

IN THE NEWS
Stopping traffic to protest Gaza pullout

Israeli right-wingers opposed to the Gaza Strip withdrawal plan blocked traffic throughout Israel.

Scores of protesters staged sit-down protests at seven major junctions in Israel on Monday. [Story, Pg. 3]

Jewish Agency candidate gets first OK

Ariel Sharon's candidate for the next chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel received preliminary approval.

On Monday, the Jewish Agency's Advice and Consent Committee unanimously approved Ze'ev Bielski, mayor of Ra'anana, as the candidate for the JAFI chairmanship.

Bielski is expected to be approved by the Zionist General Council, which meets in Jerusalem on June 21, and the agency's assembly, which meets June 26.

Bielski would succeed the current JAFI chairman, Sallai Meridor, who is resigning early.

D.C. envoy apparently to stay

Israel's ambassador to Washington apparently has received assurances from Ariel Sharon that he can continue in his post.

Daniel Ayalon has been engaged in a public feud with Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom, and some media reported over the weekend that Ayalon had been fired, but sources tell JTA that the Israeli prime minister told Ayalon he was satisfied with his work and wanted him to continue until the end of his term.

Ayalon reportedly was unable to secure a White House meeting for Shalom when he came to Washington earlier this year, and his assistant could not coordinate a meeting for Shalom's wife with Madonna when the singer was in Israel last year.

Israel's U.S. ambassador reports directly to the prime minister, not the foreign minister, which has strained relations between Ayalon and Shalom.

WORLD REPORT

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At its conference, AIPAC will try to keep focus on policy priorities

By RON KAMPEAS and MATTHEW E. BERGER

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Inside the massive Washington Convention Center, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice will be talking about the Gaza Strip withdrawal and the Iranian nuclear threat.

But in the hallways and the social gatherings of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee's annual policy conference next week, talk is likely to focus on the investigation into two former AIPAC staffers and the effect it could have on AIPAC's ability to lobby for Israel.

AIPAC will be tasked with keeping its members focused on the important issues facing Israel and maintaining support in Congress if the Gaza pullout, planned for this summer, goes awry. The effort to keep attention focused on Iran's presumed drive for nuclear weapons is also high on its agenda.

The organization is still perceived as a "behemoth," congressional officials say, and will be taken seriously when it meets May 22-24 — but a cloud will linger over the proceedings.

"You deal with them as you would normally deal with them," one congressional staffer said. He compared it to a friend who has a health problem: You don't talk about the problem, and you hope that it resolves itself quickly.

There are two traditional success markers to an AIPAC policy conference. One is a roll call of members of Congress, diplomats and administration officials attending the Monday night dinner — last year there were nearly 200, including more than 40 senators — and the other is a lobbying day Tuesday, when thousands

of AIPAC members descend on Capitol Hill.

How many lawmakers turn up Monday night and how the lobbyists fare Tuesday will be closely watched by the organization, its supporters and its critics.

Some insiders, who asked not to be identified, say there may be apprehension about working with AIPAC because of the FBI probe.

"I think most members of Congress and staffers who are invited to meet with AIPAC constituents and go to the dinner will still go," a congressional aide said. "But I'm convinced, in the back of everybody's mind, there is a kernel of concern and doubt that maybe we shouldn't be playing ball with AIPAC the way we always have."

AIPAC's problems stem from an FBI investigation into Lawrence Franklin, a Pentagon analyst arrested earlier this month and accused of verbally passing classified information to Steve Rosen, AIPAC's research director, and Keith Weissman, a top Iran analyst at AIPAC.

AIPAC fired both men last month, and Rosen associates tell JTA he expects to be indicted.

AIPAC officials claim they have been assured the probe is not targeting the organization or any other staffers.

"Nobody knows what the implications of this legal situation are," a congressional staffer said. "It could be a blip, and AIPAC has had blips before."

AIPAC has gone to great lengths to stress its bona fides, publicizing Rice, Sharon and other scheduled speakers, including leaders of both congressional chambers from both parties.

Sharon's presence is considered particularly significant. Israeli prime ministers

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**BEHIND
THE
HEADLINES**

■ *AIPAC will try to keep conference focused on policy, not problems*

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rarely travel to the United States if they don't have an audience with the president. Sharon is expected to meet with the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations in New York before heading to Washington, but has planned no political meetings, a spokesman for the Israeli Embassy in Washington said.

Sharon also is expected to be welcomed in New York at a rally Sunday, a measure of American Jewish support for the disengagement plan.

"Prime Minister Sharon is coming to stand with the American pro-Israel community at a crucial moment in the history of the U.S.-Israel relationship," AIPAC spokesman Andrew Schwartz said.

AIPAC also is boasting about attendance at the conference, which is expected to top 5,000 people, including nearly 1,000 students. In an e-mail to reporters this week, a spokesman noted that 26,000 glatt kosher meals will be needed for the conference, including 125 gallons of hummus.

Such self-promotion is unusual for the organization, which generally feels it can be most effective if it keeps its achievements behind the scenes. In the past, major speakers have not been confirmed until the week before the conference and officials play down the expected attendance, instead of talking it up. And no one can remember figures outlining catering tonnage.

AIPAC officials insist that this year's conference is business as usual, though they referred questions to Patrick Dorton, a Washington publicist whose experience

in scandal management includes shepherding accounting giant Arthur Andersen through its final acts.

"We're promoting the policy conference the same way we've done it in years past," Dorton said. "AIPAC continues to be proud of the work it does on behalf of its membership."

A source close to AIPAC said Howard Kohr, the group's executive director, will touch on the investigation briefly in a speech to delegates Sunday, but mostly will focus on AIPAC's policy agenda.

The organization has real work to do. Topping its agenda will be preparing Congress for the Israeli withdrawal. The lobby is preparing a letter for lawmakers to send to President Bush, underscoring how the United States should support the peace process going forward.

Bush already has expressed interest in assisting Israel in the development of the Negev desert and the Galilee, the regions likeliest to absorb some 9,000 settlers from Gaza and the northern West Bank. Israel has suggested that resettlement costs could run as high as \$3.5 billion.

AIPAC will be charged with laying the groundwork for pushing through any additional aid packages. In addition to direct aid, that could mean new U.S. loan guarantees for Israel.

It will be important for AIPAC to show that it backs the disengagement plan, especially since it has a hawkish reputation in Washington. A draft of the group's Action Agenda, which will be debated in executive committee at the conference, calls for supporting the "U.S. government's backing" of the plan, rather than the plan itself. Officials said that was in keeping with the group's philosophy of lobbying the U.S. government, not trying to influence Israeli policy.

In a twist, the disengagement plan could soon pit AIPAC against a traditional ally — Christian evangelicals, including several prominent lawmakers, who believe the disengagement violates biblical precepts and offers Palestinian terrorists a triumph.

Dovish groups welcomed the tilt.

"It's very significant that AIPAC intends

to adopt formal policy language that embraces disengagement, and specifically the Bush administration's endorsement of disengagement," said Lewis Roth, assistant executive director of Americans for Peace Now.

Disengagement opponents said they won't try to scuttle AIPAC's support for the plan, which they believe is inevitable. Instead, they'll try to ensure that any resolutions on the plan reflect the trauma it will impose on settlers.

Morton Klein, president of the Zionist Organization of America, said language should

refer to the evacuation of thousands of "women and children from Gaza" and the northern West Bank "by force if necessary, and abandoning Jewish homes, schools and synagogues where Jews have been living for 35 years."

"Disengagement shouldn't be comfortable," said Klein, who plans to continue protesting the plan but who has pledged not to lobby against U.S. funding related to it.

As usual, the conference will see some protests. A coalition of right-wing Jewish groups are coordinating buses from New York to Washington and plan to sleep outside the Convention Center in tents, simulating Gaza settlers who will be expelled from their homes under the withdrawal plan.

The Council for National Interest, a pro-Arab group, also will protest, claiming undue Israeli influence in American foreign policy.

AIPAC is not shutting out disengagement dissenters. Natan Sharansky, who resigned recently from Israel's Cabinet because he believes the time is not ripe for the withdrawal, will speak Sunday night. The former Soviet dissident was expected to speak of democratic ideals, not disengagement.

AIPAC also will focus on the Iranian nuclear threat. Delegates will learn about the nuclear fuel cycle and how Iran appears to be seeking a nuclear bomb.

The lobby will continue to stress the annual passage of foreign aid. This year's aid package includes \$2.28 billion in military aid for Israel and \$240 million in economic assistance, as well as \$150 million for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. ■

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Congressional staffer

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As withdrawal nears, protests take on an edge

By DAN BARON

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Political tensions in Israel, simmering over the plan to withdraw this summer from the Gaza Strip, appear close to boiling over.

In their most sweeping and coordinated protest yet, hundreds of right-wing activists flooded key road junctions across Israel Monday, burning tires and paralyzing traffic despite a heavy police deployment. Some 40 people were arrested.

A separate case that came to light suggested there might be deadlier violence in the works: The Shin Bet announced it had arrested five Israelis suspected of planning to attack the main Muslim shrine on the Temple Mount.

"We are on alert for any and all worst-case scenarios," Internal Security Minister Gideon Ezra said.

Having overcome all the parliamentary hurdles and ministerial infighting, and having received the blessing of President Bush, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon seems intent on carrying out the disengagement from the Palestinians by withdrawing from Gaza and the northern West Bank in August.

But Sharon's certainty might prompt opponents of the plan to opt for extreme measures, officials fear. Right-wing leaders dismiss such statements as politically loaded alarmism, but admit that no one can predict what deranged loners might attempt.

Topping the list of potential targets is the Al-Aksa Mosque on the Temple Mount. The five Israelis arrested last month are suspected of planning to fire an anti-tank rocket at the shrine, then fend off security forces with grenades before committing suicide. They denied any wrongdoing.

"I am against any action that would cause innocent casualties," Eyal Karmani, one of the suspects, told reporters at a Jerusalem courthouse.

Karmani and the four others were released from custody pending a decision on whether to press charges. Israeli media quoted Justice Ministry officials as saying there may not be enough evidence for an indictment.

The suspects accused the Shin Bet of arresting them on the strength of an agent provocateur, known as "Ba-

rukh," whom they alleged had urged them to mount an attack on the Temple Mount.

While such an action would draw the wrath of millions of Muslims against the Jewish state, the tactic of blocking traffic appeared aimed more at fomenting internal strife.

In the Tel Aviv suburb of Givat Shmuel, stalled motorists and sit-down protesters almost came to blows in the absence of an adequate police response.

"You're not Jews, you're scum!" one middle-aged man screamed at the young men sprawled in front of his car.

The events highlighted the limitations of Israel's security forces in handling nationwide demonstrations. Many of the junctions were blocked although police had deployed in advance, tipped off by leaflets distributed by a far-right politi-

cal group called "The National Home" that called for mass demonstrations.

Police sources said undercover patrolmen had been posted at the flashpoint sites, some with video cameras to help track down protest ring-leaders.

But such follow-up probes may not be necessary: Israeli media quoted unnamed senior members of the Yesha settler council as saying the demonstrations had hurt the anti-disengagement cause by alienating many citizens.

In another sign that withdrawal is inevitable, Channel Two television said "several hundred" families from the main Gaza settlement bloc of Gush Katif had agreed to be relocated to Israel voluntarily, parting company with residents who have vowed to stay put. Settler spokesmen were not immediately available for comment. ■

'We are on alert for any and all worst-case scenarios.'

Gideon Ezra
Israeli Internal Security Minister

Daniel Krifcher, technology exec, is chosen as JTA's next president

By JTA STAFF

NEW YORK (JTA) — Daniel Krifcher has been chosen as the next president of JTA's board of directors.

Krifcher, 43, of Potomac, Md., will succeed Howard Friedman, who will become chairman of the board, in October. JTA's board voted Krifcher into the position at its spring meeting on May 11 in New York.

Krifcher, who brings with him a wealth of corporate and technological experience, was an executive at America Online from 1994 until this year. His last job with AOL was chief operating officer for the Internet giant's dial-up business.

Krifcher now is a JTA vice president and chairman of the organization's product development and marketing committee. Before that, he led a task force charged with drafting a strategic plan for the agency.

He's enthusiastic about his new position.

"I look forward to partnering with the JTA professional and volunteer team to help JTA take even greater advantage of the many new technologies and distribution channels that are now becoming available," Krifcher said.

Norman Lipoff, chairman of JTA's board and its nominating committee, praised the incoming president.

"It's very exciting to have this young, energetic, highly skilled individual take the helm," Lipoff said.

Krifcher also serves on the boards of Harvard Hillel, the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, the United Jewish Endowment Fund of Greater Washington, and the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School. He serves on the marketing committee of the United Jewish Communities umbrella organization, is active in the American Israel Public Affairs Committee and is a Wexner Heritage Fellow. ■

NEWS IN BRIEF

NORTH AMERICA

NPR gets watched

The Corporation for Public Broadcasting appointed two ombudsmen to monitor the U.S. public radio's Middle East coverage.

The appointments of the two people, one liberal and one conservative, to monitor National Public Radio were made last month following complaints by Cheryl Halpern, a Republican Jewish activist, and U.S. Rep. Brad Sherman (D-Calif.), *The New York Times* reported.

The corporation, which has been increasingly critical of NPR recently, allocates federal funds for public radio and television.

Some Jewish activists have criticized NPR's Middle East coverage as biased since the outbreak of the Palestinian intifada in fall 2000, though that criticism has lessened somewhat over the past year.

Cabinet members party with Israel

The two Jewish members of President Bush's Cabinet attended Israel Independence Day celebrations in Washington.

Joshua Bolten, director of the Office of Management and Budget, and Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff posed May 12 with Daniel Ayalon, Israel's ambassador to Washington.

A line to get into the party at the Andrew Mellon Auditorium stretched down Constitution Avenue. "As an American, as a member of the President's Cabinet and as a Jew, I am very proud of this relationship," Bolten said of U.S.-Israel ties.

Rep. Roy Blunt (R-Mo.), the U.S. House of Representatives' majority whip, also addressed the crowd.

MIDDLE EAST

Mosques in their sights

Five Israelis are in custody on suspicion of plotting to attack a Muslim shrine on Jerusalem's Temple Mount.

Authorities said the five Jews from a Chasidic group linked to far-right politics were arrested last month and confessed to planning to fire an anti-tank rocket at Al-Aksa Mosque in a bid to spark Muslim outrage.

According to the Shin Bet, the suspects also intended to throw grenades at Israeli security forces that tried to arrest them, and then to commit suicide.

All five men, who denied wrongdoing, have been released from custody pending formal charges, which may not be filed, as Justice Ministry officials said there was a lack of hard evidence.

Hamas on the clock

A Hamas leader said Palestinian terrorist groups would observe a cease-fire only until year's end.

"The agreement to maintain calm was the only option in order to preserve the power of resistance and prevent infighting," Mousa Abu Marzouk, a Hamas political representative, told the London-based Arab newspaper *Asharq al-Awsat* on Monday.

He was referring to a March deal whereby Hamas and other armed factions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip agreed to honor the truce declared by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon the previous month.

Would-be stabber shot

Israeli troops killed a knife-wielding Palestinian in the West Bank. The Palestinian was shot Monday as he tried to stab soldiers staffing a checkpoint outside Tulkarm.

The West Bank city, one of two handed over to Palestinian Au-

thority security control under an agreement with Israel in February, otherwise has been largely quiet.

Israeli security sources said Kalkilya, another West Bank city, also could be handed over this month if the quiet holds.

Pride parade postponed

An international gay pride parade planned for Jerusalem was postponed.

Organizers said this week that WorldPride 2005 was being delayed from this summer until next to avoid clashing with the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, which recently was rescheduled to begin in mid-August.

The parade had drawn protests from Jewish, Christian and Muslim groups who said it would desecrate the holy city.

A smaller event in Jerusalem, for members of Israel's gay and lesbian community, is expected to take place at the end of June.

Bridging the Gulf

Israel reportedly is backing Qatar's bid for a seat on the U.N. Security Council.

Ma'ariv reported Sunday that several months ago the Gulf state became the first member of the Arab League to ask Israel for help in securing a place in the top United Nations forum, and that Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom obliged.

"Qatar was one of the only Arab countries that kept ties with us throughout the intifada," the newspaper quoted a Foreign Ministry source as saying.

WORLD

Center wants Islamist group out of forum

The Simon Wiesenthal Center asked that an Islamist group not be permitted to attend an upcoming forum on anti-Semitism.

Allowing the Union of Islamic Organizations of France to attend the upcoming conference, sponsored by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, "would be a parody," Shimon Samuels, the center's director for international liaison, wrote in a letter to the acting president of the OSCE.

The conference is slated to be held in Cordoba, Spain, on June 8-9.

Israeli envoy to Hungary probed

Israel's Foreign Ministry is investigating the country's ambassador to Hungary.

According to a report filed by ministry logistics officer Amikam Levi, David Admon spends much of his time cultivating ties with local business people in order to get involved in private real-estate ventures and other local business enterprises.

The report also says Admon has limited knowledge of Hungarian and English, and that the embassy spent as much as \$100,000 on an Independence Day party.

The report is based on testimony by embassy employees.

In an interview Monday with Israeli Radio, Admon denied the allegations against him, saying Hungarian is his native language.

Soccer star's visit misses wide

An appearance by a Brazilian soccer star in Israel ended early after he was mobbed by fans.

Ronaldo was escorted out of a side entrance in a Herzliya stadium after fans and media pressed to get closer to him, Ha'aretz reported.

A visit earlier in the day in the West Bank city of Ramallah was more orderly, the paper reported. Ronaldo is visiting the region as a goodwill ambassador.