

**IN THE NEWS**
**Iran to fund  
Palestinian Authority?**

Iran offered to fund the Palestinian Authority.

"The United States proved that it would not support democracy after it cut its aid to the Palestinian government after Hamas won the elections.

We will certainly help the Palestinians," Ali Larijani, secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, was quoted as saying Wednesday after meeting in Tehran with Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal.

Israel vowed to use any means necessary to block the funds from reaching the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

**Vice president  
to address AIPAC**

Vice President Dick Cheney is scheduled to headline this year's American Israel Public Affairs Committee policy conference.

The vice president will speak at the conference's closing session on March 7, "America and Israel: The View from Capitol Hill."

Also speaking at the policy conference are Rep. John Boehner (R-Ohio), the new majority leader, and John Bolton, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.

**General's remarks  
on Jordan spark spat**

An Israeli army general's remarks about Palestinians in Jordan sparked a diplomatic spat.

Maj. Gen. Yair Naveh, commander of Israeli forces in the West Bank, was quoted as telling reporters Wednesday that given Jordan's Palestinian majority, its King Abdullah "could be the last Hashemite king."

The Foreign Ministry scrambled to assure Jordan, one of two Arab countries with which Israel enjoys full relations, that the comments did not reflect Israeli government policy. The Defense Ministry said Israel considers Jordan's Hashemite regime to be stable and ordered a probe into Naveh's comments.

# WORLD REPORT

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## Questions of safety reignited with torture, murder of French Jew

By **BRETT KLINE**

**P**ARIS (JTA)—The brutal murder of a young Jewish man here is roiling the community and reviving questions over whether France is a safe place for Jews.

In an incident that has dominated headlines across the country, Ilan Halimi, 23, was lured away from the store where he sold mobile phones on Jan. 21 by a woman, abducted and then held in a suburban housing project for three weeks by a criminal gang, where he was repeatedly tortured, according to French officials.

He was then dumped, barely alive and reportedly with burn marks all over his body, at a suburban train station on Feb. 13. Halimi died while being driven to a hospital.

Until this week, detectives investigating the case said they were not linking it to anti-Semitism.

But in a turnaround, Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin told a Jewish communal gathering Monday night that officials had decided to treat the case as an act of anti-Semitism.

De Villepin said the minister of justice had ordered that Halimi's torture and murder be considered "premeditated murder motivated by religious affiliation."

Villepin spoke at the annual dinner of the Representative Council of Jewish Institutions in France, or CRIF, the umbrella organization of secular French Jewish groups. In addition to pledging that the government would do its utmost to find Halimi's killers, de Villepin vowed that the French government would fight anti-Semitism throughout French society.

The incident dominated discussion at the annual dinner, which attracts hundreds of

ministers, elected officials, ambassadors and religious officials.

Ironically, de Villepin and CRIF's president, Roger Cukierman, had hoped that a highlight of the dinner would be the announcement that anti-Semitic acts in France dropped by 47 percent in 2005 over the previous year.

Anti-Semitic attacks, largely committed by youths of North African origin, increased in France during the first few years of the Palestinian uprising against Israel. The increase was largely attributed to tensions over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The climate for Jews had seemed to improve in recent months, as had France's relations with Israel. The change came after Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's visit to Paris last summer and the Israeli pullout from Gaza.

But the recent incident has rocked the community, with many saying they had felt all along it was a deliberate act against Jews.

After meeting on Tuesday with France's interior minister, Nicolas Sarkozy, known for ordering the police crackdown against anti-Semitic violence in 2005, Cukierman said Halimi's death "was one of the worst incidents for the Jewish community in France, if not the worst."

At least 1,200 people demonstrated in Paris on Sunday to show their anger over the murder. The demonstrators shouted slogans and carried banners that read "Justice for Ilan" and "Avenge Ilan!"

At the CRIF dinner on Monday, guests expressed their horror and fear over the incident.

"These barbarians sound organized, so

*Continued on page 2*

## ■ Many French Jews believe the victim's religion influenced his attackers

*Continued from page 1*

they must have known that Ilan didn't have any money," Evelyn Elbaz-Varsat, a lawyer attending the CRIF dinner said in a voice tense with emotion. "He was from a simple family from a modest suburb."

Elbaz-Varsat said many people in the community are fed up.

"Over the past couple of years, many people have been talking about leaving France," she said. "This might be the straw that breaks the camel's back, though that is hard to say. In their hearts, people talk about Israel, but practically speaking, most people are thinking about the United States. Myself, I want to go to California."

"It is possible that this did not start out as an anti-Semitic case," said Meyer Habib, owner of a large jewelry concern in Paris. "But if Ilan were not Jewish, I think he would still be alive today. He died because he was Jewish."

The victim's mother agreed. She was quoted as saying, "If Ilan weren't Jewish, he wouldn't have been killed."

At least 10 people, aged 17 to 32, have been arrested. The suspects, of North African and black African Muslim origins and of white French background, have been labeled the "gang of barbarians" by the French media.

The group's alleged leader, identified as Youssouf E, has reportedly fled to the West African country of Ivory Coast.

French police officials said they originally thought the only motive of the kidnapping was money.

After questioning several of the suspects, the police reported that there had been six other kidnapping attempts, four of them against Jews. Officials said the suspects told police that because Jews were all rich, someone would find the money to ransom them. Only one of those attempts was reported to the police when it took place.

At Monday night's dinner, de Villepin opened with a message to the Halimi family, saying, "I share your pain. We owe it to you to find the truth."

At a news conference after meeting with Sarkozy, Cukierman said the police believe that gangs are controlling certain suburban districts, "and people do not

want to talk." He added that police had found documents in one apartment linked to Salafists, a radical North African Islamist group.

In a live forum on Jewish radio Tuesday, Cukierman told listeners that CRIF had only learned of the kidnapping when the death was reported, because police had kept tight control of the case until then.

"I think the police are devoting considerable means and manpower to this case," said Cukierman.

"Before that, there was failure," he said. "Today we can say for sure that a man was killed because he was Jewish." ■

*(JTA correspondent Lauren Elkin contributed to this report.)*

## Alabama Jewish community reaches out after church arsons

By LARRY BROOK  
*Deep South Jewish Voice*

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (JTA) — The Jewish community here is reaching out to churches that have been affected by this month's rash of arsons in rural parts of the state.

Ten churches burned in three separate sprees between Feb. 3 and Feb. 14. All of the churches have been Baptist, and six of them burned to the ground. Racial motives are being discounted, since half of the congregations were black and half were white.

The late-night fires all started in the pulpit area.

After the first six churches burned, south and west of Birmingham, the Birmingham Jewish Federation donated \$1,000 from its reserve fund to help rebuild the churches. After the other arsons, that was raised to \$2,000.

Volunteers from the Birmingham Jewish Community Relations Committee have been paired with each of the churches to express concern and find out how the Jewish community could be of further assistance.

The federation also plans to coordinate "personal helping opportunities" with groups like the Teen Tzedakah program.

JCRC member Randy Mazer contacted New Harmony Holiness Church in Chilton County, and reported that the pastor's wife said his was the only call thus far from outside the area.

After speaking with Rev. Jim Parker of Ashby Baptist Church, Joel Rotenstreich of the Birmingham Jewish Federation said, "They will be able to carry on, united with their congregants, neighbor churches that have offered space, and friends,"

but what they need is money for rebuilding.

Parker "asked me to express his profound thanks to the Jewish community for their concern, support, and prayers," Rotenstreich said. "Let's not let these people down."

Maury Shevin, chairman of the JCRC, said "An attack on a church

or any other house of worship resonates with us as Jews in particular, given the attacks on our own religious institutions throughout our history."

Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews called the fires "an assault on all people of faith."

The American Jewish Committee offered a \$5,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the arsonists. ■

**The church arsons were 'an assault on all people of faith.'**

**Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein**  
International Fellowship  
of Christians and Jews

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# Jewish group's museum in Israel challenged

By TOM TUGEND

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — Since its beginning in 1977, the Simon Wiesenthal Center has become a major player on the international scene, but it now faces its most daunting challenge.

At risk is its Center for Human Dignity-Museum of Tolerance in the heart of Jerusalem. For the past five years, Rabbi Marvin Hier, the Wiesenthal Center's founder and dean, has poured his formidable energies and negotiating skills into the \$200 million project as the capstone of his career.

But now the project is running into a roadblock: In a petition to the Israeli High Court of Justice last week, lawyers for two Muslim organizations asserted that thousands of Muslims who died during the Crusades of the 12th and 13th centuries were buried at the site where the center is being built.

They also argue that associates of the Islamic prophet Mohammed were interred at the site in the 7th century.

But Muslims aren't the only ones opposing the project — the building plan is also unpopular among many Israeli Jews.

A three-man panel of Israel's High Court, headed by presiding Justice Aharon Barak, listened to competing arguments, with an early decision expected.

After the years of bureaucratic wrangling and vocal opposition from influential Jerusalemites, the road seemed finally clear last May, when a gala ceremony marked the groundbreaking on the three-acre campus. Ready were architect Frank Gehry's plans for seven buildings, including two museums, a library, education center, performing arts theater and international conference center.

California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and the then-mayor of Jerusalem, Ehud Olmert, lauded the new center's goal of promoting civility and respect among Jews and between Jews and Muslims.

But in recent weeks, workmen excavating the site unearthed bones and partial skeletons from the old Muslim Mamilla, or Maman Allah, cemetery.

There is agreement that Muslims have been buried at the site, possibly five layers deep, for many centuries.

Hier, in an interview with JTA, forcefully laid out his case for the project, on

which \$10 million has been expended so far.

Looking back, he declared that "Never in a million years would we have undertaken this project if the government of Israel or the Jerusalem municipality had told us that we were building atop a Muslim cemetery. We would have rejected the site out of hand."

In a region where religion and politics are so closely entwined — and where the Islamist

Hamas recently won Palestinian elections and Israelis are poised to vote on March 28 — the ramifications of the dispute are bound to inflame already edgy tempers.

But Hier said he was assured by local and national authorities that there were no legal impediments to building on the site, now mainly a large open parking lot.

Also on the site is a four-level underground garage, excavated and built 30 years ago, with no protests from Muslim religious authorities, according to Hier.

Even earlier, in 1964, when the now-defunct Palace Hotel stood on part of the parcel, the highest Muslim religious council in Jerusalem ruled that the cemetery had been inactive for such a long time that it had lost its sacred character and could be used for public purposes, Hier said.

Lawyers for the Wiesenthal Center presented three possible compromises at the Supreme Court hearing: build a dignified monument to the ancient cemetery, refurbish a nearby modern Muslim cemetery or rebury the bones at another site, all at the center's expense.

"We want to do the right thing," Hier said.

Israeli politicians have criticized the plan.

Likud Party member Reuven Rivlin, the speaker of the Knesset, asked, "Why, for God's sake, does a house of tolerance need to be built on a Muslim cemetery. It goes against logic." He added: "My parents are buried on the Mount of Olives. If

someone decided they needed to be moved to build a museum of tolerance, I'd be very angry."

The Israel office of the Anti-Defamation League has appealed to the Wiesenthal Center for a "pause" in construction.

On the Muslim side, Irkrima Sabri, the grand mufti of Jerusalem, has petitioned UNESCO to declare the disputed area an international historical site.

One factor in the confrontation not mentioned is the long-standing hostility to the project by influential segments of

Jerusalem's citizenry, despite the support of municipal and national political leaders.

Such opposition, well before the cemetery dispute, may help explain the fiercely antagonistic tone of some Israeli critics.

Among the early skeptics were officials at Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust memo-

rial, who argued that there was no need for a competing Holocaust museum.

After lengthy discussions with Yad Vashem, the Wiesenthal Center agreed that its new museum would not deal with the Holocaust.

Hier is not about to quit.

"I have absolute faith that the Center for Human Dignity will rise in Jerusalem," he said. "If not on the present site, than at another location."

However, it may not be that easy to find another piece of land in Jerusalem large enough to accommodate the visions of Hier and Gehry without encountering the same obstacles.

As a spokeswoman for the Israel Antiquities Authority told the Los Angeles Times, "There are 35,000 archaeological sites in Israel. All of Jerusalem is an archaeological site. This is a place where a lot of history happened — Jewish history, Christian, Muslim," adding, "And where people lived, they also died."

"You can say that no one can build on an archaeological site, and then you won't have a country, OK — no one can live here." ■

## FOCUS ON ISSUES

**'My parents are buried on the Mount of Olives. If someone decided they needed to be moved to build a museum of tolerance, I'd be very angry.'**

**Reuven Rivlin**  
Knesset speaker

## NEWS IN BRIEF

## MIDDLE EAST

**Olmert: Ahmadinejad's an anti-Semite**

Israel's Ehud Olmert called Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad an anti-Semite.

"The president of Iran, with all of his statements, is a heinous anti-Semitic phenomenon. He is an Israel-hater," the interim prime minister told the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee on Wednesday.

Olmert said Iran, which is believed to be months away from acquiring the knowledge to make nuclear weapons, must be stopped.

But he did not discuss any direct Israeli military options, endorsing U.S.-led diplomatic pressure on Tehran.

**Israeli sues Iranian president**

An Israeli lawyer sued Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Germany for Holocaust denial.

Ervin Eran Shahar filed suit with the German Federal Prosecutors' Office in Karlsruhe this week, asking them to press charges against Ahmadinejad for his repeated statements questioning the Nazi genocide of the Jews.

Holocaust denial is a crime in Germany. Shahar acknowledged that Ahmadinejad is not a German citizen and may enjoy diplomatic immunity as a head of state, but he argued that prosecution in absentia would send an important political message.

The Federal Prosecutors' Office had no immediate comment.

**French immigration to Israel up**

Immigration to Israel from France rose in 2005. Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics reported Wednesday that 27 percent more French Jews immigrated last year than in 2004.

Political analysts attributed the phenomenon to fears of rising anti-Semitism in France, home to Western Europe's largest Jewish population.

The bureau also reported an 8 percent rise in immigration from the United States, but decreases from Ukraine, Asia and Argentina.

**Olmert house sale probed**

The Israeli state comptroller is investigating the sale of interim Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's home.

The office of Micha Lindenstrauss disclosed this week that a complaint had been received over the 2004 purchase of Olmert's Jerusalem villa by a Jewish American philanthropist known to have contributed to Israeli political campaigns.

According to media reports, the property was sold for \$2.7 million but Olmert and his wife stayed on as tenants, paying \$2,250 in monthly rent.

Israeli election laws generally prompt close scrutiny of business ties between politicians and foreign donors, but the interim prime minister denied wrongdoing.

Olmert said he reported the sale in full at the time, including how he intended to divide the money among his children.

**Likud recruits Palestinian Jew for campaign**

A Palestinian convert to Judaism is starring in the election campaign of Israel's Likud Party.

Amnon Yitzhak-Shachar, who was born into a Muslim family in the Gaza Strip but converted after fleeing to Israel as a teenager, will appear in one of the Likud election spots when they begin broadcasting next month.

Shachar, 28, told Israel's Channel 10 television Wednesday that he shares the Likud's hawkish views on efforts to reach peace with the Palestinians.

## NORTH AMERICA

**Harvard's president resigns**

Lawrence Summers, the Jewish president of Harvard University, resigned Tuesday.

Among the many controversies that dogged Summers during his five-year tenure were his outspoken remarks opposing efforts by college campuses to divest from companies that did business with Israel.

He called these and other selective sanctions against the Jewish state "anti-Semitic in their effect if not their intent."

Writing in an Op-Ed for JTA last year, Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz said, "It's no coincidence that so many of the professors leading the campaign" against Summers "were in the vanguard of the campaign to divest from Israel and boycott Israeli academics."

Professors Lizabeth Cohen and Barbara J. Grosz wrote in response that attributing "criticism of Summers to anti-Israel sentiments or to anti-Semitic roots sidelines honest debate, focuses attention on the wrong issues and does a disservice to Israel and American Jewry."

**Lithuania pressed on cemetery desecration**

U.S. Sens. Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.) and Sam Brownback (R-Kan.) called on Lithuania to halt the desecration of a Jewish cemetery in Vilnius. The senators, members of the Helsinki Commission, a congressional body monitoring European anti-Semitism, wrote a letter to Lithuania's ambassador, Vygaudas Usackas, on the issue.

Clinton and Brownback said they were reacting to a complaint brought by members of Lithuania's Jewish community regarding the Snipiskis Cemetery.

**Creating 'buzz' on reproductive rights**

A Jewish women's activist group sent vibrators to Jewish leaders to create a "buzz" about what they see as the organized Jewish community's silence on reproductive rights.

Jewish Women Watching said the Jewish community cannot be silent on these issues in the wake of Judge Samuel Alito joining the Supreme Court.

The group, whose members are anonymous, have orchestrated several similar campaigns during the past few years to protest what they see as sins of the Jewish world, including sexism and homophobia.

## WORLD

**U.N. guard reprimanded for swastikas**

The United Nations rebuked a security guard who drew swastikas on a sign-in sheet.

The guard, who is not being named, was issued a letter of censure and asked to take part in sensitivity training after an Israeli guard noticed his drawings in September, a U.N. spokesman told JTA.

**Italian mayor pressed after rally**

Italian Jewish leaders and politicians called for the resignation of a mayor who took part in a pro-Palestinian demonstration.

After participating in Saturday's demonstration in Rome, Mauro Bertini, the Communist mayor of the town of Marano, suggested that the world would be a better place without Israel.

Israel, he said, was a "punch in the stomach of humanity."

The president of the Italian Chamber of Deputies, Pierferdinando Casini, called the remarks "shameful and irresponsible" and apologized to Israel.

Authorities in Rome, meanwhile, have opened a criminal investigation into a group of demonstrators who during the rally burned Israeli and American flags and chanted slogans favoring insurgent attacks against Italian armed forces in Iraq.