

IN THE NEWS

Nations back reporting Iran

The five nations with veto power on the U.N. Security Council agreed to report Iran to the council.

In an all-night meeting Monday in London, France, Britain and the United States convinced Russia and China to support reporting the Islamic republic to the Security Council by March if there is no breakthrough in its cooperation with nuclear inspectors.

The unanimity of the five veto powers means the recommendation is assured passage when the U.N. nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency, meets Thursday in Vienna.

No criminal wrongs in WJC investigation

New York state's attorney general turned up no criminal wrongdoing in his investigation into allegations of financial improprieties at the World Jewish Congress.

But Eliot Spitzer's report also uncovered a series of "inappropriate disbursements" to top WJC employees. It also said that the organization had lacked "appropriate financial controls to safeguard charitable assets and failed to keep adequate records regarding their fund-raising activities," the Attorney General's Office said on its Web site.

When Spitzer's office began its investigation in 2004, it recommended that the WJC form an audit committee, hire a chief financial officer and computerize its records. The WJC has agreed to do additional reporting to the Attorney General's Office to ensure that they are complying with terms of the agreement, Spitzer spokesman Darren Dopf said.

"For 14 months, we worked tirelessly with the attorney general's office, providing unfettered access to our entire worldwide organization," WJC President Edgar Bronfman said in a statement after the report was released. "Our transparency and cooperation revealed that we had nothing to hide."



WORLD REPORT

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Opposition to lobbying reforms pitting Jews against lawmakers

By MATTHEW E. BERGER

WASHINGTON (JTA) — As plans for lobbying reform trickle down from both political parties in the U.S. Congress, a unified American Jewish establishment is finding itself in an increasingly precarious position.

Jewish groups are already quietly fighting some of the reform proposals, especially the proposed ban on foreign travel paid for by lobbyists, which could prevent groups from sending lawmakers to Israel.

But picking this fight could pit Jewish groups against many of the congressional leaders they often try to court.

The lobbying reform issue may become one of the most important issues of the year for Jewish lobbyists, say community activists.

"The entire Jewish community is mobilized," said William Daroff, vice president for public policy of the United Jewish Communities, the umbrella of the North American federation movement. "There is unanimity of opinion on the value of these trips from a public policy position."

Despite their efforts at quiet diplomacy, the Jewish voice is clearly being heard.

Around Capitol Hill, the debate over foreign travel for lawmakers is being called the "AIPAC question," sources said, noting the reference to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the pro-Israel lobby.

With congressional Republicans and Democrats each vying to be seen as the strongest on reform, advocates of more moderate lobbying reforms are not being well received in the halls of Congress.

Jewish officials say lawmakers are telling them that the proposals they are seeing now will change, and the end result will likely be legislation that would not restrict all travel.

"Everybody says, 'You probably won't be happy with where the debate starts, but we pledge you'll be happy with where the debate ends,'" said one Jewish official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue. "Neither side wants to be seen as soft on ethics and neither wants to be out-flanked by the other."

Some Democrats want to capitalize on the current attention to the issue, thinking that presenting a tough bill will help them in the midterm elections in November.

Republicans, meanwhile, are hoping quick reforms will neutralize the bad press they have received in the wake of the Jack Abramoff scandal.

Despite their intense opposition, Jewish groups so far are conducting a quiet campaign, relying on prominent lay leaders and professionals to speak privately to lawmakers.

They are trying to make the case that they need to be able to take members of Congress to Israel to help foster strong support for the Jewish state. They say it is also important to allow lawmakers to travel to other important international locales, like Sudan, and to communities around the United States, to meet with Jewish audiences and see how federal funds are spent.

Jewish organizational leaders have held a series of conference calls in the past few weeks, discussing tactics for opposing the travel ban.

They are focusing on what they're calling

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BEHIND
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■ Religious groups are seeking to be exempted from new lobbying regulations

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"smart reform," advocating for changes to lobbying rules, but against a ban on paying for congressional travel. Specifically, they are seeking compromises that would allow non-profit groups to continue paying for educational travel.

"We're not talking about a public campaign," said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, which organized a call last week. "We're all sensitive to the implications and we're in favor of reform."

A number of Jewish groups, including AIPAC, joined a wide range of non-governmental organizations in a letter this week, authored by the Institute on Religion and Public Policy, opposing the travel ban.

"If NGOs are barred from funding educational travel by members and staff, such travel will be feasible only with taxpayer funds or at personal expense," said the letter, sent to House Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.).

"If members must travel only at their own expense, the toll of the traveling cost will inevitably lead to minimal travel."

Meanwhile, religious groups are seeking to be exempted from any new lobbying regulations, just as they are exempted

from current lobbying restrictions. The Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995, which set the rules lawmakers currently operate

under, allows "churches" to participate in the political process without registering as official lobbies.

A coalition of religious organizations, led by Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism, is pressuring lawmakers to continue

that practice, sources said.

Saperstein declined to comment.

Crafting a strategy of opposition to the lobbying reforms has been complicated by the numerous plans in the works. Some propose a total ban on privately funded lawmaker travel, others would ban only travel paid for by lobbyists or that includes lobbyists on the trip and still others would ban even separate educational travel programs, like the one AIPAC has established.

AIPAC currently brings registered lobbyists on its trips, a spokesman said. Last year, separate trips were led by Reps. Tom DeLay (R-Texas), then the House majority leader, and Steny Hoyer (D-Md.), the minority whip.

Democratic aides tried to assure Jewish activists that some travel would be allowed, but have felt pressure in recent weeks to keep pace with the Republican proposal.

"They are sympathetic to our concerns, but there is a sense they have to do something about this, and drawing those kinds of lines is not easy to do," said Richard Foltin, legislative director of the American Jewish Committee.

He noted that Abramoff used non-profit groups for some of his trips, which has complicated the line between legitimate and illegitimate sponsors of travel.

Sen. Norm Coleman (R-Minn.), one of two Republican Jews in the Senate, asked about AIPAC travel in a hearing on lobbying reform before the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee on Jan. 25.

"AIPAC does a service in having members go to Israel, when you get to meet with leaders," Coleman said. "That would be bad — that would be prohibited if we

take the approach that's been articulated here. So I don't think that helps us be better senators."

Observers believe there is likely to be a middle ground, because congressmen want to be able to travel, especially on so-called fact-finding trips.

"If you still allow privately funded travel, but you don't allow the payment of such travel by registered lobbyists, there will be a way for groups to take members abroad for educational purposes," said one congressional official, who asked not to be identified.

"My sense is that groups like AIPAC can figure out a way to put a significant firewall around their educational programs."

Jewish Oscar nods

By TOM TUGEND

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — Two films that have encountered fierce controversy in the Jewish community and Israel received Oscar nominations this week.

"Munich," Steven Spielberg's take on the Israeli hunt for the killers of its athletes at the 1972 Olympics, got five nods.

These include best picture, best director, adapted screenplay by Tony Kushner and Eric Roth, film editing and original musical score.

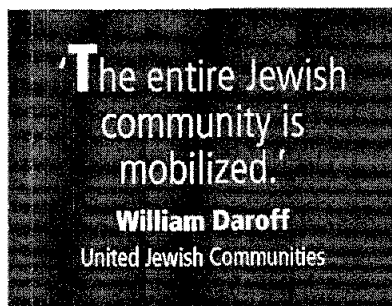
Picked among the top five foreign language film entries is the Palestinian film "Paradise Now" by director-writer Hany Abu-Assad, which follows two suicide bombers from Nablus on a mission to blow up a Tel Aviv bus.

Nominated in the same category is Germany's "Sophie Scholl: The Final Days," about an anti-Nazi resistance cell in Munich during World War II.

Joaquin Phoenix received the nod in the best actor category for his portrayal of country music legend Johnny Cash in "Walk the Line." Jake Gyllenhaal was nominated for best supporting actor in the gay cowboy saga "Brokeback Mountain."

Rachel Weisz is in contention for best actress in a supporting role for her performance in "The Constant Gardener."

Woody Allen was named for "Match Point" in the original screenplay category, as was Noah Baumbach for "The Squid and the Whale." The Oscars will be handed out March 5.



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Who's who in Hamas? A look at the leaders

By GIL SEDAN

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Ever since the targeted killing of Hamas leader Sheik Ahmed Yassin in March 2004, the big boss of Hamas is Khaled Meshaal, head of the Hamas political bureau, in exile in Damascus.

• Meshaal, 50, was born in the West Bank village of Silwad near Ramallah. Following the Six Day War in 1967 he emigrated to Kuwait, where he studied and taught physics at the University of Kuwait.

He moved to Jordan in 1990, where he served as head of Hamas in that country. In 1996 he was appointed head of Hamas' political wing.

Meshaal was the target of an abortive assassination attempt that was one of the Mossad's biggest publicized fiascos. On Sept. 25, 1997, Mossad agents in Jordan accosted Meshaal on the street and managed to inject him with a toxic substance, but Jordanian authorities discovered the assassination attempt in time, arrested the agents, pressured Israel into turning over the antidote and saved Meshaal's life.

But there was more: As a quid pro quo, Jordan forced Israel to release Yassin, Hamas' founder and spiritual leader, in exchange for the Mossad agents involved in the attempt on Meshaal.

Two years later, in November 1999, Meshaal was deported from Jordan to Syria.

■ Although Meshaal was instrumental a year ago in reaching Hamas' "tahdia," or calming-down agreement, with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, he is known for his tough, uncompromising stand toward Israel.

Local Hamas leaders tried to assume a relatively pragmatic guise during the recent election campaign, but Meshaal declared last month in Damascus that "we will not enter a new truce, and our people are preparing for a new round of conflict."

He made similar statements after Hamas' victory in the Palestinians' Jan. 25 parliamentary elections, but did come up with a proposal that some saw as a reasonable solution for the present stalemate in the Palestinian balance of power.

Meshaal suggested forming a Palestinian army that would unify all militias, theoretically ending the present state of anarchy and defusing demands on Hamas

to disarm and renounce violence. He also said Hamas would abide by the P.A.'s current agreements with Israel "as long as it is in the interest of our people."

• The most senior Hamas personality inside the territories is Dr. Ismail Haniyeh, the most likely candidate to head the first P.A. government under Hamas. Haniyeh

is considered more pragmatic than Meshaal; like Meshaal, he too escaped

an Israeli attempt on his life.

Along with Dr. Mahmoud al-Zahar, Haniyeh led Hamas in the territories after Yassin's death. He is among those who pushed Hamas to participate in the elections, and headed the party in both municipal and parliamentary elections.

Israel placed Haniyeh on the targeted-killing list following a suicide bombing on a Jerusalem bus in August 2003.

Haniyeh has spoken again and again in favor of violence against Israel. Last year, he called Hamas' success in municipal elections proof that a majority of Palestinians endorse jihad, or holy war, against Israel.

Commentators found marginally positive elements in a recent hardline interview Haniyeh gave to Israeli television, in which he talked about "resistance according to the interests of our people" — which some took to mean that violence could be suspended, under certain circumstances.

■ Haniyeh, 44, was born in the Shati refugee camp in Gaza. He began studying Arabic literature at the Islamic University in Gaza in 1987, shortly before the outbreak of the first intifada. He served three years in jail shortly after Hamas' founding the next year.

He was among 400 Hamas activists deported to Lebanon in 1992, who eventually were allowed to return. P.A. security forces arrested Haniyeh in December 2001, but released him a short time later.

Haniyeh returned to Gaza and was appointed dean of the Islamic University. In 1997, after Yassin was released from jail, Haniyeh was appointed chief of his office, a position he kept until Yassin's death in 2004.

• Second in rank in the territories is Dr. Mahmoud al-Zahar, Yassin's personal physician and close friend. He helped Yassin found Hamas shortly after the outbreak of the first intifada in 1987.

Al-Zahar, 61, was born in Gaza to a Palestinian father and an Egyptian mother. He studied medicine at Cairo's Ain Shams University, specializing in general surgery. It was in Cairo that he was influenced by Egypt's oldest and largest Islamist organization, the Muslim Brotherhood, whose ideology nourished Hamas.

■ Al-Zahar also was among the 400 Islamic activists deported by Israel to Lebanon in 1992. Back in Gaza, al-Zahar soon clashed with Palestinian authorities. He was arrested several times by P.A. security forces and at one stage spent seven months in a Palestinian jail.

On Sept. 10, 2003, only three days after a failed attempt to kill Yassin, Israel bombed al-Zahar's home in Gaza, destroying it completely. Al-Zahar survived the attack, but his 25-year-old son, Khaled, and a bodyguard were killed.

Following the killing of Abdel Aziz Rantissi in spring 2004, al-Zahar emerged as his successor.

Al-Zahar was influential in reaching the informal truce with Israel and in arranging Hamas' participation in the recent parliamentary elections.

• Dr. Mousa Abdel Marzuk, 55, is second-in-command to Meshaal in Damascus. He headed Hamas' political bureau from 1992-96, but was deported from Jordan in 1995. He was arrested in the United States in 1997 but was released after King Hussein of Jordan permitted his return, only to deport him two years later to Damascus.

• Mohammed Deif, 40, is one of the commanders of the Izz a-Din al-Kassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas, and top on Israel's most wanted list. Deif is believed to have been behind many of the suicide bombing attacks of 1996 that soured Israelis on the peace process and paved the way for the ouster of the Labor government and the election of the Likud Party's Benjamin Netanyahu.

Israel attempted to kill Deif several times, to no avail.

Many Hamas political leaders have been targeted in the past by Israel.

BACK-
GROUNDER

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Agency: Iran plotting bomb

A document in Iran's possession is aimed at manufacturing a bomb, the U.N. nuclear watchdog said.

News agencies said a report prepared by the International Atomic Energy Agency ahead of a board meeting Thursday to consider Iran's nuclear program leaves little doubt about the Islamic republic's nuclear intentions, which it has insisted are peaceful.

The 15-page document is "related to the fabrication of nuclear weapon components," The Associated Press quoted the agency's report as saying.

Reuters said the confidential report also confirmed that Iran had begun preparing nuclear enrichment, which can make fuel for bombs.

At the meeting Thursday, the agency is likely to report Iran, which seeks Israel's destruction, to the U.N. Security Council for possible sanctions.

Jihad terrorists killed

Israeli forces killed two Palestinian terrorists in the West Bank.

The two fugitives, both members of Islamic Jihad, died in a shootout in Arrabe village outside Jenin on Tuesday.

An Israeli soldier was wounded in the clash.

Islamic Jihad did not abide by a truce declared last year by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, and has called on other terrorist groups to resume full-scale attacks on Israel.

Kadima unveils list

Ariel Sharon is absent from the Kadima Party's candidate list for March 28 elections.

Despite proposals to place the comatose prime minister on the roster as a symbolic show of faith that he will recover from his Jan. 4 stroke, Sharon was not among the 50 candidates named Tuesday by Kadima.

Israeli media reported that Kadima's election jingle and posters will refer to Sharon. Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert tops the candidate list, followed by Shimon Peres and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni.

Avi Dichter, a former Shin Bet chief, is fifth, three places ahead of Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz, suggesting that Mofaz's key portfolio could pass hands if Kadima wins the elections.

Settlers storm West Bank base

Scores of settlers stormed an Israeli army base in the West Bank.

No one was hurt in Tuesday's confrontation at the Ofra settlement's garrison, which appeared aimed at derailing the planned evacuation of Amona, an illegal outpost nearby.

Military sources said as many as 200 settlers who forced their way into the base before being peacefully dispersed may have tried to sabotage a bulldozer kept there.

Thousands of settlers are expected to flock to Amona ahead of Wednesday's evacuation, which will test acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's authority. Israel is obligated to dismantle all illegal West Bank outposts under the U.S.-led "road map" peace plan.

NORTH AMERICA

Jewish groups mixed on Alito confirmation

Jewish groups expressed mixed reactions to the confirmation of Samuel Alito to the U.S. Supreme Court.

"Judge Alito's victory opens the door to the erosion of essential rights including civil rights, civil liberties, the separation of religion and state, and reproductive freedom," said Phyllis Snyder, president

of the National Council of Jewish Women.

The organization, along with the Union for Reform Judaism, opposed Alito's nomination. Alito received the endorsement of Agudath Israel of America, and other Orthodox leaders are expecting to attend a ceremony for him at the White House on Wednesday.

"As we noted during the confirmation hearings, Judge Alito is a man of keen intellect, formidable scholarship and fair-minded temperament," said Rabbi Avi Shafran, director of public affairs for the Agudah. "We are confident that his decisions as a Supreme Court justice will be steeped in law and precedent, and leavened with insight and wisdom."

Alito was confirmed 58-42 on Tuesday, and sworn in as the nation's 110th justice on the high court.

Congress presses Hamas

Four U.S. congressional initiatives would ban assistance to a Palestinian Authority governed by Hamas.

Three, in the House of Representatives, are bills that aim to become law. One, cosponsored by Reps. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.) and Tom Lantos (D-Calif.), also seeks to cut some funding to the United Nations until it abolishes a number of pro-Palestinian subsidiaries.

Rep. Vito Fossella (R-N.Y.) has proposed a similar bill, and Rep. Anthony Weiner (D-N.Y.) is circulating a bill that would ban outright any assistance to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In the Senate, Sen. John Thune (R-S.D.) introduced a non-binding resolution that urges Bush to cut funding to the Palestinian Authority under Hamas governance.

The Bush administration is lobbying to keep the bills off the floor, preferring to lead initiatives against Hamas.

Fed chief approved

The U.S. Senate approved Ben Shalom Bernanke as the next chairman of the Federal Reserve.

Bernanke, brought up in an observant Jewish household in Dillon, S.C., succeeds Alan Greenspan, who served more than 18 years.

Bernanke was approved in a voice vote Tuesday with strong bipartisan support.

Only Sen. Jim Bunning (R-Ky.) voiced opposition, saying Bernanke was too similar to Greenspan.

Jews remember King

Jewish leaders mourned the death of Coretta Scott King, who died Tuesday at age 78.

King, the widow of Martin Luther King Jr., "continued her husband's legacy of strengthening black-Jewish relations," said Rabbi Marc Schneier, president of the Foundation for Ethnic Understanding.

She "fought for the civil rights of Jews, and she supported issues and concerns of the Jewish community," particularly the State of Israel.

Schneier said Leah Rabin, widow of the late Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, told him that the most comforting letter she got after her husband's assassination was from King.

WORLD

Vienna to get Wiesenthal center

The University of Vienna will build a Holocaust center in honor of Simon Wiesenthal.

The center to honor the late Nazi hunter will include thousands of documents, including files from the country's wartime resistance and the country's Jewish community.

The center is expected to cost \$17.1 million and be completed by 2010.