

IN THE NEWS

Israel kills 3 in West Bank

Three Palestinians were reportedly killed in an Israeli strike.

At least two of those killed in the Israel Air Force attack on a car in the West Bank city of Jenin on Monday were members of the Al-Aksa Brigade, Palestinian sources said.

The main target appeared to be Mahmoud Abu Halifa, a leader of the brigade, a terrorist group linked to Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement.

Israeli officials had no immediate comment.

Weisglass to talk West Bank fence

An adviser to Israel's prime minister will unveil modifications to the route of the West Bank security barrier.

Dov Weisglass is in Washington to meet Tuesday with Condoleezza Rice, President Bush's national security adviser, and U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell.

Weisglass is expected to explain the latest plans for the fence Israel is erecting near its border with the West Bank.

Belgian calls for laws on hate

Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt called for Europe-wide laws to prohibit discrimination and racism.

Addressing Monday's opening of an OSCE conference, "Tolerance and the Fight against Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination," Verhofstadt said that without a legal framework, a policy promoting greater tolerance cannot succeed.

The conference, which ends Tuesday, offers a number of workshops on the themes of anti-Semitism and racism.

**Because of Rosh Hashanah,
the JTA World Report will
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WORLD REPORT

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Israel skeptical as Syria makes new noises of peace

By LESLIE SUSSER

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Under strong pressure from Washington to pull Syrian forces out of Lebanon and prevent cross-border terrorism against American troops in neighboring Iraq, Syria's President Bashar Assad again has been talking about a readiness for peace with Israel.

The Israeli establishment, however, is skeptical. Officials close to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon say Assad is only trying to impress the Americans and is not ready to meet Israel's condition for renewed peace talks — stopping Palestinian terror groups based in Damascus or Hezbollah, based in Lebanon, from orchestrating suicide attacks against Israelis in Gaza, the West Bank and Israel proper.

They accuse Assad of playing a dangerous double game: talking peace while backing terrorism.

Assad's peace talk came after the U.N. Security Council recently urged him to withdraw Syrian soldiers from Lebanon, and just before the United States threatened to impose stronger economic sanctions on Syria if it failed to do so.

American Middle East envoy William Burns, in a two-hour meeting with Assad in Damascus over the weekend, also warned the Syrian leader of dire consequences if he failed to crack down on terrorism launched from Syrian soil against American soldiers in Iraq.

The Syrian president's latest peace overtures were sounded in a meeting earlier this month that he initiated with Martin Indyk, a former U.S. ambassador to Israel, and Edward Gabriel, a former American ambassador to Morocco.

Assad told his American guests that peace with Israel remained a strategic goal, and that he was ready to restart negotiations at any time without preconditions. He said his main demand was for an Israeli withdrawal to the pre-1967 Six Day War lines, but that he was ready to negotiate over where those lines actually ran.

He said nothing about restarting talks from the point previous negotiations broke down, a longstanding Syrian demand rejected by Israel. And he did not link progress on the Syrian track with resolution of the Palestinian issue.

All this was carefully calculated to appeal to an Israeli audience. Even dovish Israelis, ready to trade the strategic Golan Heights for peace with Syria, want the border along the 1948 armistice line, a few hundred yards from the Sea of Galilee,

and not on the line much closer to the water, a line that the Syrian army created through a series of encroachments between 1948 and 1967.

Moreover, the Sharon government is insisting on resuming peace talks from scratch. In his meeting with Indyk and Gabriel, Assad intimated that he would now be willing to consider these two key Israeli demands.

And he added that he realized that Sharon was now preoccupied with his plan to disengage from the Palestinians. But as soon as the Israeli leader was ready for negotiations, Assad said he would be ready to take him up.

Indyk relayed the gist of Assad's presentation to Terje Larsen, the special U.N. Middle East envoy. Impressed, Larsen initiated an interview on Israel TV and declared: "I would

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grab Assad's offer with both hands."

Indyk, who now heads the Saban Center for Middle Eastern Policy at the Brookings Institute in Washington, and was deeply involved in previous Israeli-Syrian peace efforts, was more circumspect. He said it was clear that Assad's main aim was to improve Syrian ties with the United States, and that any peace-making with Israel primarily would be a means to that end.

But in an interview with Nahum Barnea in the Yediot Achronot daily newspaper, Indyk argued that whatever Assad's motivation, Israel had much to gain by engaging in peace talks with Syria.

Once in a process with Israel, Assad would have to clamp down on terror, Indyk suggested.

And, he added, in the absence of a Palestinian peace partner, talking to Assad would show that Israel could hold a dialogue with a credible Arab interlocutor, and thereby enhance its image in the Arab world and in Europe.

The Israeli response has been wariness. The chief of Israel's military intelligence, Aharon "Farkash" Ze'evi, said that given the situation in Iraq and the emergence of regional power centers in Iran and Turkey, he doubted whether Syria would stop backing Palestinian terror in the near future.

A few days before Assad's peace overtures, Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz blamed Damascus for the twin suicide bus bombings in Beersheba on Sept. 1, and warned that Israel would not toler-

ate a situation in which Syria hosted and backed terrorist leaders who were drawing up the plans and giving the orders for terror against Israelis.

U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage even suggested in an interview with Egyptian TV last week that Syria bore "some responsibility" for the attack, given its support for Hamas and Hezbollah.

Rather than making peace, Mofaz intimated that the two countries could soon find themselves locked in combat. Speaking to foreign correspondents a few days after Assad's overtures, Justice Minister Yosef "Tommy" Lapid made it clear that before any peace talks could start, Israel wanted to see tangible signs of Syrian good faith: "If the Syrians stop the terror, we will not refuse to sit down with them," he declared.

Assad, however, clearly sees Syrian support for terrorism as a powerful bargaining chip.

He is not prepared to give it up without a substantial quid pro quo. He made it plain to Indyk that he was ready to put Syrian backing for Hezbollah and its hosting of the rejectionist Palestinian organizations on the table, but that he would not stop his support for terrorists as a precondition for talks.

So, for now, the possibility of talks between Israel and Syria seems to be stymied by a new version of the old "after you" syndrome.

In the Rabin era, Israel insisted that

Syria first normalize relations, while Syria demanded that Israel first withdraw. Now Israel is saying first stop supporting terror, and Syria is saying first start talking peace.

But on the Israeli side, analysts say, the reasons for lack of movement on the Syrian front go deeper. Sharon is not ready to contemplate withdrawal from the Golan

while under massive public pressure over his planned withdrawal from Gaza and part of the West Bank.

Indeed, he has shown no sign of being convinced of the wisdom of withdrawing from the Golan under any circumstances.

And there is another snag. Syria is no longer in a position to promise to deliver peace with the entire Arab world as Assad's father could when he negotiated with former Prime Minister Ehud Barak more than four years ago.

But what will Sharon do if, in response to international pressure, Syria starts withdrawing a substantial number of its 17,000 troops in Lebanon, and loosening its bonds with Palestinian terror?

Will Israel then, by engaging Assad, be able to engender a process that leads to a further fall in Syrian support for terror, and eventually, to a peace both sides can benefit from? If Assad can show that he is genuine, Sharon may be the one under international pressure and facing an offer he cannot refuse.

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

Assad clearly sees Syrian support for terror as a powerful bargaining chip.

Iraqi fired for visiting Israel

NEW YORK (JTA) — The Iraqi National Congress fired one of its most senior members for visiting Israel.

During an emergency meeting, the leadership of the former exile group decided to fire Mithal al-Alusi, spokesman Haidar Al-Mousawi told The Associated Press.

Al-Alusi's visit to a terrorism conference angered his colleagues, who said they only knew about the trip from the media. Ha'aretz had quoted al-Alusi as saying that many elements in Iraq are

interested in diplomatic ties with Israel.

"His statements, which were carried by the media, do not represent the Iraqi National Congress' point of view," a statement from the group said.

The leader of the group, the controversial Ahmed Chalabi, is a former member of the U.S.-appointed Iraqi Governing Council and currently is a member of the Iraqi National Council, a 100-member transitional assembly intended to serve as a watchdog over the interim Iraqi government until January elections.

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Stalin's Jewish region lives on

By SUE FISHKOFF

BIROBIDZHAN, Russia (JTA) — The odd story of Stalin's Russian homeland for the Jews has taken another strange twist.

The ribbon-cutting ceremony at the two-story Moorish-style synagogue in Birobidzhan last Friday was the highlight of a weeklong celebration of the 70th anniversary of the Jewish Autonomous Region, an area in Russia's Far East that Stalin declared a secular Jewish homeland in 1934 to divert Soviet Jews from Palestine.

The festivities in Birobidzhan were punctuated by Yiddish and Russian singing and dancing performances.

The synagogue opening, one of three such openings in Russia's Far East last week, followed the unveiling of a bronze statue of Sholem Aleichem on the city's main boulevard, Sholem Aleichem Street.

And what's particularly noteworthy about these projects are the unusual funding arrangements. Rival Jewish groups combined forces, as did regional Russian governments.

The synagogue opening in Birobidzhan was attended by a star-studded roster of the region's political leadership, many of whom, including the city's mayor, are themselves Jewish.

"Today we're opening the region's first kosher synagogue," said Gov. Nikolai Volkov, as he greeted 200 spectators outside the just-painted synagogue building last Friday. "That says a lot. The JAR is a national region, and now the Jews can develop their own culture."

Volkov chose his words carefully. On the surface, Birobidzhan, population 80,000, is laden with Jewish trappings.

Yiddish is everywhere: on store signs, on every official government document, in the local newspaper — even at the train station.

But the linguistic clues are remnants of a deliberate attempt by the Soviet State in the 1930s to subvert Zionism and Jewish religious life by, on one hand, pouring money and political support into this tiny "Jewish national homeland" 5,000 miles and seven times zones east of Moscow, while on the other hand ruthlessly stamping out Hebrew and discouraging Jewish ritual observance.

In the early years of the region's existence, Yiddish theater, music, dance and literature flourished here.

More than 40,000 Jews from all over the world, including Argentina, the United States and even Palestine, answered Stalin's call to escape urban squalor and create a "New Socialist Jew," working the land in collectivist fraternity.

But in 1936 Stalin's purges thinned the ranks of the region's Jewish leadership.

In 1948-1949 the Yiddish schools were closed, the theater was shut down and many actors executed, and the state library's extensive Judaica section was burned.

The last functioning synagogue was destroyed in a mysterious fire in the 1950s.

Although by 1970 Jews represented 6 percent of the population, their influence greatly outstripped their number.

After Stalin died, Jewish life grew more public as the decades passed.

But once the doors of the Soviet Union opened in 1989, 10,000 of Birobidzhan's estimated 12,000 Jews immigrated to Israel, the highest aliyah rate in the country.

Aliyah continues today, says Jewish Agency for Israel representative Alona Goldenberg, with about 100 Jews expected to leave for Israel this year.

But in a phenomenon noted throughout the former Soviet Union, the Jewish population of the region grows even as more Jews leave.

Jewish Agency figures place the current number at 2,000, although local Jewish community officials insist it is closer to 6,000.

The leading local newspaper, the Birobidzhaner Shtern, resumed publishing a Yiddish section more than a decade ago.

Yiddish and Jewish culture and traditions are taught as part of the curriculum in one of the city's public schools, which any child may attend.

In addition to local donors, funding for the synagogue came from the Rohr Family Foundation — a major donor to Chabad activities in the former Soviet Union.

Indeed, the synagogue in Birobidzhan, as well as the two others that also opened last week, put Chabad's stamp on the Russian Far East, solidifying the movement's position as the leading Jewish religious organization in the former Soviet Union.

Chabad's chief rabbi in Russia, Berel

Lazar, flew in from Moscow on a private plane specially chartered for the occasion, hopping from city to city across the region, cutting ribbons and delivering speeches at each shul opening.

The three ceremonies mark, he said, "an even greater achievement," referring to what he called the "victory over the darkness of communism."

On Sept. 8, a 100-year-old synagogue building in Vladivostok, was formally returned by the government to the local Jewish community, headed by Chabad Rabbi Menachem Raskin.

The next day in Khabarovsk, an elegant \$3 million synagogue building was opened, and the

day after that, Birobidzhan's shul opened its doors.

Additional funding for the projects came from a group often at odds with Chabad in the former Soviet Union, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which sent a delegation to the region in advance of the synagogue openings.

Money for the Birobidzhan and Khabarovsk projects also came from regional governments, unheard of elsewhere in Russia.

The Khabarovsk regional government underwrote half the building costs for that city's new shul, and Birobidzhan's regional government contributed 10 percent of construction costs for the \$715,000 synagogue.

The deputy chairman of the Jewish Autonomous Region, or JAR, Valery Gurevich, was careful to point out that his government's contribution, which came through the Ministry of Culture, was technically given to the building's community center rather than the synagogue, and should be seen as cultural rather than religious support.

Locals say they see nothing unusual about non-Jewish children's dance troupes performing the hora.

What's new, notes 30-year-old Yelena Belyaeva, a non-Jewish woman who teaches Yiddish and Hebrew in the local teacher's college and for the Jewish Agency, is that Israeli and Hebrew culture have been added into the mix. "The Hebrew songs and dances we've only had since perestroika. Before that, it was just Yiddish." ■

In Birobidzhan,
Yiddish is
everywhere, from
store signs to
newspapers.

NEWS IN BRIEF

NORTH AMERICAN

Israelis arrested on 9/11 sue

Four Israelis arrested in the United States on 9/11 are filing a lawsuit against the U.S. Department of Justice.

The \$250 million lawsuit alleges that the four men were unlawfully incarcerated for an extended period of time and that they were subject to physical abuse during their two months in prison.

The men were arrested after they were found with foreign driver's licenses near a crossing into New York City on Sept. 11, 2001.

Support grows for anti-Semitism bill

More than 100 people have signed a letter asking the Bush administration to support new monitoring and reporting of international anti-Semitic incidents.

U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell has expressed opposition to the Global Anti-Semitism Awareness Act, which would require the State Department to file an annual report on anti-Semitism around the world, because it would show "favoritism" toward Jews, and said anti-Semitic incidents are chronicled in other reports.

Among the supporters of the legislation, which is sponsored by Rep. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.), is Jack Kemp, former secretary of Housing and Urban Development; Anthony Lake, President Clinton's national security adviser; and former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Jeane Kirkpatrick.

Armitage: Syria responsible for attacks

A U.S. official said Syria is partly responsible for the recent double suicide bombing in Beersheba.

"Why not? Syria holds and houses Hamas. Syria is a conduit of weapons from Iran and Hezbollah.

It seems to me that Syria does bear some responsibility," the deputy secretary of state, Richard Armitage, said last Friday in an interview with Egyptian television.

He called on Syrian President Bashar Assad to look into his country's support for terrorism, and supported the idea of Syrian-Israeli negotiations.

Group collects for Ivan victims

The American Jewish World Service is collecting donations to help victims of Hurricane Ivan in Grenada, Jamaica and the Caribbean.

While the death toll caused by Ivan is low, the devastation to the poor country of Grenada is high.

Approximately 90 percent of the small island's houses and businesses have been damaged and thousands have been left homeless, the group said in a news release this week.

Donations can be sent to American Jewish World Service, Hurricane Ivan Relief, 45 W. 36th St., 10th Floor, New York, N.Y., 10018, called in at 800-889-7146, or made online at www.ajws.org.

MIDEAST

Netanyahu calls for plebiscite

Israeli Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called for a referendum on Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's withdrawal plan.

Netanyahu, widely seen as the leading rival to Sharon within the ruling Likud Party, made his comments to reporters Monday.

Sharon has rejected a plebiscite as too complicated to be implemented before the 2005 deadline he has set for evacuating Jewish settlements from the Gaza Strip and part of the West Bank.

Netanyahu said a referendum would show most Israelis back the plan, but a Sharon confidant accused the finance minister of trying to

hobble the government while garnering popular support for a bid to retake the premiership.

Rabbi in Hamas' sights

A Hamas cell uncovered by the Shin Bet planned to abduct a settler leader. Rabbi Moshe Levinger, spiritual head of the Hebron Jewish community, was a leading target of several dozen Hamas terrorists arrested earlier this year in the West Bank city, Israeli security sources said Monday.

A separate Hamas cell cracked by the Shin Bet, comprising eight Palestinians from villages outside Ramallah, was responsible for last year's suicide bombings at Tzrifin junction and Cafe Hillel in Jerusalem.

WORLD

Hungarian neo-Nazi arrested

Hungarian police arrested the leader of a neo-Nazi group. Police said Monday's arrest of the Hungarian Future Group leader, Diana Bacsfi, was made after it was found that comments Bacsfi made could be construed as incitement against an ethnic or religious group, a punishable offense in Hungary.

The group previously received a permit from police to hold a commemorative rally on Oct. 15, the 60th anniversary of the Arrow Cross coup, which put a pro-Nazi militia in charge of wartime Hungary.

Opposition from political parties and various organizations, including the Alliance of Hungarian Jewish Communities, has been growing to ban the demonstration.

Also, Nepszava, one of Hungary's four national dailies, launched a petition on its cover last Friday, calling for a ban on the rally.

Cemeteries desecrated in New Zealand

Two more Jewish cemeteries in New Zealand were desecrated. Last week, red swastikas were found on the solitary Jewish headstone honoring 14 people that stands in the cemetery of the tiny town of Wanganui, and the headstone itself was smashed.

Also, four headstones were toppled over in the Symonds Street Cemetery in New Zealand's largest city, Auckland.

Last month, 113 headstones were overturned in Wellington's Makara Cemetery.

Russian Jewish group wants more local donors

A conference of the Russian Jewish Congress opened with calls for local donors to increase their contributions.

Leaders of the group, which is one of Russian Jewry's leading charity and umbrella organizations, also called Monday on local donors to help create a network of Jewish organizations in the provinces similar to the North American system of Jewish federations.

Some 200 delegates from 30 communities are participating in the fourth conference of the congress, held this week in Moscow.

Since its founding in 1996, the group has raised more than \$70 million from domestic donors to support Jewish projects, said the group's president, Yevgeny Satanovsky.

Japanese friend of Israel dies

The Rev. Takeji Otsuki, a Japanese man cited as a great friend of Israel, died last Friday at 98.

Otsuki was known as a great supporter of Jerusalem's Hebrew University, and in 1997, a chair in Bible studies was established in his name at the school.

In 1938, Otsuki said he felt a calling from God to work for the establishment of the Jewish state.

At the end of World War II, he set up the Japan Christian Friends of Israel organization, commonly known as Beit Shalom.