

IN THE NEWS

Ex-AIPAC staffers subpoena Rice, Hadley

Two former American Israel Public Affairs Committee staffers subpoenaed top U.S. officials to testify at their trial.

Steve Rosen, AIPAC's former foreign policy director, and Keith Weissman, its former Iran analyst, filed subpoenas last Friday for Condoleezza Rice, the U.S. secretary of state; Stephen Hadley, the national security adviser; Elliott Abrams, the deputy national security adviser; William Burns, the State Department's former top envoy to the Middle East; David Satterfield, Burns' former deputy and the current deputy ambassador to Iraq; and a number of former officials.

The court later suppressed the names on the subpoenas, but JTA viewed a copy of the original docket with all the names.

P.A. could get more humanitarian aid

The United States may increase humanitarian aid to the Palestinians at the expense of aid earmarked for the Palestinian Authority, Condoleezza Rice said.

The Bush administration has withheld funding from the Palestinian Authority since Hamas won parliamentary elections in January, but called for support to continue to nonprofit organizations dealing with the needy in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Rabbis call for action in Sudan

More than 150 rabbis gathered outside United Nations headquarters in New York to urge international action in the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Darfur.

The rabbis who protested Monday, representing the Reform, Conservative, Orthodox and Reconstructionist movements, urged the international community to intervene to halt the deaths of Sudanese who fled government-sponsored Arab militias that have killed tens of thousands of people over the past few years.

WORLD REPORT

PUBLISHED WEEKDAYS BY JTA—THE GLOBAL NEWS SERVICE OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE • WWW.JTA.ORG

Olmert plan sets election agenda, and could set permanent borders

By LESLIE SUSSER

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Ehud Olmert's pledge to unilaterally establish Israel's permanent borders within four years could turn out to be the defining moment of the country's election campaign.

With the ballot just two weeks away, the interim prime minister has set the agenda, pre-empting the Labor Party to the left and sharpening differences with the Likud Party to the right.

Labor claims Olmert has stolen its ideas; the Likud says that he has turned the election into a referendum on his plan to cede territory without getting anything in return.

With his Kadima Party slipping in opinion polls, Olmert is taking a huge gamble. Some right-wingers claim that by putting his cards so clearly on the table, he plays into their hands.

Beyond the electioneering, Olmert's statement has major regional and international ramifications.

On the Palestinian side, Damascus-based Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal called it a "declaration of war" against the Palestinians.

Israeli pundits ask, will Israel be able to set permanent borders, recognized by the international community, without negotiating with the Palestinians?

In weekend interviews with all the Israeli dailies, Olmert outlined his plan: By 2010, isolated West Bank settlements will be dismantled and the settlers relocated in large settlement blocs closer to the pre-1967 boundary, known as the Green Line.

The security fence will become the new,

permanent border, with Israelis on one side, Palestinians on the other.

In some cases the security fence will be moved further east, in others further west, to correspond with the new boundary route.

The new, permanent border will consolidate Israel as a Jewish state with an overwhelming Jewish majority.

According to Olmert, the Palestinians will be given a limited amount of time to enter negotiations, but if they don't, Israel will carry out the plan unilaterally.

In the absence of a Palestinian partner, Israel will negotiate the border demarcation with the international community.

It also will hold a dialogue with the settlers, aimed at reaching consensus on which settlements will be evacuated and where the settlers will be relocated.

These ideas have been around for a while, leaked by other Kadima Party leaders and aides, but this is the first time Olmert has openly backed them.

In going public two weeks before the March 28 election Olmert apparently hopes to kill two birds with one stone, giving voters a clear vision they can latch onto and pre-empting a mooted Labor-Likud coalition that would form a government in Kadima's stead.

Kadima strategists believe this clarity is what voters want to hear.

Compared to Labor's insistence on negotiations with a nonexistent Palestinian partner and the Likud's doom-and-gloom predictions, Olmert's formula will attract

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ANALYSIS

■ *Olmert's pullout proposal has shifted the focus of the elections*

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conflict-weary Israelis, they argue.

Olmert's policy statement also makes a Likud-Labor coalition that bypasses Kadima virtually impossible.

How would Labor justify choosing Likud when Olmert is committed to a withdrawal almost identical to Labor's own proposed pullback? political analyst Yossi Verter asked in Israeli daily Ha'aretz.

"Olmert's move struck down the hallucinatory visions of a Labor-right-wing coalition to block Kadima," Verter wrote.

"What could the Likud offer" Labor leader Amir Peretz "after the election? A bigger pullout than Olmert's?" Verter added.

With Olmert setting the agenda, Likud and Labor are trying to turn his candor to their advantage.

Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu hardened his already hawkish line in a bid to discredit Olmert as too dovish.

The Likud, Netanyahu said, would not countenance unilateral withdrawals or a Palestinian state, and would not join a coalition led by someone "as left-wing as Olmert."

Labor took the opposite tack: Implementing Olmert's policies would require a strong Labor contingent in the coalition, party activists argued.

Some right-wingers, however, are convinced that Olmert has made a huge blunder that could cost him the election. Moving from house to house, right-wing

settlers are trying to use Olmert's plan to trigger wholesale defections from Kadima.

Their aim: to shift a block of eight seats from Kadima to the right-wing parties, enough to give the right an upset victory.

That's a tall order, and the smart money is still on Olmert to win the election. His forthrightness might even increase his majority.

The question then becomes whether Ol-

mert will be able to get the international community to recognize borders Israel decides for itself, without consulting the Palestinians.

Getting international support clearly is a major element of Olmert's strategy: Before he made his statement, he put out feelers to the Americans, with whom he hopes to coordinate any pullback.

According to Israeli sources, the Americans understand that with the terrorist group Hamas in power on the Palestinian side, Israel has to consider unilateral moves.

The Israeli thinking is that if the United States recognizes permanent borders, the rest of the international community will follow.

Several leading Israeli pundits, how-

ever, doubt that Israel has the clout to dictate where the borders will run, and imply that Olmert's plan is based on wishful thinking.

"We are not a victorious empire that can draw lines on the desert sands of the Middle East as it pleases," Sever Plotzker wrote in Yediot Achronot.

"We were never authorized to do so in the past and we won't be in future. The map drawers are like dream merchants: They try to

sell us anachronistic hopes," he wrote.

While welcoming Olmert's "refreshing lack of doublespeak," Ha'aretz also questioned Israel's capacity to set its own borders.

But it argued that the fear that Israel might be allowed to do so could jolt the Palestinians into bona fide negotiations.

Olmert's plan could serve as a "catalyst that leads both sides to negotiate a mutually beneficial permanent-status agreement," Ha'aretz wrote.

As for Olmert, he hopes his plan first will win him the election and then write him into the history books as the leader who, after more than 60 years of statehood, finally established Israel's permanent borders around 2010.

'Olmert's move struck down the hallucinatory visions of a Labor-right-wing coalition to block Kadima.'

Yossi Verter
Analyst, Ha'aretz

Plaintiffs aim to amend Air Force lawsuit

By DAVID J. SILVERMAN

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Plaintiffs in a lawsuit against the United States Air Force asked a federal judge to declare the service's new guidelines on religion unconstitutional.

The March 9 move came five months after Mikey Weinstein, a graduate of the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, filed the original suit, which claimed the academy was unconstitutionally imposing evangelical Christianity on cadets.

Active-duty officers have since joined the suit.

Jewish groups welcomed stringent guidelines imposed last summer, but the academy has since revised them, dropping an admonition about respecting the rights of others and no longer cautioning top officers against promoting their personal religious views.

Conservative Christian groups and others were involved in lobbying the Bush administration.

The plaintiffs say the revised guidelines allow evangelicals to promote their religion and allow senior officers to influence the religious choices of their subordinates.

JTA
WORLD
REPORT

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JTA WORLD REPORT is published five days a week, except holidays, by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Inc., 330 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10001-5010. For more information about how to subscribe by e-mail, fax or regular mail, call (212) 643-1890, or visit our Web site at www.jta.org.
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Palestinian envoy to U.S. discusses Hamas

By LARRY LUXNER

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Afif Safieh, the Palestinian representative in Washington, had been on the job only two and a half months when voters in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and eastern Jerusalem overwhelmingly elected Hamas to head the next Palestinian government.

The terrorist group, which is sworn to Israel's destruction, now controls 74 of 132 seats in Parliament. Ismail Haniyeh, the Palestinian Authority's prime minister designate, says his government won't recognize Israel or engage in peace talks with the Jewish state, despite pleas from the United States, the European Union, Saudi Arabia and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, known as Abu Mazen, to do so.

None of this makes Safieh's job any easier.

"My assignment is a tough one, in the sense that I have all the duties of an ambassador and more, and I represent a people under occupation, yet I don't have the privileges," Safieh told JTA in an interview. "I am proud to be Palestinian, even though I'm not happy with the results" of the election.

"And I'm proud of the manner in which these heavily monitored elections were conducted," he said.

Unlike the Israeli Embassy on International Drive, which probably has the tightest security of any diplomatic mission in Washington, the Palestinian office just off Dupont Circle has no security at all.

Visitors aren't questioned or searched before taking the elevator up to the fourth floor of a pleasant-looking office complex. Photographs of the Al-Aksa Mosque and the late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat decorate the mission, which consists of seven people, including Safieh's driver and receptionist.

Safieh, a polished 56-year-old intellectual from eastern Jerusalem who has served in Geneva, The Hague and London, would not answer directly when asked whether Hamas might replace him. Nor did he completely discount the possibility that the State Department might close down his mission altogether.

A bill backed by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee and cosponsored

by Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.) and Rep. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.) would shut down the office. The bill's sponsors are negotiating its particulars with the administration, and it has yet to be considered by any committee.

"I have difficulties believing that U.S. legislators or the Bush administration would deprive themselves of an authoritative Palestinian voice in Washington," Safieh said.

"Silencing that voice would be so un-American and so un-Christian" that they would not do it, he added.

As for Hamas itself, Safieh said there's no single factor that explains the movement's unexpected victory.

"It was a combination and convergence of factors," he said. "First of all, I don't think Hamas won that decisively. Its parliamentary contingent is magnified compared to the percentage of votes it actually received. Although Hamas candidates were the obvious winners, this was not a landslide the way some commentators have made it out to be."

Safieh said the fact that Fatah was the ruling party for 40 years — first abroad and then back home with the birth of the Palestinian Authority — "resulted in the erosion of its popularity."

Also, there was the feeling of stagnation and the need for change.

"The perception of corruption and mismanagement was greater than the reality, but that was still a major handicap," he said.

"The third factor was that Fatah had been identified during the last 15 years with the peace process they advocated and engaged in. That peace process has been totally unconvincing, and with devastating results — such as the expansion of settlements, the continued strangulation of Palestinian society and the suffocation of the Palestinian economy through 450 checkpoints that prohibit people's freedom of movement."

Israel maintains that the checkpoints, often closed after terrorist attacks or due to intelligence of an impending strike, are necessary for security.

He blamed Israel for making it difficult

for the Palestinian Authority, "even when it was led by Abu Mazen, who is perceived by the entire world as a democratic leader unambiguously in favor of peace."

Safieh criticized what he calls "the constant American alignment" on the side of Israel, as well as "European abdication, Arab impotence and Palestinian resignation" over Israel's moves.

"During those theoretical years of peacemaking, what we really witnessed

was not the withdrawal of occupation but the expansion of occupation," he said, estimating that more than 450,000 Jews now live in the West Bank — twice as many as in 1993, when the Oslo accords were concluded. The CIA estimates that some 187,000 Jews live

in the West Bank and fewer than 177,000 Jews live in eastern Jerusalem, which Israel claims as part of its capital.

Few Israeli leaders were more hated by Palestinians than Ariel Sharon, who won worldwide accolades last year in the wake of Israel's unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. Safieh discounts this as "undeserved praise from world leaders suffering from self-inflicted impotence."

Safieh said his people have been "unreasonably reasonable" in accepting a two-state solution that envisions a future Palestinian state made up of 22 percent of its original territory, perhaps referring to the British Mandate.

Looking ahead to next month's general elections in Israel, Safieh said he has little doubt that Israel's interim prime minister, Ehud Olmert, will carry Sharon's centrist Kadima Party to victory. What happens after that depends on Israel's willingness to deal with Hamas, as well as its determination to remove West Bank settlements, he said.

In the final analysis, suggested Safieh, Israel has a choice: it can be in eastern Jerusalem and the West Bank, or in the Middle East — but not both.

"The Israelis should remember that we, the Palestinians, are the key to Israel's regional acceptance. When the peace process was moving smoothly, doors were opening up from Morocco to Muscat. When it was moving roughly, those same doors were closed," he said.

BEHIND
THE
HEADLINES

A Palestinian representative said his people have been 'unreasonably reasonable.'

NEWS IN BRIEF

WORLD

Straw: Deal with Israeli nuke program

Britain's foreign minister said the international community should turn its attention to Israel's presumed nuclear program once it finishes dealing with Iran.

Israeli officials have decided not to publicly take issue with Jack Straw's March 9 comments, the Jerusalem Post reported. Straw's comments, in an interview with British television, emphasized that Britain favors a nuclear-free Middle East.

Anti-Semitic incidents in France

Several anti-Semitic incidents occurred in the Paris suburbs.

On March 9, according to the National Office of Vigilance Against Anti-Semitism, a young man wearing a yarmulke was harassed by a gang of "African origin" when he got off the bus near his home in Sarcelles.

He was verbally, but not physically, threatened; his family has pressed charges. Last Friday, anti-Semitic graffiti was drawn on the wall of a junior high school in the suburb of Pantin.

In a separate event, a group of students made anti-Semitic remarks to Jewish students. The principal of the school immediately alerted authorities, who identified the culprits.

The students' families are pressing charges. The incidents come amid an upsurge in anti-Semitic violence in France, including the brutal murder of a French Jew by a gang of anti-Semitic thugs.

Rome chief rabbi tours mosque

Rome's chief rabbi visited the main mosque in his city. Riccardo Di Segni was given a tour Monday of the mosque by two Italian Muslim leaders.

The visit was part of efforts to increase Jewish-Muslim dialogue after the Mohammed cartoon controversy.

Art exhibit in Germany criticized

Germany's main Jewish organization lambasted an artist for filling a former synagogue with poison gas.

The installation is part of a trend of what some call "transgressive art" and others call an insult to the memory of Holocaust survivors.

To protest what he calls the "banalization of Holocaust remembrance," Spanish artist Santiago Sierra is pumping exhaust fumes from six cars into the former synagogue in Pulheim-Stommeln near Cologne.

Visitors can enter the installation wearing gas masks on Sundays through April 30, except for Easter.

European socialists open on Hamas

Leaders of European socialist parties said Europe should be open to talks with a Palestinian government led by Hamas.

The leaders, meeting in Prague on Sunday, agreed that the European Union should play the role of a "peace protector" in the Middle East, said former Danish Prime Minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, who chairs the European Socialist Party.

Official European Union policy is to oppose talks with a Hamas-led government unless it renounces terrorism and recognizes the State of Israel.

MIDDLE EAST

Purim bombing foiled

Israeli security forces thwarted a Palestinian bombing attempt.

Troops stationed outside the West Bank city of Nablus caught two Palestinian youths trying to smuggle a 35-pound bomb across a

checkpoint, military sources said Monday.

The device is believed to have been intended for use against Israelis celebrating Purim.

In northern Israel, the armed forces were put on high alert for a possible attack by Hezbollah gunmen in Lebanon.

Hamas platform backs 'resistance'

In its proposed platform for the next Palestinian Authority government, Hamas reiterated its right to "armed resistance" against Israel.

The focus of the platform, which was submitted to P.A. President Mahmoud Abbas last Friday, is to establish an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital, and implement the "right of return" for Palestinian refugees, Ha'aretz reported.

The platform also said a Hamas-led government would reconsider agreements previously signed by the Palestinian Authority, which presumably would include agreements signed with Israel.

Large Purim pastry baked

An Israeli bakery unveiled a half-ton hamantash.

Angel's Bakery in Jerusalem, with the help of the Soldiers Welfare Association, prepared the traditional poppy-seed pastry Monday in honor of Purim.

Organizers of the event said the 1,012-pound hamantash, which later was broken up to be eaten by Israeli army conscripts, was an achievement worthy of the Guinness Book of World Records.

NORTH AMERICA

Rice to ask Indonesia to pressure Hamas

Condoleezza Rice will ask Indonesia to pressure Hamas to recognize Israel and renounce violence.

"I would hope that Indonesia would add its voice to those who are saying to Hamas that this is the strategic choice that must be made," the U.S. secretary of state said on the eve of a tour this week that will bring her to the world's most populous Muslim nation.

Americans enter Holocaust cartoon contest

Six Americans reportedly have entered an Iranian newspaper's Holocaust cartoon contest.

One cartoon shows an Israeli soldier pointing a gun at a Palestinian's head with the words, "What has Ariel Sharon learned from the Holocaust?" Mike Fluggenock, the cartoon's creator, sent an e-mail to The Associated Press denying that the cartoon is anti-Semitic.

"It specifically addresses policies of the Israeli state with regard to its behavior in Palestine, and their similarities to the strategies employed by the Nazi regime in Warsaw and elsewhere," he wrote.

The Iranian newspaper launched the contest after some Western newspapers printed controversial cartoons depicting the Islamic prophet Mohammed.

Israeli, U.S. labor leaders sign pact

Labor leaders in Boston and Haifa hailed an agreement promoting stronger ties between union members in the sister cities.

The agreement — the first between an Israeli and a U.S. city — was signed by Rich Rogers, executive secretary-treasurer of the Greater Boston Labor Council, and Baruch Zalts, chairman of the Histadrut-Haifa Labor Council.

The pact calls for information sharing and an exchange of delegates to advance the welfare of workers and promote the right to organize unions.

The first-ever Boston labor delegation will visit Haifa next summer, said David Borrus, an organizer for the carpenters union and co-chair of Boston's Jewish Labor Committee.