

IN THE NEWS

Knesset OKs withdrawal plan

The Israeli Knesset approved Ariel Sharon's Gaza withdrawal plan.

On Tuesday, lawmakers voted 67-45, with seven abstentions, to approve the prime minister's plan.

Under the plan, Israel will pull out of the Gaza Strip and parts of the West Bank next year.

Another vote on actually dismantling settlements is expected to take place next year.

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Jesus no longer fighting anti-Semitism

French Jewish students withdrew images featuring Jesus and the Virgin Mary from an advertising campaign against anti-Semitism.

The ad campaign, which featured pictures of the pair above the words "Dirty Jew," was ended after the images proved too shocking for Catholics and some Jews.

The Union of Jewish Students initially had been set to run the advertisements in national newspapers and on billboards across France this week, but decided to "modify the visuals," a union official told JTA.

The move followed pressure from major Jewish and anti-racist organizations in France who claimed the campaign would do more harm than good.

Hate crime rate remains stable

There were approximately the same number of hate crimes in the United States in 2003 as 2002, according to FBI statistics.

Of the 7,489 hate crimes noted in an FBI report released Monday, 1,300 were religion-based crimes, more than 69 percent of them directed against Jews or Jewish institutions.

After the release of the report, the Anti-Defamation League called for expanded federal hate crimes legislation.

WORLD REPORT

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Rice, Holbrooke talk strategy for Israel and the Palestinians

By MATTHEW E. BERGER

HOLLYWOOD, Fla. (JTA) — Just days before the U.S. elections, the presidential candidates are sending the same broad messages about their approaches to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the greater Middle East, but they differ sharply on the details.

In exclusive interviews with JTA, Condoleezza Rice, President Bush's national security adviser, and Richard Holbrooke, a senior foreign policy adviser to Sen. John Kerry, laid out their respective candidate's vision for the Middle East over the next four years.

A second term of the Bush administration would hope to use Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip as the start of new progress on the Israeli-Palestinian front.

"I think what you will see is, if Prime Minister Sharon is successful in moving forward on his disengagement plan, that that could provide a new impetus for the Palestinians to move toward reform as they get ready to take responsibilities in the Gaza, and it could provide an impetus then for a beginning of negotiations between the parties," Rice said in a telephone interview from her White House office Tuesday.

A Kerry White House would look to appoint an envoy to the region, not to force Israel to make concessions, but to pressure Arab governments to stop sponsoring terror, Holbrooke said in a separate interview.

"You go to Riyadh and tell these guys to stop supporting the worst anti-Israeli elements and the worst anti-Semitic, anti-Zionist literature around the world," said Holbrooke, a former U.S. ambassador to the

United Nations. He also said such an envoy could help reduce Israel's isolation in the world.

Both advisers said their respective candidate would continue the policy of not talking to Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat, and supported Israel's plans to disengage from the Gaza Strip and to erect a security barrier in the West Bank.

In the minds of the campaigns, the battle for Jewish votes in this election has focused squarely on which candidate will do more to protect Israel and fight the war on terrorism.

The significance of the Jewish vote is what brought both Holbrooke and Rice to Florida this week to address a national gathering of the pro-Israel lobby, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.

Both advisers are well respected in the Jewish community, and could, depending on who wins next week's election, play leading roles in shaping U.S. foreign policy over the next four years.

The missions for the two advisers in talking to the pro-Israel community are very different.

Rice and the Bush campaign are working to boost the number of Jews, traditionally a Democratic voting bloc, who will back Bush's re-election because they like his record on Israel.

Holbrooke and the Democrats, however, are working to maintain the voting bloc, and alleviate concerns Jewish voters may have about Kerry's foreign policy, and specifically the envoy idea.

"If we have an envoy, if we have an effort

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2004**

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in the region, it is not at Israel's expense," Holbrooke told the AIPAC gathering on Sunday.

"It is not unilateral concessions with no one to negotiate."

Some Jewish activists say they think an envoy would pressure Israel to make concessions, and that Kerry's support for a multilateral approach to foreign affairs would put more stock in the anti-Israel views of European and Arab states.

Instead, Holbrooke said, an envoy could work in the region to press neighboring states to stop terrorism, singling out Saudi Arabia.

Rice seemed to mock the envoy idea, suggesting that such a person would "wander around" the region, telling Arab countries things they already hear.

"It may well be that at some point in time, someone else can help in this process, an envoy, I wouldn't rule it out," Rice said. "But it's not the answer, just sending somebody out there to wander around the Arab states and tell them they need to stop incitement. Everyone is telling them they need to stop incitement."

While Jews across the political spectrum have praised Bush for isolating Arafat and supporting Sharon's plan to disengage from the Gaza Strip and some West Bank settlements, critics say his administration has not been engaged in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The critics say the White House should more actively push for Palestinian reforms and push both parties to move the

process forward.

Rice responded to the criticism, saying: "We continue to be engaged with our Middle East partners, but we have really believed since the spring that the best chance for strong re-engagement will be when the Israeli disengagement plan goes forward."

In both her address to AIPAC on Monday and in the JTA interview, Rice said the Bush administration would rely heavily on support from states that still talk with Arafat, looking to them to help reform the Palestinian government and pressure Arafat to step aside.

"We can simply not afford to have a situation in which new Palestinian leadership does not emerge," she said in the interview. "I believe that the international community increasingly understands that."

She said Bush would continue to work from his vision outlined on June 24, 2002 — which focused on reforming the Palestinian Authority, isolating Arafat and establishing a Palestinian state by 2005 — and was gratified by signals from the Sharon government that he does not see the Gaza withdrawal as an end to the peace process.

"The United States has also been very concerned and very gratified that the Israelis have made clear that it is not Gaza only, that it is Gaza first with four settlements in the West Bank being a part of the initial parts of this, to demonstrate that there is a link between Gaza and the West Bank," she said in the interview.

Cognizant of strong support for Bush's Middle East policies among AIPAC loyalists, Holbrooke did not challenge the Republican's Middle East credentials, but tried to place Kerry on the same tier, emphasizing that both candidates support Israel's latest strategy.

"I don't want us to have a contest over who is more or less pro-Israel, because I don't think that's in the national interest

in a presidential campaign, when both men are supportive of Israel," Holbrooke said in the interview.

But, he added, Kerry is better because he had never "played footsie with the Saudis."

He also reiterated Kerry's criticisms of Bush's policy in Iraq.

And he said that he believed little progress could be made on the Israeli-Palestinian track until the situation in Iraq is stabilized.

Responding to this week's news that explosives from Iraq may have gone missing, Rice defended U.S. action in the region and suggested the United States is on the course to making the Jewish state safer.

"I think you have to ask yourself — was Israel, or for that matter, the United States, safe prior to the invasion of Iraq?" she said. "I think what you had in the Middle East was a false sense of stability, where a tyrannical and dangerous regime like Saddam Hussein was actually not being contained."

Both advisers could be central in shaping future foreign policy.

Holbrooke is considered a front runner for secretary of state in a Kerry administration. And if he doesn't get that post, he is talked about as a possible Middle East envoy.

While he would not speculate in the interview on possible positions if Kerry wins, he did seek to shore up his credentials. He said he had concerns about dealing with Arafat when he was at the United Nations and he stressed he was not part of the group associated with the failed Oslo peace plan.

"Oslo was an unsuccessful effort," he said. "You can't go back to that situation."

Rice also would not speculate about the next four years if her boss is re-elected, but suggested her desire may not be to continue to serve the administration.

"I am an academic at heart and there's a part of me that wants to go back to academic life," she said. "But I have not made a decision at this time."

While Sen. John Kerry and President Bush are sending out similar big-picture messages on Middle East policy, the candidates differ significantly on the details.

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Howard E. Friedman
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Sharon wins in Knesset, but may lose government

By LESLIE SUSSER

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Tuesday, Oct. 26 may well go down as one of the more important, and bizarre, dates in the annals of Israeli politics.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon won a resounding victory in the Knesset for his plan to withdraw from the Gaza Strip and part of the West Bank, but the vote ended with his Likud Party in tatters and on the verge of splitting in two, with Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu leading the rebels.

The upshot is that although Sharon secured Knesset approval for his plan, which includes the dismantling of 21 Jewish settlements in Gaza and four in the northern West Bank, it's not at all clear whether he will have the political clout to see it through.

Backed by the opposition Labor and Yahad parties and opposed by almost half of the Knesset faction of his own Likud Party, Sharon mustered 67 votes for his disengagement plan, with 45 against and seven abstentions.

Tuesday's vote does not authorize the actual removal of any settlements. The withdrawal is to be carried out in stages beginning next year, with Cabinet approval necessary before each move.

Still, Sharon had hoped that such a clear margin of victory in the Knesset would squelch demands for a national referendum on the withdrawal and open up new coalition-building possibilities.

But Netanyahu's move against Sharon means that his government could soon fall, and instead of moving ahead smoothly toward disengagement, Israel could find itself caught up in a stormy election.

For four hours before the vote, Netanyahu and three other leading Likud ministers — Limor Livnat, Yisrael Katz and Danny Naveh — closeted themselves in a Jerusalem hotel, working on a proposal to condition their support in Tuesday's Knesset vote on a commitment by Sharon to hold a national referendum on disengagement.

Sharon rejected the demand out of hand, even refusing to meet the four ministers before the vote. He argues that referendum advocates simply are looking for a way to delay the disengagement plan indefinitely, and accused them of planning a putsch against him.

Things came to a head in the last hour before the vote. The National Religious Party, which is part of Sharon's govern-

ment but which opposes disengagement, served the prime minister with an ultimatum: Hold a referendum or else.

NRP Cabinet minister Zevulun Orlev said the party had received rabbinical approval to remain in Sharon's coalition until the end of its term in November 2006, even if the referendum goes against them. But if Sharon refuses to hold a referendum, Orlev warned, the party will leave the coalition within two weeks.

Then, immediately after the vote, Netanyahu dropped his bombshell: Unless Sharon agrees within 14 days to hold a referendum, he, Livnat, Katz and Naveh will leave the coalition as well.

What that means is that if Sharon doesn't buckle — and so far there are no signs that he will — the Likud will split in two, with Netanyahu and Sharon on opposing sides.

Sharon finds himself left with three possible choices: build a new coalition or parliamentary pact with Labor and the left; agree to hold a referendum; or push for early elections.

None of the choices is easy. To get a majority coalition with Labor and the left, Sharon would need the support of at least 17 of Likud's 40 legislators — and it's not clear he can count on that many.

Agreeing to hold a referendum would be a monumental reversal and would leave Sharon severely weakened. And early elections would be a major gamble that he well might lose.

Sharon is unlikely to agree to the referendum demand. His most likely game plan will be to try to formalize the support of Labor and the left and keep going as prime minister as long as he can, betting that his opponents in the Likud and parties further to the right won't force elections because they too fear losing their Knesset seats.

In case it does come to an election with a split Likud, Sharon may try to take his portion of the party into an electoral alliance with Labor and the centrist Shinui Party. Advocates of this potential scenario — called the "Big Bang" of Israeli politics — argue that it would create a centrist

alignment more accurately reflecting the will of the Israeli electorate than does the current political arrangement.

The game plan of Netanyahu, a former prime minister himself, likely will be to force Sharon into an election, hoping to depose him as Likud leader in the run up. Then, running at the head of the Likud, Netanyahu would hope to defeat any centrist alliance and win

power as the head of a right-leaning government.

What actually happens in the showdown between Sharon and Netanyahu will depend initially on how many Likud legislators each of them is able to control. The more that are loyal to Netanyahu, the quicker the

election scenario is likely to come about.

In his speech presenting his plan to the Knesset on Monday, Sharon seemed to recognize that his own links with the right, once close, were over, and that his political future will depend on ties with the center-left.

Uncharacteristically, Sharon lashed out at the settlers, accusing them of a deluded "messianism" that was hurting Israeli national interests. In an equally surprising departure, he made a point of expressing regret for Palestinian suffering too.

But more than anything, journalists in the Knesset on Monday were struck by Sharon's determination. He told them he would not bring the disengagement plan to the Knesset again, and that Tuesday's approval was all he needed. He declared that he had no intention of resigning, holding a referendum or sparking new elections. And he said he was absolutely determined to carry out the disengagement plan to the letter.

Still, pundits are not convinced that Sharon will be able to pull it off. Writing in the Yediot Achronot newspaper, political analyst Shimon Shiffer maintained that "the general assessment among the politicians was that the evacuation of the settlements will not happen: Either because Sharon will have to go to early elections, or because Benjamin Netanyahu will force Sharon to accept a referendum that will delay the evacuation indefinitely."

Leslie Susser is the diplomatic correspondent for the Jerusalem Report.

Sharon is left with three possible choices: build a new coalition or parliamentary pact with Labor and the left; agree to hold a referendum; or push for early elections.

NEWS IN BRIEF

NORTH AMERICA

U.S. official: Syria relations looking up?

U.S.-Syria relations may be taking a turn for the better, a top diplomat said.

"We've had discussions in Damascus and our own relationship with Syria is not what we'd like it to be," a deputy secretary of state, Richard Armitage, said Monday in an interview with a Kuwaiti news agency.

"We'd like it to be in better shape. There may be the beginning of signs that it will be."

He did not elaborate, but U.S. officials have noted slight movement in Syria's deployment of some of its troops out of Lebanon and on securing Syria's border with Iraq.

Jewish Democrats slam Presbyterians

Three Democratic Jewish congressmen want the U.S. Presbyterian Church to denounce church leaders who met with Hezbollah.

Video of the meeting shows church elder Ronald Stone praising the terrorist group's social work in Lebanon and saying that "relations and conversations with Islamic leaders are a lot easier than dealings and dialogue with Jewish leaders."

The church outraged U.S. Jews this summer when its General Assembly voted to divest from companies that do business with Israel and to back missionary work to Jews.

"The disgraceful conduct of these individuals reflects very poorly on the church as an institution," Reps. Anthony Weiner (D-N.Y.), Howard Berman (D-Calif.) and Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) wrote in a letter Monday.

Canadian Islamic leaders criticized

Two Canadian Islamic leaders are under fire for comments seen as anti-Semitic.

The leader of the Canadian Islamic Congress, Mohamed Elmasry, has told several Canadian media outlets that all adult Israelis are legitimate targets for Palestinian suicide bombers, because they've all served in the Israeli army.

Meanwhile, Canadian police are investigating Sheik Younus Kathrada, who has been quoted as calling Jews "brothers of monkeys and swine."

In a statement posted on a Web site over the weekend, Kathrada said his comments were directed at the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and not at Jews in general.

"Any name-calling has been aimed at those perpetrating crimes and acts of terrorism and showing open aggression toward Muslims," the statement said.

"We do not perceive the entire Jewish population as having these traits or qualities."

Canadian Jewish leaders condemned both remarks.

Georgia hate crimes law struck down

Georgia's Supreme Court struck down the state's hate crimes law Monday, saying the measure is too broad.

The 7-0 ruling came in the case of a white man and woman convicted of beating two black men in Atlanta.

It was the first application of the 2000 law, which calls for up to five extra years in prison for crimes in which the victim is chosen because of bias or prejudice.

Faiths press for Sudan involvement

A representative of Jewish groups will join a meeting on Sudan with U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

Hannah Rosenthal, executive director of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, will join leaders of other faith groups at Wednesday's meeting to urge greater international leadership to stop what many are calling a genocide in the African nation.

Nobel Prize laureate Elie Wiesel and Sara Bloomfield, the director of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, will also participate in the meeting.

Reform to synagogues: Turn away cash

The Reform movement urged its U.S. congregations not to take federal funds to secure synagogues.

The U.S. government set aside \$25 million earlier this month to assist "high-risk" nonprofits with their security needs.

In a letter last week to congregations, the Reform movement said accepting such money would open the movement up to charges of hypocrisy for battling for church-state separation on the one hand and accepting federal money with the other.

"This is a critical moment for the survival of religious freedom and church-state separation in America," the letter from the Union for Reform Judaism and Reform's Religious Action Center said.

Some Reform congregations have already accepted the funds.

MIDDLE EAST

Decade-old Israel-Jordan peace

Israel marked a quiet 10th anniversary of its peace accord with Jordan.

"Israel views its relations with Jordan as strategically important and accordingly is working to promote their bilateral relations in a number of fields," the Foreign Ministry said in a statement Tuesday.

But there were no overt celebrations planned, both because of the Knesset vote on Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's withdrawal plan and because of pro-Palestinian sentiment simmering in Jordan.

Graffiti threatens Sharon

Jerusalem police probed graffiti threatening Ariel Sharon's life. "We wiped out Rabin, we'll wipe out Sharon too," read graffiti scrawled on the wall of a school in the capital Tuesday.

Police sources said the culprits were believed to belong to the banned far-right Kach movement, and were opposed to the prime minister's plan to remove Israeli settlements from the Gaza Strip and parts of the West Bank.

Security around Sharon has been beefed up out of concern that right-wing extremists could try to kill him, as Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated in 1995.

WORLD

Group wants to expand anti-Semitism fight

The World Jewish Congress has a plan to expand the fight against anti-Semitism.

One of the main thrusts of the plan, expected to be announced Wednesday in Jerusalem at a forum on anti-Semitism sponsored by Israel's minister for Diaspora affairs, Natan Sharansky, is to fight anti-Semitism in countries with smaller Jewish communities, a WJC official said.

Putin: More synagogues needed

Vladimir Putin promised his government's assistance to help solve the problems of the country's Jewish communities.

The Russian president made the statement Monday during a Kremlin meeting with one of his country's chief rabbis, Berel Lazar.

The meeting was seen as another gesture of solidarity Putin has offered to Lazar's Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, the largest organization of Russian Jewry.

The meeting took place during the group's biannual conference in Moscow. Putin told Lazar he favors the construction of new synagogues and Jewish community centers where necessary.