

IN THE NEWS

**American Jew
decapitated in Iraq**

A Jewish civilian contractor from the Philadelphia area was beheaded in Iraq.

Nick Berg, 26, of West Chester, Pa., was shown having his throat slit by masked captors in a video posted on a Web site known for ties to the Al-Qaida terrorist group.

The video is reminiscent of the grisly murder of another American Jew captured by Islamic terrorists, Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl in Pakistan.

His family said Berg, whose body was found Sunday, was in Baghdad to repair communications equipment and went missing April 9.

**Six Israeli soldiers
killed in Gaza Strip**

Six Israeli soldiers were killed by a land mine during a raid in Gaza City.

The soldiers were killed on their way back from a raid in Gaza on terrorist weapons factories. As Israeli forces struggled to extricate the casualties, they battled Gaza gunmen, killing at least four Palestinians.

Israeli aircraft also rocketed a car in Gaza City, killing a Palestinian. [Story, Pg. 2]

U.S. punishes Syria

The White House imposed sanctions on Syria for its support of terrorism and development of weapons.

President Bush on Tuesday implemented several sanctions against Syria, including a ban on the export of military items and "dual-use" items that could be used in manufacturing weapons of mass destruction.

Bush also banned all U.S. exports except for food and medicine, banned flights to and from Syria, and froze assets of some Syrian citizens.

The sanctions were part of the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act, which passed Congress last year.



WORLD REPORT

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Israeli government's disarray doesn't deter AIPAC conference

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — How do you support Israel's official policy when it changes from week to week?

That's a question facing the record number of pro-Israel activists heading to Washington for the May 15-18 annual conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the pro-Israel lobby.

Plans to make Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's plan for a unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip the centerpiece of this year's conference collapsed when Sharon's Likud Party rejected the plan in a May 2 referendum, several AIPAC executive committee members said.

By Monday, AIPAC still was trying to come up with a formulation to frame its most important lobbying issue: Israel's peace and security.

"AIPAC continues to work closely with members of Congress who are anxious to find a way to express their support for the principles President Bush laid out on April 14," said a statement distributed by AIPAC spokesman Josh Block.

April 14 was the day President Bush endorsed Sharon's plan, which called for a unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and some settlements in the West Bank. He also endorsed some Israeli land claims in the West Bank and rejected the Palestinian demand that refugees and their descendants be granted a "right of return" to Israel.

The election year timing makes the lack of a central issue especially acute because lawmakers often are more receptive to lobbying in an election year.

But AIPAC did not seem overly concerned by the lack of a central issue. Officials said the fact that 6,000 activists were due to converge on Washington in an election year, and at a time when the Israeli and U.S. governments were seeking a way out of the peace impasse, sent its own message.

"These are historic and exciting times for Israel and the United States, and the exceptionally large turnout at this year's policy conference demonstrates the strong level of support for the U.S.-Israel relationship," said Howard Kohr, AIPAC's executive director.

Anticipated attendance is 20 percent greater than last year and has tripled since 2001, which AIPAC officials attribute to aggressive outreach. Organizers are moving the conference from a hotel that long has hosted the event to the mammoth new Washington Convention Center.

"The mood will be very positive," said Malcolm Hoenlein, the executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations and a member of AIPAC's executive committee.

The flux in Israel's peace policy is hardly a catastrophe for the group: The activists have a menu of issues to discuss when they descend on Washington on May 18.

"We have a whole array of matters before Congress that I think will keep people more than busy," Hoenlein said.

Among the issues:

- A bill that urges Iran to open up its nuclear weapons programs to inspectors, and likewise urges U.S. allies to impose sanctions until Iran does so. The bill passed the House of Representatives overwhelmingly

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BEHIND
THE
HEADLINES

■ Israeli government's disarray doesn't deter AIPAC conference

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last week and is now before the Senate.

- The foreign aid package, including continuing assistance to Israel, and to Jordan and Egypt for complying with their peace agreements with Israel. Congress cut aid slightly this fiscal year to help pay for the U.S. occupation of Iraq.

- Several legislative initiatives to monitor the surge of anti-Semitism in Europe.

■

Activists also will be encouraged to discuss a range of topics that are not necessarily on the immediate legislative agenda but that serve to strengthen the U.S.-Israel relationship. They include homeland security cooperation between the two nations, the isolation of Syria and support for Israel's West Bank security barrier.

Nonetheless, the failure of Sharon to win the party referendum on his withdrawal plan is likely to haunt the conference. Sharon has said he will prepare a new plan in coming weeks, but it's uncertain when or what it will contain.

It's also not yet clear whether President Bush, whose endorsement of the plan was widely praised in the Jewish community but lost him precious political capital in the Arab world, would address the AIPAC conference.

Sharon canceled his own scheduled appearance at AIPAC, citing the need to come up with a plan acceptable both to his Cabinet and to the United States.

The proxies Sharon is sending in his stead appear to underscore his commitment to the original plan: Ehud Olmert, the Cabinet minister and deputy prime

minister; Meir Sheetrit, a minister without portfolio; and Yosef "Tommy" Lapid, the justice minister, are among the plan's most avid advocates in the Cabinet.

Even so, the messages from Sharon's team have been confusing since Likud rejected his plan. Sharon's national security adviser, Giora Eiland, told a Washington audience last week that a withdrawal from Gaza now looks unlikely.

"No one knows now what are the chances this plan will be implemented in the future," Eiland told the Washington Institute for Near East Policy on May 7, after saying he had thrown away his prepared speech on the plan.

A day earlier, Sharon was telling European officials that he was "determined to move the plan forward as is, without

changing the main points."

To make matters more confusing, Israeli officials were leaking a much more ambitious — and radically different — plan that Eiland showed to his U.S. counterparts just weeks ago.

It would swap huge swaths of land between Egypt, Israel and a Palestinian entity in order to create a larger and more livable Gaza Strip. Additionally, Egypt would assume custodianship of Gaza, and Jordan would do the same in the West Bank.

It was a measure of the lack of direction in Sharon's office that the land-swap plan bobbed up in Israeli media and in U.S. think-tank circles even after Bush administration officials rejected it out of hand as hopelessly quixotic. ■

Is Gaza becoming another Lebanon?

By DAN BARON

TEL AVIV (JTA) — It was a loss that brought back the darkest days of Israel's war on Palestinian terrorism and the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon.

Six elite soldiers of the Givati Brigade, on their way home from a mission to destroy arms factories in Gaza City, died in a huge fireball Tuesday when their ordinance-laden armored personnel carrier went over a land mine.

It was the worst single-incident Israeli death toll in Gaza since 2002 and it could not have come at a worse time for Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who has been struggling to promote his beleaguered plan for an Israeli withdrawal from the crowded coastal strip.

Faced with televised images of masked Hamas and Islamic Jihad gunmen exulting over bagfuls of the Israeli soldiers' body parts, retrieved from the gutted military vehicle, Sharon talked tough.

"We are fighting a cruel, inhuman enemy and we will not cease fighting it and striking it, no matter where it may hide," Sharon said at the Knesset.

In a bid to recover the soldiers' remains for burial, Israeli forces scoured Zeitun, a Gaza neighborhood known as a Hamas stronghold, killing at least six Palestinian gunmen in battles with local militias. Another Palestinian died in an Israeli airstrike on a car elsewhere in Gaza.

Despite Israel's show of force, pundits

were quick to draw parallels with the lead-up to Israel's evacuation of its southern Lebanese "security zone" in 2000, which followed years of public outcry over soldiers killed there by Hezbollah guerrillas.

"The waves of worry and rumors that engulfed Israel today as reports emerged about the operation in Gaza reminded many of the uncertainty, even impotence, of the final months of the IDF's presence in Lebanon," military analyst Amos Harel wrote in Ha'aretz.

"The catastrophe in Gaza is a blow that will speed disengagement," he said, referring to Sharon's plan to disengage Israel from the Palestinians.

Complicating matters is that Sharon's own Likud Party rejected the plan in a referendum May 2. Naysayers in the party said any unilateral withdrawal will reward terrorism and the Palestinian Authority's failure to do anything to stop it.

After this week's deadly incident in Gaza, some Israeli experts said the soldiers' exposure to the hazards of Gaza fighting could prompt a groundswell of public support for a pullout.

Ami Ayalon, a former chief of Israel's Shin Bet security service turned grassroots peacemaker, said Likud opponents of the plan should do some soul-searching.

"Do they have the heart to look an average Israeli parent in the eyes and say: 'We all know Gaza eventually will be evacuated, but it's OK for your son to go on risking his life there?'" he said. ■

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Grisly execution of U.S. Jew shakes community

By JOE BERKOFSKY

NEW YORK (JTA) — The videotaped execution of an American Jewish civilian contractor in Iraq shook members of the Jewish community, but not their commitment to the war on terrorism.

A video that surfaced on the Internet on Tuesday showed the decapitation by masked Iraqis of Nicholas Berg, 26, of West Chester, Pa. The grisly scene echoed the 2002 murder in Pakistan of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl, who was forced to admit his Jewishness on tape just before his captors cut off his head.

It wasn't clear whether Berg was targeted because of his religion. In the video, posted on a Web site linked to Al-Qaida, Berg is seen saying, "My name is Nick Berg, my father's name is Michael, my mother's name is Susan . . . I have a brother and sister, David and Sarah."

Several Jewish leaders and military families said the incident shouldn't dissuade Jewish soldiers and civilians from serving in Iraq.

"Should people think twice or should we continue this?" asked Judy Ledger, whose son and daughter — and their spouses — all served with the U.S. military in Iraq. "You do have to realize there's a danger, but the danger is no more if you're in the military than if there is a hate crime" in the United States.

Several sources said Berg's murder — as well as Tuesday's videotaped killing of six Israeli soldiers by Palestinians in the Gaza Strip — should deepen the commitment of Jews and other Americans to the war on terrorism.

"This is an evil force that has no moral compunction at all," said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

Referring to the video showing a man holding Berg's severed head aloft and shouting, "Allahu akbar," or "God is great" — and footage of Palestinian militants proudly displaying an Israeli soldier's head and other body parts — Hoenlein said the two cases point to the same enemy.

"Their barbarism could not be more clear after today. On both fronts it's the same menace," he said.

Joseph Kashnow agrees. An Army Cavalry scout stationed in Baghdad, Kash-

now's right leg was nearly blown off by a homemade land mine last September. He has spent months undergoing operations and therapy — yet he says he's as sure as ever that the war is just.

As an American Jewish soldier in Baghdad, Kashnow knew better than to pursue one particular chat with a local man.

"He said, 'Saddam wasn't so bad, at least he wasn't Jewish,'" recalled Kashnow, 25. "Not a person I wanted to continue having a chat with."

Berg's nationality may have been the determining factor in his fate, not his religion, observers noted. On the video, Berg's captors said the killing was to avenge the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers.

"It's certainly possible there are people" in Iraq "who would feel it was a 'two-mints-in-one' to get an American and a Jew," Kashnow said.

Regardless, Berg "was still an innocent civilian who was slaughtered, whether he was Jewish, black, or Asian," Kashnow said. "He was fighting to rebuild the country and make it safe for freedom. It's still a tragedy."

Shoshana Bryen, director of special projects for the Washington-based Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs, said it makes sense that Jews would be targeted in Iraq.

"There are people in these countries who are looking to kill people who are members of certain groups," Bryen said. "The two at the top of the list are Americans and Jews."

The parents of Daniel Pearl, who immigrated to Los Angeles in the 1960s from Israel, prepared a statement for the media after news of Berg's killing circulated Tuesday.

"We have heard from the news about the videotape showing the tragic death of Nicholas Berg in Iraq. Our thoughts and prayers are with his family and friends at this extremely difficult time," the statement said.

"Our heart goes out to them. Kidnaping, torture, humiliation and murder

must have no place in this world," the statement went on. "We call on people of principle around the world to help stop the madness and take a stand for humanity."

Ironically, Berg's father, Michael, and his small business, Prometheus Methods

Tower Service Inc., were listed as endorsers of a coalition called Act Now to Stop War and End Racism.

Berg was in Iraq as a freelance contractor working to repair

communications antennae, The Associated Press reported. His family members said they had known of their son's death since the weekend but did not know of the video until it surfaced this week.

The family last heard from Berg on April 9. U.S. officials recovered Berg's remains May 8.

The Bush administration and Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.), the presumptive Democratic nominee for president, expressed outrage at the killing.

Berg's friends and neighbors were devastated to learn of his fate. Reached by phone, Berg's parents declined to comment on their son's death.

The circumstances of his capture are unknown.

"Nick was probably one of the most amazing men I've ever met," said Aaron Spool, a friend of Berg's since they were in the seventh grade. "He just touched everyone's life. West Chester is going to be a much emptier place without him. He was good man, a good Jew. It's tough. It's very hard."

Glenn Brown, a friend of the Spool family who occasionally would have Shabbat meals with Berg in West Chester, recalled the young man as being "a sincere individual." He said, "It is a huge tragedy and loss."

Burt Siegel, director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of the Philadelphia Jewish federation, said, "It is absolutely sickening."

"Obviously, you don't have to be a Jew for these people to murder you." ■

(JTA Washington bureau chief Ron Kampeas, JTA staff writer Matthew E. Berger in Washington and the Philadelphia Jewish Exponent contributed to this report.)

'We call on people of principle around the world to help stop the madness.'

Family of slain Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Bush writes to Qurei

President Bush sent Ahmed Qurei a letter reaffirming his support for a Palestinian state.

Bush's three-page letter to the Palestinian Authority prime minister was a condition of Jordan's endorsement last week of Israel's plan to withdraw unilaterally from the Gaza Strip. The United States' Arab allies were infuriated by Bush's recognition of some Israeli claims in the West Bank in exchange for the Gaza pullout. Bush later moderated those views.

The president "reiterated his vision for a two-state solution and the principle that no side should pre-empt final status negotiations," P.A. Cabinet minister Saeb Erekat said, according to a Reuters report Tuesday. Qurei is to meet with Bush's national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, next week and will present a plan for Palestinian statehood.

Israel-U.S. anti-terror fund planned

Israel and the United States hope to establish a \$50 million counterterrorism research and development fund.

Each country would contribute half of the fund, Israeli Ambassador Daniel Ayalon told JTA on Tuesday. Congress and the Israeli Treasury must approve the fund. "I see it as a very positive step. This fund is much needed and will address the threat that both countries face," Ayalon said.

The fund is an outgrowth of recent conversations between Tom Ridge, the U.S. homeland security secretary, and his Israeli counterpart, Tzachi Hanegbi. It would research aviation security, protection of sensitive installations and defense against biochemical attacks.

Torahs join the army

A group of U.S. rabbis recently donated 10 Torahs for use by Israeli soldiers.

One Torah brought over by the rabbis from the National Council of Young Israel is less than 12 inches high and will be used on an Israeli submarine. During the past three years, the group has sent 100 Torahs to the Israel Defense Forces. The Torahs were donated by U.S. individuals and synagogues.

NORTH AMERICA

Senate backs anti-Semitism monitoring

The U.S. Senate passed legislation requiring the State Department to report on acts of anti-Semitism around the world.

The Global Anti-Semitism Review Act passed the Senate last Friday. The act mandates that the government report annually on harassment and acts of physical violence against Jews in each country and the governmental responses, as part of its annual reports on international religious freedom and human rights. The bill awaits action in the U.S. House of Representatives.

House passes Iran bill

The U.S. House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed a bill urging countries to cut ties with Iran until it opens its nuclear weapons program to inspectors. Pro-Israel groups lobbied for the bill, which called on Europe, Japan and Russia to cut their ties with the Islamic republic. The bill now faces Senate debate after its 376-3 House passage May 6.

Bill would give Ramon family residency

A lawmaker introduced a bill in the U.S. House of Representatives to grant permanent residency status to the family of Israel's first as-

tronaut. The bill, introduced last week by Rep. John Carter (R-Texas), would give the family of the late Col. Ilan Ramon two years to apply for immigrant visas and be admitted as permanent residents.

Observant Jews get bar exam moved

Following an eight-month lobbying effort, the State Bar of California will excuse observant Jews from taking the bar examination on Tisha B'Av.

Reversing an earlier denial, the Committee of Bar Examiners rearranged the schedule so that observers of the fast day can take the first portion of the three-day test on July 28, instead of July 27.

Churches press Bush on fence

Some U.S. Christian leaders are calling on President Bush to ask Israel to protect access to Christian sites.

Churches for Middle East Peace, in a letter to the president last Friday, said Israel's West Bank security barrier is "damaging Christian institutions and the daily livelihood of individual Christians."

In addition, the church leaders are concerned about delay of visas for clergy and church personnel to travel to Israel and attempts to tax church organizations in the country.

The group is made up of 50 leaders of evangelical and mainline Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox churches and church-related organizations.

JINSA wants Rumsfeld to stay

The Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs is pushing for Donald Rumsfeld to keep his job.

The U.S. defense secretary is under pressure from some Democrats to resign after photographs surfaced of Iraqi prisoners being abused by American soldiers. While deploring the prisoner abuse, JINSA said Rumsfeld's resignation would be a "far greater tragedy."

Racist community service

White supremacist David Duke, released from jail, is doing his community service with his "white civil rights group."

Duke was released to a halfway house in Louisiana last month after serving a year in jail for fraud. "My work-release plan was approved in the normal channels," Duke told The New York Times on Monday. The Web site for Duke's group, the European-American Unity and Rights Organization, says the group is an answer to the NAACP, the Anti-Defamation League and other "anti-European-American organizations."

WORLD

JDC turns 90

The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee is celebrating its 90th birthday.

The JDC will celebrate the occasion with a ceremony Tuesday night at Gracie Mansion, the official residence of New York City's mayor, who will address the group.

The JDC was founded in 1914 in New York City to send funds from North American Jews to their brethren in Europe and Palestine during World War I.

Greek wants to go Palestinian for Olympics

A Greek javelin thrower petitioned the International Olympic Committee to compete under the Palestinian flag at the Athens Olympics.

Sofia Sakorafa, 47, who broke the women's javelin world record in 1982, claims she has become a Palestinian citizen and hopes to compete for the Palestinian team at the Aug. 13-29 Games.