


IN THE NEWS
Egyptian envoy returns to Israel

Egypt named a new ambassador to Israel.

Israel accepted the appointment of Mohammed Asim Ibrahim as Egypt's ambassador in Tel Aviv, shortly after Jordan returned its ambassador to Israel.

Violating their peace treaties with Israel, the two countries withdrew their ambassadors at the beginning of the intifada to protest Israel's moves to quell Palestinian terrorism.

The returns come amid renewed optimism about Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts.

Israeli army chief nominee announced

Maj. Gen. Dan Halutz will be recommended as the next chief of staff of the Israeli army.

Israel's defense minister, Shaul Mofaz, announced Tuesday that he would recommend Halutz, now the deputy chief of staff, to replace Lt. Gen. Moshe Ya'alon.

Ya'alon's three-year tenure was not extended beyond its scheduled end this summer. Political analysts said the decision reflects dissatisfaction with public criticisms of government policy toward the Palestinians. Ya'alon aired last year.

Hateful talk in Pittsburgh

Jewish students at a Pittsburgh university were upset by comments by a controversial black figure. Jewish students were asked to identify themselves at last week's lecture by Malik Shabazz at Carnegie Mellon, and then were threatened.

Students who admitted to being Zionists were told they would be watched, according to Aaron Weil, executive director of Hillel Jewish university center of Pittsburgh.

Anti-hate groups such as the Anti-Defamation League and the Southern Poverty Law Center long have warned against Shabazz's hateful rhetoric. University officials hosted a town meeting in reaction to the speech.

WORLD REPORT

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In Israel, Conference of Presidents backs Ariel Sharon's evacuation plan

By DINA KRAFT

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Over the clatter of dishes and glasses at a lunch Sunday for Israel's minister of defense, James Tisch, chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, says he leaned over to tell his guest that the conference backs Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and parts of the West Bank.

"I just want you to know — contrary to what you've seen in the press, the conference does support the disengagement plan," Tisch said he told Shaul Mofaz.

Later that day, at a dinner for Prime Minister Ariel Sharon at the King David Hotel here, Tisch introduced the leader of Israel, saying, "The Conference of Presidents proudly supports and has supported your historic disengagement plan.

"Your role as a great and patriotic leader is noted."

Tisch's decisive words seemed aimed at quashing the perception that the leadership of American Jewry was not staunchly behind Sharon's plan. The prime minister soon will begin to remove Israeli forces and settlements from the Gaza Strip and the West Bank for the first time since Israel took control of those areas during the Six Day War in June 1967.

Sharon, who came to the dinner directly from a marathon Cabinet session where government ministers gave final approval for the disengagement plan, told the room, packed with more than 100 leaders of major American Jewish organizations, that their support is crucial.

"In this sensitive and complicated period, there is great importance to the support and solidarity of the Jewish communities for the State of Israel. Your support of the State of

Israel, your standing by our side, is important now, maybe more than ever," Sharon told the conference.

In September, when Sharon's plan began to seem as if it might win Cabinet backing, American Jewish groups had a hard time finding a consensus position. Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, circulated a "statement of support" for the plan because he felt the conference wasn't taking action.

At that time, the Conference of Presidents, to which the ADL belongs, said it was not yet ready to take a position that could accurately reflect the beliefs of all its constituent groups.

In October, the conference met with Daniel Ayalon, Israel's ambassador to the United States, to hear his impassioned plea for its support. The group, noting the reservations of several Orthodox and hawkish groups in the conference, then issued a statement that fell short of across-the-board support for disengagement. Soon after, however, when the Knesset passed legislation in favor of disengagement for the first time, a stronger statement was issued, saying there was consensus support for the plan. Even that statement, however, drew criticism from some Jewish leaders as being too tepid.

The controversy over how strongly the American Jewish leadership stood behind the matter heated up again when the conference arrived in Israel last week.

In an article in the daily Ha'aretz, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, head of the Reform movement in the United States, criticized the conference for being slow in supporting disengagement, calling its stance on the issue a "shameful disgrace." Striking back, Tisch said Yoffie's comments

Continued on page 2

■ Evacuation plan endorsed by Conference of Presidents

Continued from page 1

were "totally outrageous" and cited the second statement the conference issued, which noted consensus support for disengagement by the conference members.

But Yoffie was heartened by news of Tisch's statements Sunday.

The Reform leader, kept away from the conference's meeting by obligations to his own movement, said, "If the conference is now expressing full support of the disengagement, I'm delighted in every way.

"My view, both in the past and now, is that it's the conference's job to be chief public advocate in the United States for the disengagement plan and for the positions of the prime minister. We're facing a very difficult period in the three to five months ahead, so let the conference assume that role.

"If it can, it will certainly be a blessing for all concerned."

Foxman, too, was pleased by what he heard. "I'm delighted that finally the Presidents' Conference supports the Prime Minister's disengagement plan," he said in a phone interview from New York.

"Better late than never."

Most other members of the conference, an umbrella group representing 52 American Jewish organizations, said they personally supported disengagement even if their own organizations had not taken a formal stand on it.

Still, there was some talk that the conference leadership had not come out strongly enough before now.

"The leadership says it has been vocal but the perception is that they are not on the

forefront of advocacy," said Seymour Reich, president of the Israel Policy Forum.

Malcolm Hoenlein, the executive vice chairman of the Presidents Conference, said the organization would continue to play a supportive role in both Washington and Jerusalem as the Israeli government carries out the challenges posed by the withdrawal. He took issue with the Israeli media for what he said was a preference for reporting scandal instead of substance.

Hoenlein also spoke out against those voices in Israel advocating violent protest against the disengagement. Last week several Likud Cabinet ministers in favor of the disengagement revealed they had received death threats.

"Government officials and religious and communal leaders have a special responsibility to exercise care in the language they employ, as well as seeking to isolate those who engage in incitement to violence," Hoenlein added.

Efforts, including the possibility of traveling to the West Bank city of Ramallah, were made to arrange a meeting between Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and the conference. But logistics and timing made the meeting impossible to arrange, according to Mark Rosenblum, founder and policy director of Americans for Peace Now, who had tried to make it work.

Americans for Peace Now has been among the most vocal supporters of disengagement.

"We see it as the first step" towards negotiations and an eventual resolution of the conflict, Rosenblum said.

The conference did, however, meet with a panel of Palestinian academics, who discussed the challenges ahead of Abbas and the shifting mood on the Palestinian street. Surveys show an increase of those opposed to the use of violence as a political means among Palestinians, they said.

Rabbi Arthur Schneier of the Orthodox Park East Synagogue in New York City, who heads the Appeal of Conscience Founda-

tion, an interfaith group, said his personal support for disengagement comes with a heavy heart.

"On the one hand, there is a great deal of sadness and compassion for those who will be uprooted as a result of the disengagement," he said. But citing the government's decision to go ahead with the plan, he added, "We can only hope and pray that as a result of this, co-existence between Palestinian and Israelis will be on track."

The Orthodox

Union, meanwhile, has not taken a position on disengagement, with its leaders saying it is up to the Israeli people to decide what is best for its own security.

O.U. President Stephen Savitsky said people must be educated to understand what disengagement will mean for Israel's future.

The most outspoken voice at the conference against disengagement was from the Zionist Organization of America.

"We think" the withdrawal is a "serious mistake which will increase, in all likelihood, terror because" terrorism "is being rewarded," said ZOA President Morton Klein. "Our role is to support what we think is good for Israel, not to support all Israeli governments."

At a community center in Sderot, Rabbi Emmanuel Holzer, an Orthodox rabbi with the Rabbinical Council of America, approached Aharon Polat, who has lived in the Gaza settlement of Eli Sinai for eight years.

Polat, who is in favor of the disengagement despite the fact that he will have to leave his home, told the conference members that unity at this time is paramount.

Holzer's message to Polat was brief but direct: He said that there are many religious Jews in the United States who would support him during the painful process of leaving Gaza.

"The idea is to live and to win rather than to die and surrender," Holzer said. ■

(JTA staff writer Rachel Pomerance and copy editor Joanne Palmer in New York contributed to this report.)

'It's the conference's job to be chief public advocate in the United States for the disengagement plan and for the positions of the prime minister.'

Rabbi Eric Yoffie
Union for Reform Judaism

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Lebanon assassination changes landscape

By LESLIE SUSSER

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Political assassinations often turn out to be seminal events, but they don't always work out the way the assassins wanted them to.

The Feb. 14 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri is widely believed to have been engineered by Syrian intelligence. It may well have triggered a chain reaction that will lead to the expulsion of Syrian troops from Lebanon, with serious repercussions for Israel and the Middle East as a whole.

Indeed, if Syria's influence in Lebanon wanes, one of the beneficiaries could be Israel. But then again the big winner could be Iran — at Israel's cost.

A good scenario for Israel would be if the Lebanese opposition, galvanized into action by the assassination, forces the Syrians to leave, and with backing from the United States and Europe fashions a new Western-oriented Lebanon, open to ties with Israel. A chastened Syria, its weaknesses exposed, may feel its best hope lies in joining in.

But there are other scenarios, not as positive for Israel, that are possible as well. For example, the Lebanese opposition could be cruelly repressed by Syria, which could end up an even stronger force in the country.

Israeli analysts tend to rule out this scenario, arguing that the United States would not allow it to happen. More likely, they say, is that Syria would either end or drastically reduce its presence in Lebanon and Shi'ite Iran would move into the vacuum, fomenting internal instability to cement its position and upgrading its power base among Lebanese Shi'ites to harass Israel.

At issue is not only Lebanon's liberty, but the international orientation of both Lebanon and Syria: Will they emerge closer to Iran or the West?

The general consensus in the Arab world is that Hariri was assassinated because of his outspoken opposition to Syria's continued domination of Lebanese affairs.

Ever since 1976, Syria has controlled Lebanon. Over the past few years, though, Lebanese calls for an end to Syrian domination have been growing louder.

The outspoken Hariri was the driving force behind U.N. Resolution 1559, calling on the Syrians to remove the 15,000 soldiers they have deployed on Lebanese soil.

According to Arab news reports, the Syrians feared Hariri would be re-elected prime minister in general elections scheduled for May, spearhead a move to expel Syrian forces from Lebanon and then conclude a separate peace with Israel.

To prevent this, Arab media reports say, Syrian security forces assassinated him.

The Israeli intelligence reading is similar. Military intelligence agrees the Syrians were behind the murder, but argues that Syrian President Bashar Assad probably didn't know about it. If he had, the Israeli version goes, he would have prevented it because of its potential to harm Syria.

The assassination sparked a Lebanese grass-roots opposition movement against the continued Syrian presence. Lebanese opposition forces are demanding that Syria remove all its soldiers, agents and 1 million workers from Lebanon. Opposition leaders say they are counting on an "avalanche effect" and have called for a relentless intifada, or uprising, until the Syrians leave.

Such activity and terminology would have been inconceivable just a few years ago, and by now Syrian guns probably would have gotten rid of any signs of dissidence. But over the past five years there have been two major changes in the region.

Syrian President Hafez Assad, who was a strong leader, died. His son Bashar has nothing like his father's presence or clout. Even more to the point, the United States now has 150,000 troops in Iraq, right on Syria's doorstep. A weak and insecure Syrian regime will think twice before embarking on any action that could spark retaliatory U.S. moves.

Israeli analysts say the United States could cooperate with France and the European Union to curb Syrian influence. French President Jacques Chirac, a per-

sonal friend of Hariri's, has taken a strong stand in favor of Syrian withdrawal and for a free Lebanon.

Some Israeli analysts think the removal of Syrian influence might be problematic not only for Syria but for Israel too.

Writing in the mass circulation daily Ma'ariv, Jackie Hougie maintains that "expelling the Syrians from Lebanon could release volatile genies."

But most analysts argue that a new civil war in Lebanon is unlikely because all the

sectarian players — Christians, Muslims and Druse — know the cost. On Israel Radio, Guy Bechor of Herzliya's Interdisciplinary Center insisted that a stronger Lebanon, free of Syria, could become united enough to make a lasting peace with Israel.

But that leaves open the question of Iranian influence.

If Syria were not a force, Iran would do all it could to undermine the chance of peace between Lebanon and Israel. Iran already has Revolutionary Guards stationed in southern Lebanon, and they control the Shi'ite Hezbollah militia. For some time, Iran has been promoting terror in the West Bank and Gaza through Hezbollah agents who have infiltrated into the Palestinian areas. Any talk of peace with Israel almost certainly would encounter strong and possibly violent Iranian resistance.

The Lebanese crisis at first led to a tightening of the Damascus-Tehran axis. Two days after the assassination, Assad sent his prime minister to Tehran, in what Israeli intelligence says was an attempt to deter a U.S. attack on Damascus by playing up his close ties with Iran. But the United States is unlikely to be deterred so easily.

For Israel, the changes in Lebanon could lead to efforts to achieve a peace deal, despite Syrian and Iranian resistance. The result — as is so often the case — could depend on America.

The United States may be able to neutralize Syria. The big question is whether it will have the resolve to stop Iran from spoiling the party.

'Expelling the Syrians from Lebanon could release volatile genies.'

Jackie Hougie
Ma'ariv columnist

NEWS
ANALYSIS

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Disengagement tests police

Israel's police chief called for withdrawals from the Gaza Strip and northern West Bank, planned for this summer, to be accelerated. Inspector General Moshe Karadi told Israel Radio on Tuesday that the evacuation of settlements, slated to begin July 20, should take place over five weeks, not the nine weeks now planned.

He said tightening the time frame would reduce the risk of security personnel being exposed to Palestinian attacks or violent resistance from settlers opposed to the withdrawal.

With thousands of police being diverted for the withdrawals, there also are fears that the country's crime rate could rise.

Peres slams hysteria

Shimon Peres played down fears of a civil war in Israel.

Asked Tuesday during a tour of the Galilee whether right-wing rancor over upcoming withdrawals from the Gaza Strip and parts of the West Bank could erupt into violence, Israel's vice premier said, "I am against this phenomenon of cultivating hysteria.

There are disagreements, indeed, but the majority decides. The Knesset and government decided with a respectable majority to go with disengagement, and under democratic rule the decision of the majority must be respected."

Threatening letter-writer busted

An Israeli woman is suspected of sending a threatening letter to Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz.

The 54-year-old Bat Yam resident was arrested this week after fraud squad detectives matched her handwriting to that on a letter received by the Defense Ministry, which read "disengagement=pulsa denura," an ancient Aramaic curse.

Police are on high alert for vigilante violence by right-wingers opposed to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's plan to withdraw from the Gaza Strip and northern West Bank this summer.

Group assails Egypt on detentions

Egypt is illegally detaining suspects in the October bombing of hotels in the Sinai, Human Rights Watch said.

As many as 2,400 suspects are still being detained, the group said in a report issued Tuesday.

"Egyptian security forces responded to the Taba atrocity by committing mass human rights abuses," said Joe Stork, Human Rights Watch's Middle East director.

Three car bombs detonated on Oct. 7 killed 34 people, including 12 Israelis, in simultaneous attacks. Egypt has yet to comment on the report.

NORTH AMERICA

O.U. backs assisted suicide ruling

An Orthodox group praised the U.S. Supreme Court decision to hear a case reviewing an Oregon law permitting assisted suicide.

The high court announced Tuesday it would review a ruling by former Attorney General John Ashcroft that medication could not be used for assisted suicide, which challenged Oregon's "Death with Dignity" law.

The Orthodox Union said Jewish teachings recognize "the infinite value and sanctity of human life" and seek to preserve it, "while at the same time taking all responsible measures to comfort the ill."

The organization expects to file an amicus brief in support of the Bush administration.

High court rejects synagogue zoning case

The U.S. Supreme Court refused to review a ruling that found it unconstitutional to bar synagogues from being built in a downtown business district.

The court announced Tuesday, without comment, that it would not hear the case testing a Surfside, Fla., law that forbids synagogues and churches from locating in its business district, in an effort to maximize revenue.

Two synagogues sued the town, calling the ruling discriminatory, and the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta ruled the town had violated federal law because it allowed nonsecular private clubs to be established downtown.

An attorney for one of the synagogues said he was pleased with the ruling.

WORLD

Jewish Agency budget passes

The Jewish Agency for Israel passed a quarterly budget. At the meeting Tuesday of its board of governors in Israel, the Jewish Agency passed its budget for April through June.

The group has been formulating its estimated \$290 million budget on a quarterly basis until it fully approves a new strategic plan.

The group's board of governors also officially passed MASA, an initiative to bring 100,000 young Diaspora Jews to Israel for a semester or a year.

MASA will be funded by program participants, the Jewish Agency and the Israeli government, which approved the initiative in December 2004.

Partners will put \$10 million in the project for 2005, adding \$10 million each year until leveling off at \$50 million in 2009.

The board of governors also supported the Israeli government's decision to double the rate of immigration of Falash Mura, Ethiopian Jews whose ancestors converted to Christianity, completing the group's aliyah by the year 2007.

Jewish authors nominated for prize

Several Jewish authors were nominated for a new literary prize.

U.S. authors Philip Roth, Cynthia Ozick and Saul Bellow — as well as Israeli author A.B. Yehoshua — were among 18 finalists for the Man International Booker Prize, Ha'aretz reported.

The prize, to be announced in London in June, will be given for an author's entire body of work.

Hungarians flock to Holocaust-themed movie

A Holocaust-themed movie is dominating Hungarian movie theaters. Ten days after the release of "Fateless," more than 150,000 viewers had seen it, according to box-office data released Sunday.

The movie, based on a novel by Imre Kertesz, a Hungarian Jew who won the 2002 Nobel Prize for literature, is enjoying a stronger showing than many Hollywood blockbusters did in Hungary.

For instance, in its first 10 days in Hungarian theaters "Spider-Man" attracted 130,000 Hungarian moviegoers, while another hit movie, "Bruce Almighty," drew 122,000.

French attacks draw official ire

French leaders condemned two hate crimes.

Interior Minister Dominique de Villepin said Monday that the week-end attacks, in which swastikas were painted on a wall of Paris' Grand Mosque and a gas bomb was thrown at a train car that the Nazis used to deport Jews during World War II, are "utterly unspeakable and ignominious."

Jewish and Muslim leaders also condemned the attacks.