

IN THE NEWS
Kadima gains seat in final results

Final election results boosted Ehud Olmert's chances of forming an Israeli government that will support a West Bank withdrawal.

Final tallies released Thursday gave an extra seat each to the Kadima, Likud and Meretz parties, and took away one each from Shas, Yisrael Beiteinu and the United Arab List.

That leaves a 61-seat majority for pro-withdrawal parties such as Kadima, Labor, Pensioners and Meretz.

The changes came after votes were counted from soldiers and foreign diplomats, among others.

Rice: U.S. may back withdrawal

The United States could back a partial Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said Thursday in Berlin that the Bush administration would wait for more details of an Israeli plan before deciding whether to back it.

Ehud Olmert, who seems likely to be asked to form Israel's next government, has stated that a West Bank withdrawal would be the focus of his government.

'Quartet' warns Hamas on terrorism

The "Quartet" working for Mideast peace warned the new Palestinian government to recognize Israel and renounce terrorism if it wants financial aid.

The statement by the diplomatic body composed of the United States, European Union, Russia and United Nations came Thursday, a day after a Hamas-led government was sworn in for the Palestinian Authority.

The new P.A. foreign minister, Mahmoud Zahar, has said Hamas has no plans to change its policies on these issues.

The European Union currently gives the Palestinians \$600 million a year.

WORLD REPORT

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



Brian Hendler

Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ehud Olmert acknowledges cheers as he makes his victory speech Wednesday near Jerusalem.

In Washington, Israel's Olmert is well-known — and well-liked

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Low-key, detail-oriented, a master of the backroom deal: The same qualities that make Prime Minister-elect Ehud Olmert uninspiring for some Israelis are the ones that Americans who deal with him find exciting.

Olmert's attention to the fine print and his less-than-mythic status in Israel have become subjects of parody at home.

But it's just those qualities that have made him a favorite among Jewish officials and politicians in Washington.

"He's very familiar to many members of this administration, and across the board they

would all have had a positive impression of him," said Daniel Kurtzer, who was U.S. ambassador to Israel until last summer and who now lectures at Princeton University. "He's very smart, focused on details. When you're dealing with him, you're not dealing with someone uninterested in substance."

Olmert's powers of persuasion are about to be put to the test: He has pledged to move ahead immediately with plans to withdraw unilaterally from more West Bank territory.

Olmert wants a Palestinian state in place by the end of his term, and says he will look for ways to deal with Palestinians not affiliated with Hamas, the terrorist group set to assume control of the Palestinian Author-

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HEADLINES**

■ *Olmert's quiet diplomacy and transparency have made allies in Washington*

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ity after winning legislative elections in January.

The P.A. president, Mahmoud Abbas, outlined a similar scenario over the weekend: The Palestine Liberation Organization, which has no Hamas affiliation, would be the partner, Abbas said in interviews, and Abbas would bypass the Hamas Cabinet and Parliament by putting any deal to a popular referendum.

Abbas did not explain how he planned to control Hamas, which already was setting much of the agenda through terrorist attacks even before it took over the government.

U.S. officials say they're eager to get started with the new Israeli government.

"We will of course engage with the Israeli government in discussions about how we move forward," Condoleezza Rice, the U.S. secretary of state, said on CNN this weekend. "I would note that the unilateral withdrawal from Gaza ended up turning over to the Palestinians territory for the first time in the 30-some years of this conflict, and that was a good thing."

Daniel Ayalon, Israel's ambassador to Washington, said Olmert has a policy wonk's understanding of the United States.

"He has a very strong command of how Washington works. Not just Washington — he knows how the United States works," Ayalon told JTA. "On the state level, even local politics; it's quite impressive: He knows many of the governors by name."

Kurtzer agreed: "He knows how to make the rounds of a room."

Olmert's best deals have been done in back rooms, said Marvin Lender, a Connecticut businessman who is one of Olmert's most ardent U.S. backers.

"Ehud has always worked behind the scenes," Lender said. "He has built tremendous relationships in Washington."

His charms are evident in one-on-one relationships, Kurtzer said. Olmert's friendship with Robert Zoellick, the U.S. trade representative until last year, was key to settling a prickly customs-free trade agreement among Israel, the United States and Egypt, Kurtzer said.

His admirers admit that Olmert, whose military career was undistinguished and whose reflexive sarcasm often gets in the way of his lofty thoughts, may not be equal in stature to mythmakers like Yitzhak Rabin or Ariel Sharon.

"He doesn't come with negative baggage, but he also doesn't come with a hero status," said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

Nonetheless, Olmert's association with Sharon, the larger-than-life warrior-statesman whose debilitating stroke in January set the stage for Olmert's ascension to the Prime Minister's Office, will help sustain him.

"A critical door-opener for this administration is that he was Sharon's choice as the alternative prime minister," Kurtzer said.

Olmert's loyalty to Sharon also is a plus, said Rep. Gary Ackerman of New York, a senior Democrat on the U.S. House of Representatives' International Relations Committee.

"His loyalty was legendary," said Ackerman, who met with Olmert the day after Sharon's stroke. "You didn't have to guess where he was going to stand. He made it clear at that meeting that he was not the prime minister, that he was hoping and praying that the prime minister would take his rightful place."

Since then, Olmert has left Sharon's seat empty at Cabinet meetings.

Olmert's distaste for soaring rhetoric and lack of a glorious military career may be a welcome change in a Washington used to Israeli leaders who often seem to aspire

to prophecy, said David Makovsky, an analyst with the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

"The United States will be very cognizant of the fact that he doesn't have Sharon's gravitas or his national security credentials," Makovsky said of Olmert.

"Frankly, the idea of a civilian prime minister will be refreshing here in Washington."

Olmert already has staked out differences with Sharon, mapping out clear plans for the next four years: unilateral withdrawals from the West Bank

that for the most part would hew to the security barrier; evacuating 70,000 settlers and annexing other settlements that would bring at least another 100,000 settlers under Israeli sovereignty.

Olmert maintains Sharon's legacy of setting borders for an Israel that is guaranteed a Jewish majority, but "in many ways he's far more explicit in the scope of his political goals," Makovsky said. "The White House is gratified he made those ideas of settlement evacuations clear before the election."

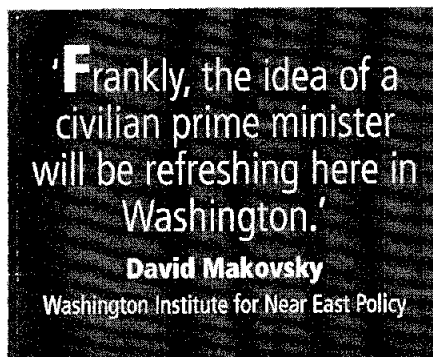
Sharon typically played his cards much closer to his chest, and delayed discussing the dimensions of last year's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and a portion of the West Bank until it was inevitable. Sharon also jealously guarded Israeli sovereignty, casting the withdrawal as solely an Israeli prerogative.

Olmert has said he would consult immediately with the "Quartet" — the diplomatic grouping of the United States, Russia, European Union and United Nations, which is overseeing the Israeli-Palestinian peace process — as soon as the elections are over.

However he proceeds, Olmert will have an attentive ear here, cultivated over years of transatlantic dealings: First, as Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir's U.S. point man during the Madrid negotiations in 1991 and then as Jerusalem mayor from 1993-2003, when he stressed Israel's claim to the entire, unified city.

"He brought people closer emotionally to Jerusalem," Lender said.

Washington Staff Writer Matthew E. Berger contributed to this 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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'Israel lobby' paper a dud on Hill

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Two weeks after two prominent political science professors published a paper that they promised would expose the pro-Israel lobby in the United States, the collective reaction so far suggests they get a D for impact.

"The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy," by John Mearsheimer, a professor of political science at the University of Chicago, and Stephen Walt, a professor of international affairs at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, has been the subject of numerous Op-Eds — which generally have discredited it — but has been all but ignored in the halls of Congress, its purported target.

Among other assertions, the paper suggests that the pro-Israel lobby — and particularly the American Israel Public Affairs Committee — have helped make the United States more vulnerable to terrorist attacks, steered the country into the Iraq war, silenced debate on campuses and in the media, cost the United States friends throughout the world and corrupted U.S. moral standing.

The paper's "disagreement is not with America's pro-Israel lobby, but with the American people, who overwhelmingly support our relationship with Israel," said an official with a pro-Israel lobbying organization in Washington.

The Anti-Defamation League called the paper "an amateurish and biased critique of Israel, American Jews, and American policy."

Especially outrageous, some said, are the paper's insinuations that Jewish officials in government are somehow suspect.

"Not only are these charges wildly at variance with what I have personally witnessed in the Oval Office, but they also impugn the unstinting service to America's national security by public figures like Dennis Ross, Martin Indyk and many others," David Gergen, Walt's fellow academic at the Kennedy School and a veteran of four administrations, wrote in an opinion piece in the New York Daily News.

One of the few positive reviews came from white supremacist David Duke, who said the authors reiterate points he has been making for years.

The controversy passed almost unnoticed on Capitol Hill. A statement from

Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.) was typical of the few who bothered to pay attention to the paper, which Nadler called "little more than a repackaging of old conspiracy theories, historical revisionism, and a distorted understanding of U.S. strategic interest."

U.S. support of Israel was no mystery, Nadler said: "Israel is our only democratic and reliable ally in an extremely volatile and strategically important region. It is in our nation's best interests to maintain that alliance."

The authors anticipated silence, arguing that the Israel lobby is "manipulating the media." The problem with that theory is that some of the harshest criticism of the paper has come from individuals and groups who have long called for changes in how the United States deals with Israel. "It was a lot of warmed-over arguments that have been tossed about for years, brought together in a rather unscholarly fashion and presented as a Harvard document, clearly not deserving of the title," said Lewis Roth, assistant executive director of Americans for Peace Now, a group that has argued for increased U.S. pressure on Israel to achieve a peace agreement.

In fact, Mearsheimer and Walt have quietly removed the imprimatur of the Harvard and Kennedy schools that originally appeared on the paper.

"It read more like an opinion piece than serious research, and even as opinion it was so overreaching in some of its claims," Roth said. "It didn't have a lot of utility."

One of the harshest critics of the paper was Noam Chomsky, the political theorist who routinely excoriates the U.S.-Israel relationship. He ridiculed the paper's central "wag the dog" thesis, that the United States has "been willing to set aside its own security in order to advance the interests of another state."

Walt and Mearsheimer "have a highly selective use of evidence (and much of the evidence is assertion)," Chomsky wrote in an e-mail to followers. One example, he says, is how the paper cites Israel's arms sales to China as evidence that the Jewish state detracts from U.S. security interests.

"But they fail to mention that when the U.S. objected, Israel was compelled to back down: under Clinton in 2000, and again in 2005, in this case with the Washington neocon regime going out of its way to humiliate Israel," Chomsky notes.

Walt and Mearsheimer see as interchangeable the pro-Israel lobby and the neo-conservatives who have developed Bush's foreign policy.

One of the paper's more curious conclusions is that "what sets the Israel Lobby apart is its extraordinary effectiveness. But there is nothing improper about American Jews and their Christian allies attempting to sway U.S. policy towards Israel."

If so, it begs the question of why Walt and Mearsheimer set out to write the paper. Mearsheimer did not return a call for comment.

In other areas, the paper gets facts wrong, for example

when it says Israel wanted to sell its Lavie fighter aircraft to the United States, when it was strictly a domestic project.

According to the writers, "pressure from Israel and the Lobby was not the only factor behind the U.S. decision to attack Iraq in March 2003, but it was a critical element."

Off the record, Jewish officials here reverse that equation, saying their support for the Iraq war was necessary in order to curry favor with a White House that was hell-bent on war.

"That really jumped out at me," Roth said. "Among nasty neighbors, Iran was clearly the greater threat."

Jewish groups and individuals at first were reluctant to react to a paper they saw as impugning their patriotism, but in time they could not resist. Detailed debunkings of Walt and Mearsheimer have proliferated.

Some of these, notably by fellow Harvard professors Ruth Wisse and Alan Dershowitz, have likened the writers to Duke — a former leader of the Ku Klux Klan — and other anti-Semites.

For some Jews, however, the criticism proved that despite the paper's flaws, it correctly identified a symptom afflicting discussion of Israel: a tendency to dismiss all criticism as anti-Semitism.

FOCUS
ON
ISSUES

One of the paper's few positive reviews came from white supremacist David Duke.

Refugee head faces greatest test

By MICHAEL J. JORDAN

NEW YORK (JTA) — The honeymoon was sure to end sooner or later. Since Karen Koning AbuZayd took the reins nearly a year ago of the U.N. relief agency for Palestinian refugees, Israeli officials had praised her for steering clear of the politics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

But the smoother sailing was misleading. AbuZayd's controversial predecessor, Peter Hansen, had served during the intifada, when Israel cracked down on terrorists in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, often via incursions into UNRWA refugee camps that were incubators of militancy.

During the relative calm since AbuZayd took over UNRWA, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, Israel had conducted no large-scale operations — and so had not come in for UNRWA criticism.

That has changed in recent weeks, with an Israel Defense Force offensive into the Balata refugee camp in Nablus and elsewhere to hunt down wanted men.

With that, AbuZayd has made herself heard — in UNRWA's familiar, imbalanced fashion.

"Israeli military operations have continued in the OPT, including daily shelling (in response to Kassam rocket attacks), targeted assassinations in Gaza and new incursions in the West Bank," AbuZayd told diplomats of the 21-nation UNRWA Advisory Commission on Feb. 27 in Amman. "In the latest IDF operation in Balata camp, some of our installations were commandeered by the IDF, despite all efforts made by my West Bank colleagues and myself at preventing these unacceptable and illegal intrusions."

Not only did AbuZayd adopt the language of the Palestinian narrative — the OPT refers to the "Occupied Palestinian Territories" — but her passive wording skipped over the fact that the Kassams were launched by Palestinians. And that was the lone reference to Palestinian violence; in contrast, several paragraphs focus on Israeli actions, with no mention of their motives.

That sort of one-sidedness was familiar from the days of the intifada. While supplying vital relief and shelter for the neediest of its 1.6 million clients in Gaza and the West Bank, UNRWA made repeated statements that skimmed over, if not outright



Eskinder Debebe/UN

U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, right, and wife Nane, left, arrive at UNRWA's West Bank field office in 2005, accompanied by Karen Koning AbuZayd, second from left, the UNRWA commissioner-general, and her predecessor, Peter Hansen.

ignored, Palestinian violence.

That lack of context and short shrift to Israeli security concerns — by a U.N. agency that presents itself as neutral — helped create a popular impression of disproportionate, gratuitous Israeli violence. If the situation grows more violent, AbuZayd's words will surely be watched closely by supporters of Israel.

In a quarter-century of refugee work, AbuZayd, 64, has helped the displaced and dispossessed of Uganda, Chad, Ethiopia, Namibia, Liberia, and South Africa.

With Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip last summer, the Ohio native now faces her toughest challenge — overseeing the historic transition from occupation to sovereignty and, potentially, an end to the Palestinians' perpetual refugee status.

UNRWA has unveiled a vast reconstruction and recovery plan that AbuZayd says will cost "several hundred million dollars over several years."

If Palestinians see tangible benefits of steps toward peace with Israel — freedom of movement, a decent-paying job, food on the table — they'll be less likely to take up arms, she said, or support those who do.

Of course, that also was the theory behind the Oslo peace process, and it failed to temper militancy.

Nevertheless, that is AbuZayd's philosophy — and, as the top administrator and fund-raiser for an organization responsible for nearly 4.3 million registered Palestinian refugees across the Middle East, she commands a unique pulpit.

With the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as much a battle for public opinion as a struggle on the ground, the debate often becomes a contest of conflicting narratives. In this debate, supporters of Israel say, an agency that is bound by the U.N. Charter to be neutral and impartial has been anything but.

AbuZayd took over UNRWA last April, after four and a half years of intifada violence in which Hansen had become a vocal defender of the Palestinians.

Hansen was unrepentant about his advocacy, yet he reportedly became too much of a liability for U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who was under pressure from the United States for various other controversies. The United States is UNRWA's largest donor — typically providing about 30 percent of its annual budget — and was fiercely critical of Hansen's bias.

It was against that background that AbuZayd took over, to her good fortune, during the quietest period in six years.

Still, as presaged by AbuZayd's reaction to the recent Balata incursion, that could all change if the intifada resumes under a Hamas-led Palestinian Authority.

UNMASKING
UNRWA

AbuZayd's idea to
temper terrorism
with jobs and food
ignores incitement in
mosques and schools.

A clear case of double standards?

By MICHAEL J. JORDAN

NEW YORK (JTA) — Armed gunmen roamed freely in United Nations refugee camps. They stockpiled weapons, recruited refugees and launched cross-border attacks.

In response, opposing forces attacked the camps, aiming for the gunmen — but sometimes cutting down civilians in the process.

The international community was troubled both by the instability fomented and the thought of the beleaguered refugees — exploited within the camps, denied a truly safe haven, then caught in the crossfire.

So the United Nations took action.

U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan produced a pair of landmark reports singling out the militarization of refugee camps as a cause of conflict and insecurity. He called for the “separation of armed elements from refugee populations” to maintain the camps’ civilian character. And he outlined several steps to police the camps.

The U.N. Security Council followed suit in 1998 with Resolution 1208, defending the sanctity of refugee camps and criminalizing their militarization.

What was the source of this international concern — the Palestinian camps in Gaza and the West Bank? No, it was Africa in the mid-1990s,

To defenders of Israel, the scenario described above sounds familiar. They question why the world body has never applied Resolution 1208 to the 27 U.N. refugee camps in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, which were a prime source of attacks during the violent Palestinian uprising that began in September 2000.

Security Council resolutions carry the weight of international law — and Resolution 1208 itself makes note of the fact that it should be universally applied.

The question of the Palestinian exception to 1208 is more than theoretical. Despite moves toward reform in other areas, the U.N. General Assembly is unlikely to make any changes to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, which provides relief and social services to the majority of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. Thus, an appeal to the Security Council to apply Resolution 1208 may be a viable option if, as some predict, the intifada is

renewed and terrorists again use UNRWA camps to plan and launch attacks against Israel.

Annan himself underscored the universality of Resolution 1208 in March 2001 when reports of similar abuses emerged from refugee camps in West Timor.

Yet Annan hasn’t voiced similar outrage regarding Palestinian militancy in UNRWA camps.

UNRWA says it acknowledges Israel’s security needs and right to self-defense, but that civilian well-being should take priority.

An UNRWA defender agrees.

“Of course there are people trying to use these places, but having armed people inside the camps doesn’t legitimize Israel’s attacks on civilians,” says Raji Sourani, director of the Gaza-based Palestinian Centre for Human Rights.

Yet critics say that if UNRWA really is concerned about civilians, it should speak out against any action that endangers them — including Palestinian attacks, launched from among civilians, that provoke Israeli retaliation.

The militarization of UNRWA camps is not a new revelation: In 1982, President Reagan accused UNRWA of allowing its Lebanese camps to become armed bastions of the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Forced to investigate when Reagan threatened to withhold U.S. funding for the organization, UNRWA admitted that several camps indeed had been militarized.

While the Security Council hasn’t enforced 1208 in the Palestinian territories, it has applied pressure on militant Palestinian refugees elsewhere.

Some Palestinian supporters argue that Resolution 1208 shouldn’t apply to the West Bank because Palestinians there are engaged in “legitimate resistance to occupation.”

Israel’s defenders, though, say it’s a clear case of double standards.

“Here the U.N. has adopted clear criteria for how refugee camps are supposed to be maintained, and consistently fails to apply its own law when it comes to the Is-

raeli-Palestinian conflict,” said Dore Gold, Israel’s former U.N. ambassador and current president of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. “One of the most compelling arguments for demonstrating how Israel is systematically denied the same rights and privileges given to other member states is the story of Resolution 1208.”

In an interview with JTA, UNRWA Commissioner-General Karen Koning AbuZayd acknowledged that Resolution 1208 officially applies to UNRWA camps, but added that “it requires action to be taken by the authorities where the camps are located, not by the humanitarian agencies.”

Yet a line needs to be drawn somewhere, Astrid Van Genderen Stort, a spokeswoman for the U.N. High Commission for Refugees said.

“For me, a refugee camp is a place where people in need of protection or assistance can find it,” she said. “A refugee camp shouldn’t be a battleground or a place where criminals are hiding.”

Kofi Annan hasn't
voiced outrage about
Palestinian militancy in
U.N. camps in the West
Bank and Gaza.



BP IMAGES

Israeli soldiers look at a tunnel thought to be used by Palestinians to smuggle weapons in the Rafah refugee camp in Gaza in 2003.

Palestinians unimpressed with Kadima win

By URIEL HEILMAN

KALANDIA CHECKPOINT, West Bank, (JTA) — The day after an historic election that realigned Israel's political landscape, little has changed at the Kalandia Checkpoint on the outskirts of Ramallah.

Palestinians still file past well-armed Israeli soldiers, bulldozers still work on closing gaps in the 20-foot high concrete wall that constitutes this part of Israel's West Bank security barrier and optimism about the future remains in short supply.

“Each one of the Israeli parties wants Israel to be in control, the occupier of the Palestinians, so none of them will give us the state, none of them will give us our rights,” said Gada K., a Palestinian woman headed through the checkpoint in the direction of Jerusalem.

“They are not concerned with the Palestinian people. They have the power; we are weak.”

Ehud Olmert, Kadima Party head and prime minister-elect, has proposed an Israeli withdrawal from almost all of the West Bank — facilitating, he says, the creation of a Palestinian state. He also called on Palestinians to compromise on their dreams in order to live next to Israel in peace.

Still, even with the old warrior Ariel Sharon gone from the political scene, the right-wing Likud Party left in tatters and Hamas in power in the Palestinian Authority, Palestinians say they expect few positive developments from an election that solidified Kadima's place at the helm of Israeli politics.

The Israelis “do whatever they want. Nobody can stop them,” said Faisal Salam, a Palestinian from Beir Nebaleh, near Ramallah.

In many ways, Palestinians reacted to Israel's elections with the same resignation and sense of fatalism that attended Israelis' reaction to Hamas' electoral victory in Palestinian Authority legislative elections two months ago.

“The State of Israel's policy is consistent, no matter who's in power,” said Sam Bahour, a Palestinian-American businessman who lives in El Bireh, a suburb of Ramallah. “I would not have been more excited or less excited if anyone else would have won.”

The reactions on the day after the election reflect the mindset Olmert will encounter as he seeks to push forward with his policy of separating Israelis and Palestinians.

Maher Abu-Gaidh, who lives in the village of Karyout, between Nablus and Ramallah and adjacent to four Israeli settlements, says Hamas is the only option for confronting Israel.

“I think the current policy of Hamas is the only solution to make Israelis change their minds,” Abu-Gaidh said. “They need a hard government — hard in their decisions, hard in their opinions.”

Abu-Gaidh suggested that Hamas' hard line is political posturing intended to bring about a two-state solution along the pre-1967 boundaries, known as the Green Line.

If Israel agreed to release Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails, withdraw from the West Bank and cede eastern Jerusalem, Hamas would yield to pan-Arab pressure and agree to a two-state solution, Abu-Gaidh predicted.

Hamas spokesmen have spoken of a long-term cease-fire, but have hinted that they would keep the underlying conflict alive for future generations to resume.

In any case, if change does not come soon, there will be more violence, Abu-Gaidh warned.

“Hamas really came to governing to make a change, and they need to give the Palestinian people the feeling that something has changed,” he said.

“So if the situation is really the same, with more settlements, there will be vio-

lence,” and Ismail Haniyeh, Hamas' prime minister, “will encourage such violence.”

Despite the general perception of Kadima as a centrist party — and the fact that it is likely to reach out to left-wing parties such as Labor and Meretz as coalition partners — Palestinians seem to view Kadima as right-wing.

“Kadima is on the extreme right wing,” said Nazeeh Shalabi, from the village of Mascha.

He ticked off Olmert's “right-wing” policies one by one: all of Jerusalem should remain under Israeli sovereignty, the security fence will become the future border between Israel and a Palestinian state, and Israel will annex some Jewish settlements close to the Green Line.

“He says he is left or in the middle and wants to make peace, but he takes everything he wants,” Shalabi said.

After years of peace talks ended in intifada violence, Israel began building its West Bank security fence and withdrew from the Gaza Strip.

But Shalabi, like many Palestinians, said Israel's unilateralism had come at a heavy cost for Palestinians.

A father of eight, Shalabi has not worked in some time. He says part of his agricultural property was confiscated by the Israeli government — even though he lives more than four miles from the Green Line — and he has had to feed his family by farming what remains of his land.

“All the agreements Israel signed with the Palestinian Authority since 1993 didn't accomplish anything,” Shalabi said.

“We live in open-air prisons with a wall around us,” Bahour said.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

‘All the agreements Israel signed with the Palestinian Authority since 1993 didn't accomplish anything.’

Nazeeh Shalabi

FBI stopped Hezbollah smugglers

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The FBI broke up a ring that tried to smuggle Hezbollah operatives into the United States.

In testimony Tuesday to Congress on the FBI's budget request, director Robert Mueller said most recent reports on ter-

rorist smuggling do not pan out. However, he identified one that did: “This was an occasion in which Hezbollah operatives were assisting others with some association with Hezbollah in coming to the United States,” Mueller said.

ARTS & CULTURE

Ethiopian-Israeli cracks up audiences

By LOOLWA KHAZZOOM

SAN FRANCISCO (JTA) — As part of his one-man theatrical comedy, "It Sounds Better in Amharic," Israeli actor Yossi Vassa recounted scenes from his youth in Uzava, the northern Ethiopian village where he was raised.

"Whenever my grandmother would visit, it was a big production. We'd all line up in front of the house and bow ourselves lower than her, out of respect. She was really short. That's why I have back problems now."

Vassa's show, which he recently took on tour across the United States, offers wry, humorous and sometimes painful insight into the experience of Ethiopian immigrants in Israel, and helps audiences glimpse a side of Israel they may not often hear about on the news.

Vassa left Ethiopia at age 10, making the dangerous journey to the Sudan as part of Operation Moses. During the nine months that he and his family waited to be airlifted to Israel, Vassa's two little brothers and grandmother died from harsh conditions — including lack of medicine — and Vassa nearly lost his life as well.

Though these traumas haunted Vassa in the years to follow, he shares them with both grace and humor through his performance — making it easy for audiences to listen, empathize and even laugh.

Poking fun at the 430-mile trek, for example, Vassa said, "I don't mean to brag, but it only took us three months. Exodus was 185 miles and took 40 years. Those guys were amateurs!"

Vassa studied theater at Haifa University. Among his many student projects, he wrote and acted in three Amharic comedies about the Ethiopian community in Israel.

Describing the community's first interactions with Israeli society, he remarked, "They gave us all Israeli names, names that had nothing to do with who we were. Like the Ethiopian girls they called Levana," or "white."

On the culture clash between Ethiopians and non-Ethiopians in Israel, he jibed "At the bus stop, I saw this white guy with head-to-toe tattoos. I said, 'Wake up, man! In Africa we write on paper now!'" ■

Munich Olympics survivor speaks

By SARAH LASKOW

NEW HAVEN (JTA) — Dan Alon, an Israeli fencer and 1972 Olympic athlete, never talked about his experience at the Munich Games and the Palestinian terrorist attack on the Israeli delegation. The reason was simple: No one ever asked him.

At the time, he said, the media was focused on the victims and their families.

"I couldn't just go out on the street and shout, 'I'm a survivor, I want to talk!'" says Alon, 61. "So I didn't talk about it for 30 years."

On March 23, Alon's wife and daughter heard his story for the first time, along with more than 200 students at Yale University. Alon began speaking in depth about the attack and the death of his coach, Andre Spitzer, only after Steven Spielberg's film "Munich" prompted a Chabad group in England to seek out a survivor's story.

The event at Yale, the first time Alon has spoken in the United States about his experiences, was sponsored by Chabad at Yale and the student group Yale Friends of Israel. Alon began fencing when he was 12 and dreamed of competing in the Olympics. In 1972, then aged 27, Alon marched into the Olympic stadium in Munich under the Israeli flag.

"I was in heaven," he said. "It was the most beautiful day of my life."

Six days later, on Sept. 5, 1972, the Palestinian terrorist organization Black September took 11 Israeli athletes and coaches hostage in their rooms at the Olympic Village. None of the hostages survived.

Alon appears briefly in the flashback footage in "Munich." While he says he has no special insight into the Israeli retaliation for the Olympic attack Alon says the parts depicting the kidnapping in the Olympic village are quite accurate.

At 4:30 a.m., Alon was sleeping in his room in the second of five units that housed the Israeli squad. He and his teammate awoke to the sound of machine gun fire.

The walls of the room shook.

The eight terrorists already had captured the coaches in the first suite, inexplicably passed by Alon's room and overpowered the weightlifters and wrestlers in the third unit.

On the night of the attack, the athletes in No. 2 avoided capture, but were trapped in their suite. Their clearest exits — the front door and the second-floor balcony — would expose them to the terrorists guarding the suite next door.

Initially, members of an Israeli marksmanship team at the Games proposed attacking the terrorists, but — without knowing the number of adversaries — the plan seemed too risky. Instead, the athletes decided to leave through the first-floor window.

Alon and his companions walked with excruciating care down the noisy wooden steps to the first floor. One by one the four exited, sprinting toward German police officers and safety.

Alon said he agreed with the Olympic Committee's decision to

continue the Games.

"We can never give in to terrorism," he said.

The remnants of the Israeli team returned home on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, but it was four or five months before Alon could sleep soundly at night.

"I asked my brother to sleep with me in my bed. One night a chair fell on him, and he jumped up," he said. "I started to scream and hit him."

Despite his talent and many championships, Alon gave up fencing. He returned to the sport only once, at age 46, when he again won the Israeli fencing championship.

He began a career in business and now is a manager-director at a plastics company. He met his wife, Adele — a native of Cape Town — while she was hitchhiking in Israel. They have three children, one of whom also fences.

Whether from the movie or from his story, Alon wants the world to know what happened in Munich. Now that he has begun talking, he says, the words come more easily each time. ■

Alon called the first day of the Olympics 'the most beautiful day of my life.'

NEWS IN BRIEF

WORLD

U.N.: Gaza pullout didn't harm environment

Israel's pullout from Gaza did not harm the coastal strip's environment, a report found.

Published by the United Nations Environment Program, the report said that Israel's demolition of thousands of buildings during its pullout last summer from Gaza did not damage the environment and that Palestinians would be able to use the evacuated land, The Associated Press reported.

According to the report, Israel left behind 1.2 million tons of rubble, some of which contained asbestos.

Nevertheless, the report said, "The scientific assessment report gives the Gaza pullout an environmental clean bill of health."

NORTH AMERICA

Bush: Palestinians face a choice

Palestinians must choose if they want a government that wants to destroy Israel, President Bush said.

"The Palestinians must make a choice as to whether or not it makes sense for them to have a government that says they want to destroy their neighbor," Bush said Wednesday.

"I don't think it does." Bush fielded questions at Freedom House, a Washington group that assesses democratization throughout the world.

A woman named Bushra identified herself as a Palestinian refugee and asked Bush, "Why is the United States punishing us and cutting funds for people who chose fair and free elections?" The United States is cutting funding to the Palestinian Authority now after the terrorist group Hamas assumed power after Palestinian Authority elections in January.

Bush replied, "I think that aid should go to suffering Palestinians," but not to a government "which has expressed its desire to destroy its neighbor."

Jewish groups welcome immigration reforms

Jewish groups welcomed an immigration bill that offers illegal immigrants a path to legal status. The bill the Senate Judiciary Committee referred to the full Senate on Wednesday considerably softens a version passed last year in the U.S. House of Representatives, which some had characterized as "enforcement only" because it didn't include avenues for illegal immigrants to change their status.

The National Council of Jewish Women, American Jewish Committee, Jewish Council for Public Affairs and Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society all backed the changes.

Chicago day schools set \$50 million goal

The Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago is launching a funding drive it hopes will raise \$50 million for local Jewish days schools.

Millions of dollars are expected to flow to schools throughout the Chicago area thanks to the new Jewish Day School Guaranty Trust. In an effort to get money quickly to schools with immediate financial needs, the trust income will be "front-loaded" — donations may come in over the course of a decade, but interest on the sum will be paid to schools up front.

The federation is borrowing up to \$40 million to make the front-loading possible. The federation also is offering a 10 percent match on gifts received through 2007.

The first gift to the trust was a \$1 million commitment from the Hochberg and Lowenstein families, who were involved in creating the program.

Jews join letter against 'anti-terror' bill

More than 300 organizations and businesses, including about a dozen small Jewish groups, signed a letter opposing the Palestinian Anti-Terrorism Act.

The petition presented this week to the act's principal sponsor, Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.), says the act "would punish and isolate the Palestinian people for exercising their right to vote." The letter, drafted by the U.S. Committee to End the Occupation, is signed by Jewish Voice for Peace, Tikkun and Bubbes & Zaydes for Peace in the Middle East, among other groups.

The act, strongly backed by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, was drafted in the wake of the electoral victory of Hamas. It would severely limit assistance to the Palestinians and restrict contacts between the United States and the Palestinian Authority.

House considers university funding

A bill in Congress would establish a board to advise the government on whether federally funded international relations programs benefit U.S. interests.

Jewish groups, including the American Jewish Congress and the American Jewish Committee, have strongly backed the higher education funding bill before the House of Representatives on Thursday. Two of its elements would address a perceived pro-Arab tilt in some federally funded programs.

Kerry backs yarmulke

John Kerry urged the U.S. Coast Guard to allow a Chasidic Jew to wear a yarmulke while on duty.

The Massachusetts senator wrote a letter Wednesday to the commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard in defense of Jack Rosenberg of Spring Valley, N.Y. After being sworn into the Coast Guard Auxiliary last year, Rosenberg was told by his commander that he was not permitted to wear a yarmulke while on duty. According to current Coast Guard regulations, "religious items" must be "concealed or worn only during religious services."

Kerry is the principal sponsor of the Workplace Religious Freedom Act.

ADL: Assad aids Holocaust denial

The Anti-Defamation League accused Syria's president of giving "aid and comfort" to Holocaust deniers. Appearing on the "Charlie Rose" show on PBS recently, Bashar Assad repeatedly refused to say whether he thought the Nazis murdered 6 million Jews, but said that "what is going on in Palestine" is the same as what happened to the Jews during the Holocaust.

Minnesota legislature gets anti-Semitic mail

Minnesota legislative leaders joined the state's Jewish Community Relations Council in denouncing anti-Semitic hate mail sent to members of the state legislature.

A joint statement Monday condemned the virulently anti-Semitic Winrod group of Gainesville, Mo., for sending the mail this week. The Winrod Group also sent similar mail to legislators in Colorado and Iowa.

MIDDLE EAST

Abbas phones Olmert

Mahmoud Abbas called Ehud Olmert to offer congratulations on his election victory. The Palestinian Authority president called Olmert on Thursday, two days after Olmert's Kadima Party won 29 seats in Israel's 120-seat Knesset, making it the largest party.