

IN THE NEWS

Peres quits Labor, backs Ariel Sharon

Shimon Peres quit Israel's Labor Party.

Peres announced Wednesday he was leaving Labor, his political home for decades, in order to help Prime Minister Ariel Sharon pursue peace with the Palestinians.

"My activities in the party have come to an end," he told reporters. "I ask myself what, in the coming years, in this year, is the main thing facing Israel. I have no doubt this is the inevitable intersection of peace and the diplomatic process," Peres said. "I believe that the most suitable person for this is Arik Sharon."

AIPAC slams White House on Iran

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee criticized the White House for not pushing the U.N. nuclear watchdog to recommend sanctions for Iran.

The Bush administration backed a European Union bid last week to reopen negotiations with Iran that would allow Iran to continue with its nuclear program as long as it exports its uranium to Russia for enrichment.

The agreement, which kept the International Atomic Energy Agency from referring Iran to the Security Council for sanctions, would supposedly keep Iran from obtaining weapons-grade uranium.

AIPAC and some leaders in Congress oppose the plan, saying Iran could work around it and suggesting that Russia is not trustworthy.

Gaza crossing bothers Israel

Israel complained over insufficient Palestinian Authority cooperation in running a Gaza Strip border terminal.

Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz said Wednesday that Israeli security officials were not receiving full information on those using the Rafah terminal on the Gaza-Egypt border.

WORLD REPORT

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After 'big bang,' analysts wonder whether Likud can pick up pieces

By LESLIE SUSSER

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The twin earthquakes that hit Israeli politics in the past month have left the once-dominant Likud Party reeling, with a question mark over its future as a relevant political force in Israel.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's decision to leave Likud and establish a new party and Amir Peretz's election as Labor leader both are seen as mortal blows to the ruling Likud. Recent polls show Likud falling from 40 seats in the outgoing Knesset to just 13 in new elections, and pundits are asking: Can the hawkish party make a comeback or is it destined to be consigned to the margins of Israeli politics?

Analysts doubt that, in the short term, Likud can find a vote-catching leader or come up with a credible political agenda. Moreover, the party could be torn by infighting among its six leadership contenders and a witch hunt against party members who are suspected of backing Sharon but staying in Likud to skew the outcome of its leadership and Knesset primaries.

Sharon's biggest coup came Wednesday, when former Labor leader Shimon Peres announced he would join Kadima. Peres is expected to become a Cabinet minister if Sharon's Kadima Party forms a government, though he is not expected to be placed on the party's slate of Knesset candidates. If other senior Laborites cross over, it will begin to look like a split in the party, which could hurt Peretz in the general election.

Weekend polls predict Sharon's new Kadima Party winning 33 to 34 seats in the

March 28 general election, Labor taking 26 to 28, Likud plummeting to 13 and the centrist Shinui also crashing, down from 15 seats in the current Knesset to just six or seven seats in the next.

Pollsters say the underlying trends indicate a revolution in Israeli voting patterns. Pollster Rafi Smith told JTA that after the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in August, he began to detect a huge drop in voters' loyalty to the parties they normally supported.

"The electorate is ready for something new, and Sharon and Peretz are the main beneficiaries," he said.

Moreover, whereas Ashkenazi voters have tended to vote mainly for the left and Sephardi voters mainly for the right, Sharon has broken the mold, winning strong support from both groups.

According to the pollsters, Sharon should take about 45 percent of the Likud vote and 30 percent from both Labor and the largely Ashkenazi-supported Shinui.

He also is expected to take a whopping 30 percent of the key Russian immigrant vote, which some pundits argue has decided every Israeli election since 1992.

Analysts say the Kadima phenomenon is different from previous centrist parties that started well but imploded just before or soon after elections.

"This time we have a popular sitting prime minister with an agenda on the key Palestinian issue that many Israelis believe is realistic and right," Smith says.

Few pundits believe the Likud will manage to turn things around before the election. The party has lost its two best electoral cards: For one, its argument that Israel should make

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NEWS
ANALYSIS

■ *There is little doubt that Kadima and Labor will be the two biggest parties in the Knesset*

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no unreciprocated moves on the Palestinian front has been trumped by Sharon's unilateralism, which seems to have paid rich security and diplomatic dividends.

Secondly, traditional Likud support based on Sephardi discontent has been eroded by both Sharon and the Moroccan-born Peretz. Peretz is expected to bring Labor about 10 percent of the Likud vote, mainly from relatively poor Sephardi areas on Israel's periphery.

Worse: Many poor Sephardim blame Benjamin Netanyahu, the man most likely to win the Likud leadership race, for their worsening plight because of fiscal austerity measures he introduced as finance minister.

In an effort to reunify their badly shaken party, the six Likud leadership contenders signed an election charter promising to conduct a clean campaign. But that's no guarantee that the race won't turn negative or that the losers will give their unequivocal support to the winner.

The question of what to do about Sharon supporters who are still formally members of Likud is exacerbating internal party tensions. Dani Danon, head of Betar International, has opened a hot line for party members to inform on suspected "Sharonists" so that they can be expelled.

Labor has its problems with Sharon's Kadima too. Many Labor voters who see Peretz as too dovish on the Palestinians or too socialist on the economy are flocking to Sharon. The party also has lost some of its top guns to Kadima, and could lose more.

Haim Ramon, one of the earliest propo-

nents of what's known as the "big bang" of Israeli politics — the establishment of a broad, secular, centrist party to replace the traditional large parties — was the first

to cross over. He was followed by Labor legislator Dalia Itzik.

Sharon and Peretz are vying for stars with popular appeal. Peretz's biggest success so far is Ben-Gurion University President Avishai Braverman, a respected economist, who sends a reassuring message to big business. Sharon seems likely to win over many Likud and Labor mayors, which could help his election-day logistics.

The Sharon and Peretz campaigns also will vie over the election agenda. Sharon will want to focus on peacemaking with

the Palestinians, Peretz on socioeconomic issues.

Either way, there is little doubt that Kadima and Labor will be the two biggest parties in the next Knesset; the headhunting and agenda setting will decide which of the two comes in first. But for now, Likud is not even in the frame.

Indeed, the significance of Sharon's move is that it has broken the long-standing and often debilitating deadlock in Israeli politics between left and right.

If the numbers don't change, the center-left will have about

80 seats in the next Knesset, the right and religious parties just 40. And if Sharon wins, as seems likely, he will be able to form a strong and stable government intent on promoting peace with the Palestinians. ■

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's decision to leave Likud and establish a new party and Amir Peretz's election as Labor leader both are seen as mortal blows to the ruling Likud.

Book: Campuses hostile to Israel

By JOE ESKENAZI
j., the Jewish news weekly
of Northern California

SAN FRANCISCO (JTA) — When it comes to raucous anti-Israel rallies, it's quiet on the nation's campuses.

Too quiet, San Francisco's Gary Tobin says.

The chaotic, often violent anti-Israel campus demonstrations of 2001 and 2002 caught the attention of the media and provided an easy example for pro-Israel activists to say, "See? This is what we're up against."

But as the 800-person rallies of 2002 give way to seven disgruntled socialists shouting into a bullhorn to disinterested lunchtime crowds, it would be foolish to think the problem of anti-Israel behavior on campuses has been whipped.

Far from it, Tobin writes in "The Uncivil University," a new publication of his Institute of Jewish & Community Research. Campus demonstrations are "just the tip of the iceberg."

"When there are not a lot of mass rallies on campus, it makes the level of anti-Israelism more insidious and more dangerous. The next time there's a precipitating

event, you'll see the rallies again," he said.

The real problem doesn't involve bullhorns and building occupations, he continued: It's coming in the classrooms, where holding views strongly critical of Israel is not only politically correct but, increasingly, de rigueur.

The Israeli-Palestinian debate is "framed in the politics of race, which is why it has so much currency on campuses. Jews are the white colonial oppressors and the Palestinians are portrayed as the brown victims of colonization. So to be a white, Jewish student in support of Israel means you risk being branded as a racist as a 19-year-old. And that is far more insidious on a day-to-day basis than any mass rally," Tobin said.

"The whole field of Mideast studies was hijacked by Edward Said and his Orientalism," Tobin said. "The field on the whole has become mediocre. People are hired and promoted on the basis of their ideology, not on scholarship. You will never find a field so thoroughly corrupted by ideology."

In the book, co-authored by Aryeh K. Weinberg and Jenna Ferer, Tobin provides several examples of anti-Israel machinations deep within academia. ■

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Uproar erupts over comments on French riots

By LAUREN ELKIN

PARIS (JTA) — A prominent French Jewish intellectual has come under attack for criticizing the public reaction to recent Muslim riots as too sympathetic.

Critics called Alain Finkelkraut racist for emphasizing the ethnicity and religion of the rioters in a Nov. 18 interview with Ha'aretz.

Finkelkraut, 56, was quoted as saying that "in France there are also other immigrants whose situation is difficult — Chinese, Vietnamese, Portuguese — and they're not taking part in the riots. Therefore, it is clear that this is a revolt with an ethno-religious character."

Contrary to the widespread opinion that the riots could not be "reduced to an unalloyed reaction to French racism," Finkelkraut argued that they were attacks not against France "as a former colonial power" but "against France as a European country. Against France, with its Christian or Judeo-Christian tradition."

The comments by Finkelkraut, a former leader of the left-wing 1968 student uprisings who in recent years has been characterized as a "neo-conservative" because of his support for Israel, launched a French version of the "culture wars" that have periodically raged in the United States over the past few decades.

The controversy erupted week when excerpts from the interview were translated into French and appeared in Le Monde newspaper. The truncated version of the interview caused an immediate sensation, and a lively debate arose in the French media over the "Finkelkraut Affair."

On Nov. 24, the Movement Against Racism filed charges of racism against Finkelkraut. Racism is a criminal offense in France.

Finkelkraut apologized on the Europe 1 television station last Friday, saying his comments had been taken out of context.

The Movement Against Racism then withdrew the charges, though Mouloud Aounit, the group's secretary general, said he doubted the sincerity of Finkelkraut's apology.

Finkelkraut is the son of Polish

Jewish immigrants to France, survivors of Auschwitz whose parents died there.

His theories on Holocaust denial have helped make him one of the most respected philosophers in contemporary France.

He said he was perturbed by the riots not only as a Frenchman, but as a Jew. As he told Ha'aretz, "When an Arab torches a school, it's rebellion. When a white guy does it, it's fascism. I'm 'color blind.' Evil is evil, no matter what color it is. And this evil, for the Jew that I am, is completely intolerable."

Finkelkraut also said the French educational system breeds a "post-colonial mind-set" that offers sympathy for the rioters and, he claimed, is "creating an infrastructure for the new anti-Semitism."

Laurent Joffrin, editor in chief of the newspaper Le Nouvel Observateur, said that Finkelkraut "is certainly not a racist. But in speaking like one, he reinforces the dangerous propaganda popularized" by racists, and "only exacerbates the tensions."

Some Jewish community groups were outraged by the way Finkelkraut's com-

ments were "butchered" in the French media.

Writing on the Web site of the Union of French Jewish Employers and Professionals, Menahem Macina defended Finkelkraut. Macina accused Sylvain Cypel, author of the Le Monde article, of "a high degree of libel."

Finkelkraut's legal troubles aren't

over yet. In the Ha'aretz interview, he referred to the French comedian Dieudonné as the "guardian of [the new] anti-Semitism in France."

Dieudonné, who has been prosecuted several times for anti-Semitic remarks, responded by pressing libel charges against Finkelkraut.

But Finkelkraut found one supporter in an unlikely place. In an interview published Monday with Le Nouvel Observateur, Muslim intellectual Tariq Ramadan defended Finkelkraut's sincerity and commended him for expressing views that "other French intellectuals, politicians, or journalists think as well but are simply more calculated" about expressing.

Still, Ramadan said he believed the interview revealed Finkelkraut's "strange and dangerous evolution."

Finkelkraut
'reinforces the
dangerous propaganda
popularized' by racists.

Laurent Joffrin

Editor in chief of Le Nouvel Observateur

**BEHIND
THE
HEADLINES**

Poll: Elites more likely to blame Israel

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Members of American opinion-making elites are much likelier than average Americans to see Israel as a cause of international discontent with the United States, a survey found.

Such attitudes are particularly widespread among members of the news media (78 percent), security experts (72 percent), military leaders (72 percent) and foreign-affairs specialists (69 percent), the Pew Research Center said Sunday in announcing results of its survey.

"But just 39 percent of the public sees U.S. support for Israel as a major reason that America's global image suffers

— most (52 percent) say it is only a minor reason, or not much of a reason," the report said.

One of the survey questions that assessed whether a respondent was "low knowledge" was to name what country recently ceded the Gaza Strip to the Palestinians; only 46 percent correctly answered Israel.

The perception that Israel is a reason for America's negative image does not suggest a lack of support for the Jewish state, the pollsters noted; evangelical Protestants were likelier than secular respondents to name Israel as a reason America's image suffered, but evangelical support for Israel remains strong.

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Israel sees Iran nuclear countdown

Israel's military intelligence chief said time was running out for the U.N. Security Council to punish Iran over its nuclear program.

Addressing the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee on Wednesday, Maj. Gen. Aharon Ze'evi-Farkash noted that the International Atomic Energy Agency decided last week not to refer Iran to the Security Council in order to give Europe more time to talk Iran into abandoning its uranium-enrichment efforts.

"If, by the end of March, it does not succeed in transferring the issue to the Security Council, it will be possible to say that the diplomatic effort has failed," Ze'evi-Farkash said. "Iran understands the international efforts are weakening, that there are internal problems in the United States and oil prices are rising. They feel confident."

Foreign experts speculate that Israel could resort to military action against Iran if diplomatic efforts to prevent Iran from developing a bomb fail.

Woman faces jail for terror ties

An Israeli woman who offered to protect a Palestinian terrorist faces three years in prison.

Lawyers for Tali Fahima, arrested last year after befriending the leader of the Al-Aksa Brigade in the West Bank city of Jenin, said Wednesday she had entered into a plea bargain with state prosecutors.

Under the deal, Fahima, 29, will be convicted of illegal contacts with a foreign agent and harming national security, and receive three-year jail term.

She will be spared a possible life sentence on charges of assisting the enemy during wartime.

Fahima was accused of translating, on behalf of the Al-Aksa Brigade, a classified document about a planned Israeli army operation in Jenin.

She already has spent almost two years behind bars, and is expected to go free in 11 months.

Israeli institute tops survey

An Israeli institute was named the top place to work in international academia.

The Weizmann Institute of Science topped the survey of international institutions among academics surveyed by The Scientist magazine.

More than 2,600 academics participated in the annual survey.

NORTH AMERICA

O.U.: Hands off Israel elections

The Orthodox Union called on U.S. Jews not to intervene in Israel's electoral process.

Passion for Israel "ought not be channeled into inappropriate interventions in the policy decisions of the duly elected Israeli government, Israel's elections or into lobbying the American government to pressure Israel to make concessions it would not otherwise make," said Stephen Savitsky, president of the group.

Israel is going to general elections March 28.

Savitsky singled out the Israel Policy Forum, which met with Condoleezza Rice, the U.S. secretary of state, before she intervened in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations this month.

Rice pressed Israel to allow the Palestinians to open up a border station between the Gaza Strip and Egypt, despite Israeli security concerns.

Urging American officials to press Israel "to make certain conces-

sions is not only disrespectful to Israel's government but offensive to millions of American Jews who categorically reject such an approach," Savitsky said.

The IPF advocates a greater U.S. role in the peace process, but its leaders did not report asking Rice to specifically intervene in the border issue.

WORLD

'Peace Team' plays in Spain

An Israeli-Palestinian team took on one of the world's top soccer clubs. The "Peace Team," assembled for this week's Euro-Mediterranean summit in Spain, played Barcelona Football Club in its home stadium Tuesday night, losing 2-1.

The event was deemed a success because it brought together athletes from Israel and the Palestinian areas in a rare show of cooperation.

Among the 32,000 fans were Israeli Vice Prime Minister Shimon Peres — whose eponymous center sponsored the team — Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos and actor Sean Connery.

Germany's new leader backs Israel

Germany will stand by Israel, the country's new chancellor said. In her first speech as chancellor to the German Parliament on Wednesday, Angela Merkel stressed her commitment to the Jewish state and said Iran, whose president recently called for Israel's destruction, must cooperate with International Atomic Energy Agency inspections.

In the first official contact between the new chancellor and a representative of the Israeli government, Merkel told Israeli Cabinet minister Ehud Olmert that she'll visit Israel in the near future.

Benedict deplores Holocaust

Pope Benedict XVI deplored the Holocaust. Addressing pilgrims Wednesday in the Vatican, Benedict recalled biblical passages about the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile of the Jews. "It was almost a symbolic foretelling of the extermination camps that the Jewish people were subjected to as part of an infamous project of death, which remains an indelible shame on the history of humanity," he said.

Warnings on Russian elections

Hate-filled propaganda is being disseminated by political parties running in municipal elections, a Russian Jewish group warned.

The Federation of Jewish Communities issued the statement three days before Sunday elections in Moscow.

The federation called on Muscovites not to support candidates who subscribe to anti-Semitic and xenophobic ideas.

Earlier this month, the federation's leader, Berel Lazar, one of Russia's two chief rabbis, met with leaders of two parties known for their xenophobia and anti-Semitism, raising concerns in Moscow and irritating Israel.

The statement is seen by some observers as the federation's attempt to make up for the bad impression resulting from the meetings with the ultranationalist politicians.

Rabbis thank Italian leader

A delegation of senior European rabbis thanked Italy's prime minister for his support for Israel.

The rabbis also thanked Silvio Berlusconi for opposing anti-Semitism and Islamic fundamentalism and asked for his support in sponsoring legislation to protect Jewish cemeteries across the continent.

The meeting took place Tuesday at the end of a three-day meeting of the standing committee of the Conference of European Rabbis.