of a bus blown up in a Jerusalem terrorist attack will be displayed in Washington for a month.

Zaka emergency services sent the bus — previously displayed outside the International Court of Justice at The Hague — to be displayed opposite Capitol Hill as part of a worldwide campaign against Palestinian terrorism.

The display will begin Thursday, the same day as a Christian-sponsored rally against terrorism that is expected to draw tens of thousands of people.

Lowey wants Saudi apology

A congresswoman wants Saudi Arabia's crown prince to correct his statement that "Zionists" are responsible for terrorism in the kingdom.

"It became clear for us and I say it, not 100 percent but 95 percent, that Zionists' hands are behind what is going on now," Crown Prince Abdullah said Saturday about recent terrorist attacks in Saudi Arabia.

Rep. Nita Lowey (D-N.Y.) is sending a letter to President Bush asking that he express dismay at Abdullah's remarks and ask Abdullah to blame the terrorism on Al-Qaida, which is believed to be behind the attacks.

Pro-Palestinian Jew suspended

A Toronto university suspended a pro-Palestinian student who used a megaphone during a recent protest, disrupting classes.

Daniel Freeman-Maloy, who is Jewish, cannot appeal the suspension and will be charged with trespassing if he is found on school property, York University President Lorna Marsden said.

HIAS lauds proposed legislation

The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society welcomed new immigration legislation.

The initiative, proposed Tuesday by Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) and Reps. Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) and Luis Guttierrez (D-Ill.), focuses on reforming the treatment of undocumented immigrants in the United States.

In 2003, HIAS embraced comprehensive immigration reform as a way to alleviate humanitarian issues facing undocumented immigrants, including exploitation and death at U.S. borders.

Montreal gravestones defaced

Dozens of gravestones at a Montreal Jewish cemetery were defaced with swastikas and Nazi slogans.

Police said there is no link between this incident and the fire-bombing last month of a Jewish day school.

Governor lauds JNF initiative

New York's governor lauded a Jewish National Fund campus initiative.

Representatives from Caravan for Democracy were invited to George Pataki's office last week, where the governor praised the organization for its efforts to bring speakers and promote dialogue about the Middle East on college campuses.

An initiative of JNF, Media Watch International and Hamagshimim, Caravan for Democracy brought speakers to 20 schools across the United States this year.

California foundation receives \$12 million

The Jewish Community Foundation of Los Angeles received a \$12 million endowment.

The gift, from the estate of Jewish philanthropists Werner and Ellen Lange, represents the largest gift in the 50-year history of the foundation, which is affiliated with the L.A. federation.

The money will be used to start an endowment fund expected to generate some \$500,000 annually to fund existing initiatives and seed programs in Israel and Los Angeles.

MIDDLE EAST

Israel kills two Palestinians

Two Palestinians were killed when an Israeli helicopter fired a missile at a group of armed men in the Gaza Strip.

According to witnesses, the helicopter attacked the men in the Khan Yunis refugee camp after they fired two missiles at Israeli tanks. One of the dead was a 25-year-old gunman and the other was a 15-year-old bystander, residents said.

Oil found in central Israel?

Reservoirs of oil potentially worth some \$6 billion reportedly were discovered in central Israel.

The reservoirs might contain 980 million barrels worth of oil at a site east of Kfar Saba, according to findings of a geological survey released Tuesday by the exploration company Givot Olam.

The company also has claimed in the past to have made major oil finds but has not succeeded in extracting the oil.

WORLD

French rabbi attacked

A rabbi was attacked near his synagogue in the suburbs of Paris. Rabbi James Mallul of the Chabad-Lubavitch synagogue in Creteil, south of the capital, was hit in the face and stomach by two men while walking to services Saturday evening with his son, the Bureau for Vigilance Against Anti-Semitism told JTA.

In another incident, a swastika and Nazi slogans were scrawled on a synagogue in northern France.

Australian art draws protests

Jewish groups in Australia protested a publicly funded work of art in Melbourne that criticizes Israel.

Featured in a department store window, the work features a Star of David painted on a wall with text that reads: "Since the creation of Israel in 1948, 200,000 Palestinians have been killed, 5,000,000 refugees have been created, 21,000 square kilometers of land has been annexed, 385 towns and villages have been destroyed, 200,000 settlements have been built, 300 billion military dollars have been spent, 100+ (weapons of mass destruction) have been manufactured, 65 U.N. resolutions have been ignored."

City officials promised to respond to the complaints.