

IN THE NEWS

Olmert said planning more withdrawals

Ehud Olmert reportedly plans to carry out further West Bank withdrawals if he wins the Israeli elections.

The interim prime minister will seek to enlist foreign support for a major unilateral pullback in the West Bank if his Kadima Party wins the March 28 vote, Ha'aretz reported Sunday. Yediot Achronot quoted former Shin Bet chief Avi Dichter, as saying many isolated West Bank settlements would be evacuated while Israel maintains control of six settlement blocs and the Jordan Valley.

Putin briefs Olmert on Hamas

Russia's president briefed Ehud Olmert on his government's talks with Hamas officials. The Kremlin statement said Sunday that Vladimir Putin telephoned Israel's interim prime minister for a "detailed exchange of opinions" on the weekend talks in Moscow.

Russia is pressing Hamas to renounce terrorism and recognize Israel's right to exist, but the terrorist group has refused. Israeli officials saw the Russian invitation as a major threat to Israel's desire to deny Hamas international legitimacy.

Bolton: 'All tools' available against Iran

The United States is prepared to use "all tools" to deal with Iran's nuclear threat, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations said.

"If the pursuit of nuclear weapons by a state whose leader calls for another to be 'wiped off the map' is not considered a threat, then what is?" John Bolton said Sunday, addressing the American Israel Public Affairs Committee's annual conference.

The International Atomic Energy Agency, the U.N. nuclear watchdog, meets Monday in Vienna to consider strategy before the Security Council considers Iran's nuclear program later this month.

WORLD REPORT

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Hamas capitalizes on Russia trip as Kadima slides further in polls

By LESLIE SUSSER

JERUSALEM (JTA) — After a successful visit to Moscow, Hamas leaders claim "the wall" of diplomatic isolation Israel is trying to build around the newly empowered organization is collapsing.

But Israel is still confident that the international community will cut off funds to a Hamas-led Palestinian Authority and back Israeli moves for a second unilateral pullback from Palestinian territory.

The Moscow trip perfectly served Hamas' strategy: to gain as much international recognition as possible without making concessions to Israel.

Following talks with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Hamas leader Khaled Meshal declared that the organization did not recognize Israel's right to exist, and that the internationally accepted "road map" peace plan was no longer relevant.

If the Russians had hoped to score diplomatic points by persuading Hamas to accept the West's conditions for dialogue — recognition of Israel, acceptance of previous Israeli-Palestinian agreements and repudiation of violence — they failed utterly.

Hamas, however, succeeded in getting a Russian promise to urge the West not to withhold funds earmarked for the Palestinians.

Hamas has had other diplomatic successes. Its leaders have held talks in Turkey, and have been invited to South Africa and Venezuela. They also claim some European countries are holding secret contacts with them.

More importantly, European funding for the Palestinians has not yet dried up. The European Union is releasing \$143 million

in emergency aid to the Palestinians, on the grounds that the Palestinian Authority is on the verge of economic collapse, and that Hamas has not yet formally taken the reins of power.

With an eye to retaining Western aid, without which it couldn't function, Hamas has been putting out mixed messages. On the one hand it says it won't recognize Israel; on the other, that it's ready for a long truce.

In a rare interview with Israel's Ma'ariv newspaper, Alistair Crooke, a former E.U. adviser on security who knows the Palestinian scene well, put a positive gloss on Hamas' position.

Crooke argues that a real process of change is underway in the organization, and that it would be ready to end the conflict if Israel withdraws to the pre-1967 boundaries, known as the Green Line.

He says Hamas wants a mutually agreed, long-term ceasefire so that it can concentrate on Palestinian institution-building in preparation for full statehood alongside Israel.

Crooke, who now runs the London-based Forum for Conflict Resolution, recently met with top Hamas people and clearly was getting a message across for them. But it's not clear whether Hamas is genuinely ready for some sort of accommodation with Israel, or whether Crooke is merely being used as a pawn by Hamas in a game aimed at impressing European and other Western donors.

For now, the Israeli government does not believe Hamas is genuine. While the Hamas leaders were in Moscow, Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni was in Europe trying to pre-

Continued on page 2

NEWS
ANALYSIS

■ *As Hamas gets stronger, Kadima continues to slide in polls*

Continued from page 1

empt an erosion in the E.U.'s hard line on Hamas.

In talks in Vienna, Paris and London, Livni argued that it's essential that Europe keep up its diplomatic and economic pressure on Hamas. She also maintained that it would be a mistake to try to circumvent Hamas and negotiate with P.A. President Mahmoud Abbas, from the somewhat more moderate Fatah Party, because he's in no position to deliver.

Indeed, Israeli policy is based on pressuring Hamas to moderate its positions and, if that fails, convincing the international community that there is no peace partner on the Palestinian side and that, therefore, Israel has no option but to set its borders unilaterally.

Thus, the main goal of Livni's European trip seemed to be to set the stage for a second unilateral withdrawal from Palestinian territory, if her party, Kadima, wins the March 28 general election.

On Sunday, Kadima announced its plans for a second disengagement. Avi Dichter, former head of Israel's Shin Bet security service, outlined the details: Israel will dismantle isolated West Bank settlements, relocating the settlers in large settlement blocs close to the Green Line, or in Israel proper.

The Israel Defense Forces, however, will remain inside the evacuated territory, the way it has done in the northern West Bank since the evacuation of four settlements there last summer. Dichter calls it "a civilian, but not a military disengagement."

Dichter explained that since there is no Palestinian peace partner, Israel, too, sees the road map as a dead letter, and that it would negotiate the new boundary lines with the international community, especially the United States, rather than with the Hamas-led Palestinians.

Hanan Krystal, a political analyst for Israel Radio, says that by officially announcing its disengagement plan, Kadima has set the March 28 election agenda.

"The election will now be a referendum on a second disengagement," he declared.

The timing of Kadima's announcement may have been intended to boost the party's electoral prospects. Over the past few weeks, polls have shown Kadima's share of the vote steadily declining.

Pollsters, who initially paid little heed to the loss of a seat or two, now are talking about a trend. Weekend polls show Kadima getting some 37 seats, well below the 43 it had three weeks ago. Most of the gains have been made by the right — which may not

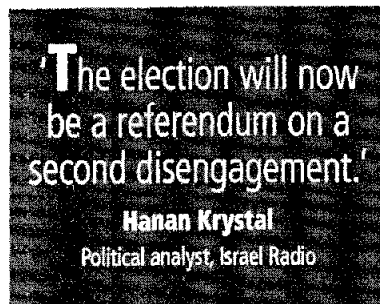
be surprising, given Hamas' accession to power, which has allowed the right-wing parties to paint a picture of an Iranian-backed, Al-Qaida-supported radical state on Israel's doorstep.

The Kadima plan is intended to show that the centrist party has a realistic answer to the threat, and one more likely to bring about stability and calm than anything the right or left can offer.

Still, for the first time, there is talk of Kadima not forming the next government.

Former Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom of the Likud is openly pressing for a Labor-Likud coalition with a rotating premiership: first Labor's Amir Peretz, then the Likud's Benjamin Netanyahu.

Peretz dismisses the idea out of hand, but Shalom argues that if the swing away from Kadima continues, things could change dramatically. With the election just three weeks away, the public response to Kadima's disengagement plan could be crucial. ■



Dems want to review Holocaust assets

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Congressional Democrats want to review Holocaust assets in the United States.

All 32 Democrats and the single Independent on the Financial Services Committee wrote Friday to the chairwoman of the subcommittee on domestic and international policy, asking for a review of the work of a presidential advisory commission that examined the fate of Holocaust-era assets in U.S. custody.

The commission completed its work in

2000, the Democrats wrote to Rep. Deborah Pryce (R-Ohio), but the committee — which created the commission — has yet to hold hearings.

"We still haven't reviewed the commission's findings or monitored the efforts undertaken domestically and abroad to ensure restitution," Rep. Steve Israel (D-N.Y.) said in a statement. Israel and Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass.), both Jewish, spearheaded the call for hearings. ■

Jewish book awards get new owner

NEW YORK (JTA) — The Jewish Family & Life organization took over management of a prestigious Jewish book award.

The newly rebranded Koret International Book Awards will be run by Jewish Family & Life in partnership with the Koret Foundation and the National Foundation for Jewish Culture.

Books will be honored in five categories: fiction, Jewish life and living,

children's books, Jewish thought and the new People's Choice Award.

The \$5,000 awards, founded seven years ago, will be handed out at the San Francisco JCC in November, Jewish Book Month.

Two other Jewish book awards also will be announced by JFL — the National Foundation for Jewish Culture's Goldberg Prize and the Union for Reform Judaism's prize for emerging fiction writers. ■



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THIS WEEK**MONDAY**

■ The 35 members of the board of the International Atomic Energy Agency, the U.N. nuclear watchdog, meet in Vienna to consider Iran, the first meeting since the Islamic Republic shut down access to nuclear inspectors after the board reported Iran to the U.N. Security Council for possible sanctions.

■ Sergei Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, meets with Condoleezza Rice, the U.S. secretary of state. A top issue for discussion will be Lavrov's meeting last week in Moscow with Hamas officials.

■ Walid Jumblatt, a Druse leader in Lebanon, speaks to the Saban Center, a Washington think tank, about Syria's continued influence in Lebanon.

■ Peace X Peace, a Washington-based women's group, hosts a video conference between Washington and Jerusalem to discuss promoting peaceful relations among Israeli, American and Palestinian women.

TUESDAY

■ Vice President Dick Cheney speaks on the U.S.-Israel relationship on the final day of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee's annual policy conference. Later, some 6,000 activists lobby on Capitol Hill for bills that would impose far-reaching limitations on any U.S. aid to the Palestinians.

■ The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative Movement's Rabbinical Assembly meets in Baltimore to discuss a host of halachic issues, including the status of homosexuality in Conservative Judaism.

■ Moshe Ya'alon, former Israeli military chief of staff, speaks at the Hudson Institute think tank in Washington on whether there is an "Israeli option" in dealing with Iran's nuclear program.

WEDNESDAY

■ B'nai B'rith International hosts a celebration marking 20 years of diplomatic relations between Israel and Spain, with representatives from both embassies, at Washington's historic Sixth and I Synagogue.

■ The U.S. House of Representatives' Middle East subcommittee considers assistance to the Palestinian Authority.

FRIDAY

■ The Conservative movement's Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs holds a weekend seminar for lay leaders through Sunday in Baltimore.

SUNDAY

■ More than 1,000 Jews from across New Jersey gather at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in New Brunswick to celebrate their accomplishments in Torah study through the Torah Links program.

Church fireworks roil Israel

By DAN BARON

JERUSALEM (JTA) — It only takes a few loose screws to throw Israel's delicate interracial mechanism out of whack.

After years of claiming they were abused by the country's social services, an impoverished and eccentric Israeli family took welfare protests to a new level last Friday by staging an attack on one of Christianity's holiest sites.

Haim Eliahu Havivi, his Christian wife, Violette and their daughter Odelia, 20, entered the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth, pushing a baby stroller that they had loaded with firecrackers and gas canisters, and set them off.

No one was seriously hurt, but it sent shockwaves through the mostly Arab city, whose residents have been wary of Jewish violence since an off-duty soldier went on a shooting spree last year, said a church clergyman.

"The worshipers thought it was a terrorist attack and scattered," Father John Muscat said.

Before the truth could be determined, thousands of angry locals converged on the shrine, as did scores of riot police.

The would-be lynch mob was beaten back, and several of its ringleaders were

injured. A police patrol car was torched.

Throughout, a lightly injured Havivi and his family remained in the grotto until they could be spirited away to lock-up.

"I have nothing against Christians," Havivi, 43, told investigators.

His wife is a Christian, and the couple had for years mounted spectacular demonstrations in a bid to recover three children they said had been unfairly taken into state custody.

But on Saturday, several thousand took part in a protest march in Nazareth that was led by Israeli Arab lawmakers.

Ahmed Tibi of the Islamic Arabic Union called the church attack part of the "sickness

and insanity that affects the far-right in the country and leads it to attack Arabs."

Some in Israel sensed a cynical attempt by Israeli Arab parties to shore up voter support ahead of the March 28 election.

Interim Prime Minister Ehud Olmert condemned the Havivis' actions, but said that they did not reflect on the state, and urged against the exploitation of the event for political purposes.

That did not stop Labor candidate Amir Peretz from visiting Nazareth.

The Havivis have been remanded for two weeks while prosecutors decide on charges. ■

'I have nothing
against Christians.'
Haim Eliahu Havivi

Demolition begins on Tajikistan's shul

By LEV KRICHEVSKY

MOSCOW (JTA) — Tajikistan's government has begun demolishing the Central Asian nation's only synagogue, offering in exchange a plot of land far from where most Jewish community members live.

On Feb. 8, demolition crews destroyed part of the synagogue's property according to sources in Dushanbe, the capital city.

According to local residents, the road to the synagogue was damaged and people now have to walk over demolition waste to get to shul. The remaining part of the one-story building is slated for demolition later this year.

The conflict around Dushanbe's 100-year-old synagogue began several years

ago. In May 2004, Dushanbe city authorities ordered the Jewish community to vacate the synagogue so the site could be cleared for a Palace of Nations and national park.

Authorities rejected the community's proposal to give the shul a facelift and include it in the new architectural complex.

Instead the city gave the Jewish community land in a remote area to build a new shul, something the community could not afford.

The Jewish community in Dushanbe is estimated at 400 people, primarily Bukharan Jews. Most are elderly, and about 200 regularly attended services.

The Federation of Jewish Communities of the former Soviet Union said it would try to find a solution with the local government. ■

**AROUND
THE
JEWISH
WORLD**

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Arrow missile may block Iranian attack

An Israeli military official said the Arrow anti-ballistic missile system can intercept and destroy an incoming missile from Iran.

The high-ranking Israeli Defense Force official, who was unnamed, told the Jerusalem Post on Thursday that the system could be used on a missile with a nuclear warhead. "We will shoot all of Iran's missiles' down," the official told the newspaper. "The Arrow knows how to intercept the Shihab missile."

Improvements have been made to the missile, after senior military officials said last year it was not ready to protect against the Iranian threat.

P.A. returns U.S. funds

The Palestinian Authority returned \$30 million of \$50 million it received last year from the United States.

The Bush administration asked for the money back after Hamas, a terrorist group, won a landslide victory Jan. 25 in legislative elections. About \$48 million remained in a bank account that required U.S. approval for use. Testifying Thursday to the U.S. House of Representatives, David Welch, the State Department's top envoy to the Middle East, said \$30 million was returned Wednesday, and the United States was working on a schedule with the Palestinian Authority to return the rest.

Olmert: We still hope for Palestinian state

Ehud Olmert said Israel still hopes to see a Palestinian state formed in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The acting Israeli prime minister greeted the American Israel Public Affairs Committee's annual conference Sunday via videolink. Israel's policy is to isolate a Palestinian Authority run by Hamas, but still to seek a resolution to the conflict, Olmert said.

Despite the terrorist group's landslide victory in Jan. 25 Palestinian legislative elections, Olmert said, Israel "will look for every opportunity to build a process that may lead to" resolution of "some of the outstanding issues that are on the agenda between us and the Palestinians."

Fatah spurns Hamas

Fatah rejected a proposal by Hamas to join forces in a Palestinian Authority government. Lawmakers from the long-dominant Fatah faction voted Saturday against allying themselves with the radical Islamic group, which swept to victory in P.A. legislative elections in January.

Though the decision has yet to be ratified by the Fatah Revolutionary Council, the faction's central decision-making body, it is expected to be permanent. Without Fatah's support, Hamas is likely to appeal to smaller, equally hardline factions to form a coalition.

Al-Qaida chief hails Hamas line

Osama bin Laden's lieutenant urged Hamas to maintain its hard line against Israel. "No Palestinian has the right to give away even a grain of the soil," Ayman al-Zawahiri said in an audio recording posted on the Internet on Sunday and directed at political developments since Hamas' election win in late January.

P.A. President Mahmoud Abbas said recently that Al-Qaida has established a presence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Israeli: Pollard gave good info

An Israeli intelligence official said Jonathan Pollard gave Israel high-quality information that was important to the country's security. Rafi Eitan, Pollard's Israeli intelligence handler, told Yediot Achronot

that Pollard's information was so important that Israeli officials did not consider ending the operation, even though the target was the United States.

Pollard, who is serving a life sentence in a North Carolina prison for spying for Israel, recently appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court to have his lawyers receive access to classified information he believes can help make his case for clemency.

Israeli forces in Iran?

Israeli special forces are searching for secret nuclear sites in Iran, a British paper reported. Citing an Israeli intelligence source, Britain's Sunday Times reported that the Jewish state had dispatched commandos to seek out undeclared Iranian uranium enrichment facilities. The secret units entered Iran through a base in northern Iraq with U.S. approval, according to the newspaper. Israeli officials denied the report.

Mofaz: Countries working to destroy Israel

Israel's defense minister said a Middle Eastern "Axis of Evil" is trying to destroy the Jewish state. Shaul Mofaz told a Kadima Party conference that Israel faces challenges from the Palestinian Authority, Iran and the north, a reference to Lebanon and Syria.

Israel must work with moderate Arab states and the United States to contain the threat, Mofaz said, according to Ha'aretz.

Rockets land near Ashkelon

A Palestinian rocket hit a "strategic" facility in Ashkelon on Friday. Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for the attack on the facility, which was not described in detail, in the Israeli city just north of the Gaza Strip.

In retaliation, Israeli military attacked Qassam rocket launch sites in the Gaza Strip.

NORTH AMERICA

'Paradise' petition presented

The daughter of an Arab killed by Israeli forces presented a petition with 36,000 signatures to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences denouncing its selection of "Paradise Now" for possible Oscar honors. Earlier, Nonie Darwish, who has become a critic of what she calls the systematic indoctrination of Palestinians to hate Israelis and Jews, harshly criticized the film about two Palestinian suicide bombers for "putting a human face on the murderers of children."

"Paradise Now" recently won a Golden Globe award as best foreign-language film and is one of five nominees in the same category at Sunday's event. Darwish was the sole speaker at a Friday news conference sponsored by The Israel Project, which organized the petition campaign. The group also placed a full-page ad Friday in the entertainment industry daily Variety featuring photos of an Israeli bus and teenager blown up by a suicide bomber.

Resolution calls for Israel in NATO

A senior Republican and a senior Democrat introduced a resolution calling on NATO to begin the process of making Israel a member.

The non-binding resolution, which aims for Israel's full inclusion in NATO, was introduced this week by Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.), chairwoman of the U.S. House of Representatives' Middle East subcommittee, and Rep. Robert Wexler (D-Fla.), a senior member of the House's International Relations Committee.

Israel has not requested membership, but some supporters say its accession to NATO would signal Western support for Israel in the face of Iran's nuclear program.