

IN THE NEWS

Poll: U.S. Jews disapprove of Iraq war

Most American Jews disapprove of the war in Iraq and the way the United States is handling the campaign against terrorism, according to a new study.

The American Jewish Committee's annual Survey of American Jewish Opinion, released Wednesday, found that 70 percent of U.S. Jews disapprove of the Iraq war, with 28 percent backing it.

Sixty percent of respondents said they did not support America's handling of the war on terror, while 36 percent approved. [Story, Pg. 3]

House passes Saudi education resolution

The U.S. House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed a nonbinding resolution urging educational reform in Saudi Arabia.

The resolution, sponsored by Rep. Jim Davis (D-Fla.), notes that "some textbooks in Saudi Arabian schools foster intolerance, ignorance, and anti-Semitic, anti-American, and anti-Western views" and urges the Bush administration to make Saudi education reform an element of bilateral relations.

JTA recently revealed in a special investigation that Saudi Arabia is also funding teaching materials for American public schools that contain anti-Israel and anti-Western views.

The resolution passed on Monday by a vote of 351-1.

The sole dissenter was Rep. Ron Paul (R-Texas.) It now goes to the Senate.

Israel kills Hamas terrorist

Israeli troops killed a Palestinian terrorist in the West Bank.

The Hamas man, who was wanted for the recent slaying of an Israeli soldier, was shot dead Wednesday during a clash in Jenin.

An Israeli border policeman was lightly wounded and a dog used by the patrol killed.



WORLD REPORT

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As Iraq conflict winds on, community finally feels free to join public debate

By MATTHEW E. BERGER

WASHINGTON (JTA) — After staying largely in the shadows for several years, the organized American Jewish community has jumped full throttle into the debate over the Iraq war.

The debate reached a crescendo last week when the Republican Jewish Coalition took a full-page ad in The New York Times, expressing support for the war and chastising the Union for Reform Judaism for a resolution last month denouncing the war and seeking a troop withdrawal.

The advertisement led to an open letter from Rabbi David Saperstein, a Reform movement leader, and a response from Matt Brooks, the RJC's executive director. Each accused the other of pretending to represent American Jewish opinion on the war.

The debate over the war on the pages of one of the nation's most-prestigious newspapers came as a surprise from a community that has gone out of its way not to talk about the conflict publicly. Many American Jewish groups and Jewish leaders believed that coming out in support of the war would lead to accusations that it was being fought for Israel, and would highlight the influence of Jewish defense policy staffers, dubbed "neoconservatives."

Comments from congressional representatives suggesting the war was being fought on Israel's behalf, and memories of similar rhetoric during the 1991 Persian Gulf War, prompted many major Jewish groups not to publicly endorse the war or highlight the supposed threat Saddam Hussein posed to Israel.

But now that public support for the war has dropped, Jews appear to feel more comfortable

openly discussing the conflict, its goals — and whether it's worth the cost in dollars and lives.

"The Iraq war looms so large in American life, for the Jewish community to take a pass at discussing the war would really be unrealistic," said David Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee.

Brooks said he had no hesitation putting Jewish support for the war in the pages of the Times.

"One of the things we've been careful about and which is a general sensitivity is we've tried to minimize this war in terms of the impact it will have on Israel," he said. "What we're doing is saying, 'Let's have a debate on the issues.'"

Ironically, while many assume that American Jews would support the war because of its presumed benefits for Israel, the Jewish community seems to outpace other Americans in opposing the war. The American Jewish Committee's latest poll shows 70 percent of American Jews disapprove of the war in Iraq, a 4 percent increase from a year ago and up from 54 percent in 2003.

In contrast, a recent CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll found that 52 percent of Americans believe sending troops to Iraq was a mistake.

In addition, some who backed the war originally have come to question whether it really had any benefit for Israel.

While some Jews have been outspoken opponents of the war — even joining Cindy Sheehan, the mother of a soldier killed in Iraq, who has been protesting President Bush at his Crawford, Texas, ranch — few have done so under Jewish auspices.

In fact, days ahead of publishing its own poll showing Jewish opposition to the war, the

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BEHIND THE HEADLINES

U.S. Jewish groups have jumped full throttle into the debate over the Iraq war

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American Jewish Committee wrote Bush a letter congratulating him on the Iraqi elections last week.

"This success could not have been achieved without two things," said the letter, mailed Monday. "The vision, statesmanship and persistence of your administration in its efforts to promote democracy and stability in Iraq; and the courage and perseverance of the United States armed forces and our allies."

Concerns that Jews would be blamed for the war have dissipated greatly since the campaign began. At the time, much was made of the Jewish heritage of war architects like Paul Wolfowitz, then the deputy secretary of defense, and Richard Perle, then chair of the Defense Policy Board. Now, the "neoconservatives" receive less blame than the Bush administration directly.

Indeed, the purported benefits to Israel largely have been overshadowed. Much of the talk in the mainstream press now revolves around faulty intelligence on Saddam's weapons of mass destruction, and the continuing violence of the insurgency.

That has freed the Jewish community to speak more openly about the war, leaders said.

"I think what has changed in a lot of people's minds is the length of time we're there," said Steve Gutow, president of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs. "I hear all kinds of discussions now, and I don't think it's a 'verboden' topic."

The Reform movement openly sought

increased debate on the issue through its resolution. Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism, said the time felt right to turn up the debate. The Iraq resolution was authored by individual congregations, not the Washington office, he said.

"This is a weighing process we're doing here," he said. "More and more, it's tipping to the scale of there being a problem with us in Iraq."

Proponents of the war have stressed its goals of creating a peaceful and democratic Iraq, with the implicit aim of appealing to liberal groups that traditionally have sought U.S. humanitarian intervention around the world, and are seeking it now in the Darfur refugee crisis. White House officials made that correlation directly in responding to the URJ's resolution.

Last week, Bush also appealed to supporters of Israel.

"If you're a supporter of Israel, I would

strongly urge you to help other countries become democracies," he said Dec. 12 in a speech to the World Affairs Council of Philadelphia. "Israel's long-term survival depends upon the spread of democracy in the Middle East."

That comment worried some in the community, raising fears anew that the war would be blamed on Jews or Israel.

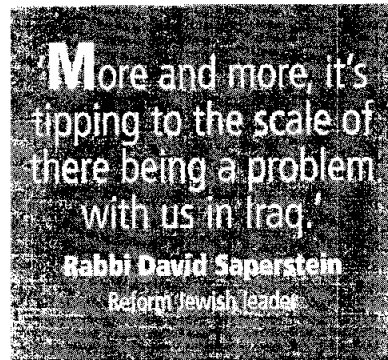
In any case, Saperstein said, there's a difference in just war theo-

ry between a "just cause and just means."

"I think one of the reasons the Jewish community was sympathetic was because of those grounds," he said. "But it was very different from what the Bush administration was arguing at the time."

Those speaking out now say the current debate is healthy, and few have urged Jews to lower the volume.

"It's healthy because dissecting and talking through all of the issues and all of the implication of what's at stake is critically important," Brooks said.



Conservatives duck Alito fight

By SUE FISHKOFF

OAKLAND, Calif. (JTA) — Burned by the fallout from its perceived endorsement of John Roberts' Supreme Court nomination this summer, the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism is playing it safer on Judge Samuel Alito.

At its Boston biennial this month, the Conservative group shot down a last-minute attempt to force it to take a stand on Alito's candidacy. His confirmation hearings are scheduled for January.

Several hundred convention delegates overwhelmingly passed a resolution reaffirming a woman's right to a halachically-permitted abortion, but voted down an amendment dealing with judicial nominees.

The Resolution on Reproductive Choice calls on the USCJ to "register its opinion on court cases and administrative agency actions (and any government action)" that might impact a woman's access to an abortion that she and her rabbi have deemed is in accordance with Jewish law.

An amendment that would have forced

the USCJ to take a stand on judicial nominations as well was defeated by a show of hands.

Nancy Kaplan of West Bloomfield, Mich., who proposed the controversial amendment, says its defeat will allow Conservative leaders to avoid taking a stand on Alito.

"Now they can say, 'We can't come out against Alito because our lay people said we can't say anything,'" she said.

Bill Bresnick of Potomac, Md., co-chair of the USCJ committee on public policy and social action, says the amendment would have tied his committee's hands.

The language "would have required us to take a position on judicial nominations," Bresnick said, adding that his committee "doesn't feel it appropriate" to endorse or oppose particular individuals on the basis of how it imagines they might later rule.

Bresnick said he doesn't expect the Conservative movement to make a declaration on Alito's candidacy. The Union for Reform Judaism, by contrast, passed a resolution opposing Alito at its November biennial.

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U.S. Jews oppose Iraq war, poll finds

By CHANAN TIGAY

NEW YORK (JTA) — Most American Jews disapprove of the war in Iraq and the way the United States is handling the campaign against terrorism, according to a new study.

The American Jewish Committee's annual Survey of American Jewish Opinion, released Wednesday, found that 70 percent of U.S. Jews disapprove of the Iraq war, with 28 percent backing it. Sixty percent of respondents said they did not support America's handling of the war on terror, while 36 percent approve.

That's just a slight change in U.S. Jewish views. In last year's AJCommittee study, 30 percent of respondents approved of the Iraq war and 66 percent disapproved. In that survey, 42 percent approved of the handling of the war on terror and 52 percent disapproved.

"Even on the eve of the war, fewer American Jews than other Americans were supportive of the prospect of going to war with Iraq," said David Harris, the AJCommittee's executive director. "As American public support has declined since 2003, Jewish support has been declining in step, but because it began at a lower level, it continues to remain at a lower level of support than other Americans."

This year's survey — in which 1,000 Jews were interviewed by telephone between Nov. 14-27 — asked questions in six categories: the war on terror and Iraq; Israel; world affairs; national affairs; Jewish identity; and anti-Semitism.

The polling was done before the first of a series of speeches President Bush has delivered in support of his Iraq effort. It also was carried out prior to the mid-December elections in Iraq.

The poll found that despite Israel's pull-out from the Gaza Strip this summer, 59 percent of respondents do not believe the chances for peace between Israel and the Arabs have changed since a year ago.

Morton Klein, president of the Zionist Organization of America, said the results make sense.

"I'm not surprised that people don't think anything has improved," he said. After the Gaza withdrawal "all they've seen is more missiles shot into Israel, more weapons entering Gaza, more terrorists entering Gaza, a dozen U.N. resolutions

condemning Israel by wide margins and, to top it off, Palestinian leaders dismissing this major concession by Israel as meaningless and Iran calling for Israel's destruction.

"How can anyone be anything but pessimistic?" he asked.

Indeed, 78 percent of American Jews believe the Arabs' goal is not securing the return of territories lost in war, but rather the destruction of Israel. Yet 56 percent of respondents said they favor the establishment of a Palestinian state, while 38 percent oppose it.

"American Jews are schizophrenic," Harris said. "Our polls year after year after year show the very same thing: On the one hand, on the peace process options, a

majority of American Jews support — let's call it the liberal option. At the very same time, a clear majority of American Jews in the next breath say the real goal of the Arabs is to destroy Israel."

In other words, most American Jews believe Israel should try for peace with the Palestinians, but don't necessarily believe the Palestinians are serious.

Most of those surveyed — 60 percent — said Israel should not compromise on its sole control of Jerusalem, with 36 percent saying Israel should compromise on its capital.

As Israel gears up for national elections in March, questions about how much West Bank territory Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is willing to cede to the Palestinians have become a major campaign issue. Sharon is expected to win re-election easily.

The AJCommittee survey asked whether Israel should be willing to dismantle all, some or none of its West Bank settlements. Fifteen percent said Israel should dismantle all settlements, 46 percent said some, 36 percent said none and 3 percent were unsure.

After a year in which Israel made notable strides at the United Nations — including the election of its U.N. ambassador as a General Assembly vice president and the establishment of a Holocaust remembrance day at the world body — 32 percent of respondents held somewhat favorable views of the United Nations. Seven percent espoused very favorable views, 21

percent were neutral, 23 percent were somewhat unfavorable and 18 percent were very unfavorable. Last year's survey did not ask respondents' views of the United Nations.

Asked to rate their feelings toward several countries, respondents said they held the warmest feelings for the United States, followed by Japan, Mexico, India and South Africa. Rounding out the list were the Vatican, Turkey, Germany and China. France finished last.

Respondents also were asked about religious affiliation. Thirty-two percent said they were Conservative, 29 percent said they were Reform, 26 percent identified as "just Jewish," 10 percent said they were Orthodox, 2 percent were Reconstructionist and 1 percent said they weren't sure.

According to the latest National Jewish Population Survey, 33 percent of 4.3 million affiliated U.S. Jews identified as Conservative. That represented a drop of 10 percentage points over the previous decade, a time when the other major streams saw their ranks swell.

The NJPS showed the Reform movement supplanting the Conservatives as the largest denomination in America, but with a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points, the stronger showing of the Conservative movement in the AJCommittee survey was not necessarily statistically significant, Harris said.

Fifty-seven percent of respondents belonged to a synagogue; 43 percent did not.

As for political affiliation, 54 percent of those surveyed said they were Democrats, 16 percent Republicans, 29 percent independents, and 1 percent were not sure. Those numbers have not changed since last year's survey.

Two Supreme Court seats opened up over the past year with the death of Chief Justice William Rehnquist and the retirement of Justice Sandra Day O'Connor.

The survey asked respondents if support for overturning the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision legalizing abortion should disqualify a candidate from serving on the court. Fifty percent said it should; 49 percent said it should not.

The AJCommittee has been conducting its annual Jewish opinion survey since 1997.

Sixty percent of respondents said they did not support America's handling of the war on terror

BEHIND
THE
HEADLINES

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Israel bars Jerusalem Arabs from vote

Israel banned Jerusalem Arabs from taking part in upcoming Palestinian Authority elections.

Officials announced the decision Wednesday, calling it a response to Hamas' participation in the Jan. 25 vote, despite Israeli and U.S. calls on the Palestinian Authority to bar the Islamic terrorist group.

The Palestinian Authority responded by saying the decision could prompt it to defer the parliamentary election indefinitely.

Political analysts suggest that the Palestinian Authority, whose dominant faction, Fatah, is under pressure to fend off a legislative sweep by Hamas, would welcome the excuse not to hold the election on schedule.

The United States called on Israel and the Palestinians to come to an agreement on Palestinian voting in Jerusalem.

In the last such elections, in 1996, Israel limited voting to postal votes mailed from five post offices.

The Palestinian Authority says that under that formula, time constraints would limit voting to no more than 5,000 ballots out of tens of thousands of eligible voters.

Half of Israelis see talks with Hamas

One in two Israelis would negotiate with Hamas if it achieved peace with the Palestinians, a survey found.

According to the poll released Wednesday, 50 percent of Israelis said they believe talks should be held with the Islamic terrorist group as part of a peace accord based on mutual compromise.

Forty-seven percent were opposed to such negotiations with Hamas, which is sworn to destroying the Jewish state with the rest undecided.

Hamas has hinted that though it will never recognize Israel's right to exist, it could call off attacks if mainstream Palestinian peacemaking demands are met.

The poll, conducted jointly by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, suggested Israelis and Palestinians may remain split on core issues.

WORLD

Iran-E.U. talks to resume in January

Talks between the European Union and Iran on Iran's nuclear program were suspended until next month.

Javad Vaeeadi, the head of the Iranian delegation, said Wednesday that the talks between Iran and the "E.U. 3" — Germany, Britain and France — would reconvene in January in Vienna, where they broke up Wednesday.

Citing a spate of anti-Semitic statements by the Iranian president, the European Union has in recent weeks moved closer to the Israeli and American position that Iran should be sanctioned if it does not suspend its nuclear activity.

Iran says its nuclear programs are peaceful, but Israel believes it is close to developing the capacity to create a bomb.

U.S. expert: Jews in Russia still face hostility

Minority religions still face hostility on the local level in Russia, a U.S. government expert said.

Catherine Cosman, an analyst on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, a federal body, spoke last week at a Radio Free Europe conference.

"The Russian Orthodox Church often receives preferential treatment from the Russian government, while other religions face harsh restrictions," Radio Free Europe reported Cosman as saying.

She noted that the adherents of such government-designated "traditional" religions as Judaism and Islam still face hostility at the local level, which includes violence and the arrest of clergy and members.

According to Cosman, mosques, synagogues and other places of worship are often vandalized, but the perpetrators of these crimes are rarely prosecuted.

Five German war criminals lose pensions

Germany canceled the pensions of five people for World War II-era crimes.

The news was reported by Germany's Ministry of Social Welfare to the Simon Wiesenthal Center office, said Efraim Zuroff, the director of the center's Israel office.

Three additional cancellations are imminent, Zuroff said.

The move was consistent with a law passed by the German Parliament in January 1998.

So far, the pensions of 110 former Nazi war criminals have been canceled, and another 157 cases are under consideration.

Hundreds of other cases are about to be investigated, according to the center.

The center's research team, headed by Stefan Klemp, has provided tens of thousands of names to the German government of persons allegedly involved in genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.

Controversial French comic loses lawsuit

A French comedian who tried to suppress passages in a new book concerning his anti-Semitic remarks lost his case on appeal.

Dieudonne, who has been repeatedly sued for his anti-Semitic comments, had won a case against the publishing house Editions Plon.

The house recently published "The Truth About Dieudonne," which included several passages discussing the Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism in Dieudonne's comedy routines.

Plon appealed — and on Dec. 15 was granted the right to reprint the book with the previously suppressed passages.

'Soviet Jewish homeland' gets public menorah

A Chanukah menorah will be installed in a public square in the former "Soviet Jewish homeland."

The more than 12-foot-high menorah will be erected this week in one of Birobidzhan's main squares in front of the local House of Culture, the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia reported.

Last year, Birobidzhan, once designated by Josef Stalin as the Soviet Jewish homeland, received its first permanent synagogue in its history.

Located in the Russian Far East, Birobidzhan is home to an estimated 3,000 to 6,000 Jews.

The Chabad-led federation puts public Chanukah menorahs in communities across the former Soviet Union.

NORTH AMERICA

Reform movement slams budget

The budget passed by the U.S. Congress is blind to those in need, the Reform movement said.

The Budget Reconciliation Act, with \$40 billion in cuts, sought to amend earlier budgets in the wake of the hurricane season and the continued U.S. presence in Iraq.

It passed in the Senate on Wednesday when Vice President Dick Cheney cast a tie-breaking vote.

In a statement, the Reform movement's Religious Action Center said most of the cuts affected the needy.