

IN THE NEWS
**Ahmadinejad to Bush:
Why does Israel exist?**

Iran's president told President Bush that the Iranian people do not understand "the phenomenon of Israel."

"Throughout history, many countries have been occupied, but I think the establishment of a new country with a new people is a new phenomenon that is exclusive to our times," Mahmoud Ahmadinejad wrote in an 18-page letter to Bush.

"Students are saying that 60 years ago such a country did not exist. They show old documents and globes and say, 'Try as we have, we have not been able to find a country named Israel.'"

Ahmadinejad also claimed that Israel "does not show mercy even to kids."

**Israel foils
explosives smuggling**

Israel foiled an attempt by Palestinians to smuggle half a ton of explosives into the Gaza Strip by sea.

A military spokesman said Tuesday that Israeli naval vessels spotted an Egyptian boat approaching Gaza's coast on May 3.

The crew dumped bags overboard and the boat sped off.

Israeli divers recovered the bags, finding 1,200 pounds of military grade TNT inside.

Two Palestinian boats at the scene were intercepted and their crews interrogated.

But the Palestinians were released after Israeli investigators determined that they did not know what they were smuggling.

**Bush extends
Syria sanctions**

President Bush extended sanctions against Syria.

Bush said in the announcement that Syria had not done enough to meet the conditions of the Syria Accountability Act since it was first implemented in May 2004. Syria also continues to back terrorist groups that target Israel.

WORLD REPORT

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On eve of Olmert visit, mixed signals on Palestinian aid confuse Congress

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — When Ehud Olmert gets a rare chance to explain to the combined houses of the U.S. Congress exactly what he wants, legislators will be more attentive than usual.

Barely two weeks before the Israeli prime minister's May 25 speech to Congress, a much-heralded congressional initiative to isolate the Palestinian Authority is in limbo, in part because no one is quite sure what Israel wants.

Top members of Congress, administration officials and senior diplomats are sorting through conflicting signals from Israel and its supporters as they attempt to formulate a policy on how to assist Palestinians while isolating their leaders.

Olmert arrives May 21, meets President Bush on May 23 and then addresses Congress. The congressional speech is a rare honor; one actively solicited by the Israeli Embassy in Washington, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee and other Jewish groups.

Olmert needs the reinforcement as he launches a plan to unilaterally withdraw from more of the West Bank. To get that support, he'll have to present a detailed outline of how he plans to deal with the Palestinians.

One sign of the confusion: The Palestinian Anti-Terrorism Act, which had accumulated 291 co-sponsors in the 435-member U.S. House of Representatives, was guaranteed passage in a vote scheduled for Tuesday when it was abruptly removed

from the congressional calendar.

Ostensibly that was because Rep. Jim Sensenbrenner (R-Wis.), chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, asked to sign off on the bill because it includes travel restrictions on Palestinian officials, and visas are his purview. The bill had been referred to the full House by the International Relations Committee, where it had been introduced by Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.).

Sensenbrenner's committee was to consider the bill Wednesday.

Yet congressional staffers involved in the negotiations insist Sensenbrenner's staff already had

signed off on the final draft. Furthermore, since last week Ros-Lehtinen had been blitzing journalists and fellow legislators with predictions that the bill would pass.

That left Hill staffers wondering what was really going on.

Israel's mixed signals were part of the problem. Olmert's government is not yet a week old, and he has yet to work out exactly how to deal with a Palestinian Authority tugged in different directions by the Cabinet — led by the terrorist group Hamas — and Mahmoud Abbas, the relatively moderate P.A. president from the Fatah Party.

Members of Congress who look to Israel for guidance wanted to wait until Olmert could articulate where exactly Israel stood before clamping down on the Palestinians.

That could take a few days. Israel is stinging from reports such as one in the New York Times on Monday describing a Gaza Strip on the verge of collapse because of its isolation. And while Israel is loathe to prop up the Hamas government in any way, some

Continued on page 2

NEWS
ANALYSIS

■ *A bill limiting Palestinian aid was shelved just before the House voted on it*

Continued from page 1

government officials feel that if Gaza plunges into chaos, it could endanger Israel and remove any leverage Israel has left with P.A. security forces.

Representatives of the "Quartet," the diplomatic grouping of the United States, United Nations, European Union and Russia, met Tuesday in New York to consider the problem. Condoleezza Rice, the U.S. secretary of state, pledged \$10 million in emergency assistance to the Palestinians, but said Hamas' refusal to recognize Israel and renounce terrorism remained the critical issue.

"No one wants to deal with a Palestinian government that, when there is a suicide bombing in Tel Aviv, finds it reason to celebrate," she said.

The Europeans reportedly have proposed paying overdue salaries to 165,000 P.A. employees through Abbas or through a World Bank mechanism. The Americans and the Israelis say the fungibility of money effectively means this will prop up Hamas, but they want to sustain livable conditions for the Palestinians.

In any case, it was clear that the Bush administration opposed the restrictions in Ros-Lehtinen's bill. In a strongly worded memo to House members distributed late last week, the State Department said the bill was "unnecessary" and was too restrictive of direct assistance to Abbas, a conduit the administration favors.

The Bush administration wants flexibility in dealing with Abbas "to ensure

he can fulfill his duties as president, prevent Hamas from taking over the rest of the P.A. and the PLO, and prevail in any confrontation with Hamas," the memo said.

For Congress members, the mixed signals were coming not just from Israel but from the pro-Israel community as well. Congressional staffers said a combined phone blitz by three dovish groups opposed to the Ros-Lehtinen bill was having an effect.

For the first time in a long time, as one staffer put it, there were "two possible pro-Israel votes": for and against the bill.

The three groups are Americans for Peace Now, the Israel Policy Forum and the Jewish Alliance for Justice and Peace. The groups say the bill's restrictions on presidential flexibility in dealing with the Palestinians are too broad and not limited to Hamas, but apply to the entire Palestinian political spectrum.

The legislation "undermines the U.S. role in bringing Israelis and Palestinians back to the negotiating table towards the end of achieving a two-state resolution of the conflict," the Alliance said in a letter to Congress members, backed up by phone calls from the group's grass-roots membership.

Another concern was that restrictions on assistance to non-governmental organizations that deal with the Palestinians would deepen the crisis.

The Israel Policy Forum "opposes aid to Hamas and any entity controlled by Hamas, but it strongly opposes legislation, such as this, which obstructs the delivery of essential aid to the Palestinian people," the group said in e-mails to legislators.

Such appeals apparently were having an effect. AIPAC, which lobbied hard for the bill, told journalists the delay was "procedural," but in a private alert to its members AIPAC

"strongly urged" them to maintain support for the bill by calling their representatives in Congress.

The alert outlined talking points to rebuff the dovish groups' points. The Senate and House versions of the act "allow humanitarian assistance to flow unfettered and maintain the president's flexibility to provide indirect non-humanitarian project assistance if he deems it is in the national security interests of the United States," the AIPAC memo said.

Within hours, Peace Now had e-mailed House members a rebuttal to AIPAC's rebuttal, saying the bill excessively restricts presidential prerogative.

The House version "requires the president to certify not only that the provision of such aid will further the national security interests of the U.S., but that he get Congress to approve such assistance in advance on a case-by-case basis, and that he explain how failure to provide the assistance would conflict with U.S. national security interests," Peace Now said.

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Jewish Studies Center for Austin

NEW YORK (JTA) — The University of Texas will soon boast the state's first center for Jewish studies.

The Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation has provided a \$6 million initial challenge grant, and the university has pledged to raise the remaining \$6 million over the next five years.

The center, which will be housed in the Religious Studies Department of the

College of Liberal Arts, will have three endowed chairs: Jewish history, Jewish thought and text studies. It also will support professorships in social science and literature.

Noting that U of T has more than 4,000 Jewish students, foundation president Lynn Schusterman said the school is "the ideal venue for a world-class Jewish studies center" that will become "an international beacon for Jewish studies." ■

Humanist Jews look to grow

By PENNY SCHWARTZ

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. (JTA) — When Rebekah Rosenfeld was 10 years old, she started the “I don’t believe in God” club. A logical choice for Rosenfeld, since she was raised in a secular humanist Jewish family in Rochester, N.Y.

“We didn’t actually do anything,” Rosenfeld recalls with a chuckle, “but I had this idea that I was going to form this atheist club. I even made up application forms.”

Now, 11 years later, a junior at Swarthmore College near Philadelphia, Rosenfeld admits she is not so sure.

Rosenfeld, who delivered the teen and young adult keynote address at the conference of the Society for Humanistic Judaism, describes herself as on a search, and says that while she values her upbringing, she is trying to find a level of observance that is comfortable for her.

Rosenfeld’s search exemplifies the challenge faced by the organization.

Founded in 1969 by a small group led by Sherwin Wine, an ordained rabbi who left the Reform movement, the Society for Humanistic Judaism rejects the concept of God. Instead, adherents celebrate Shabbat, holidays and b’nai mitzvah ceremonies, emphasizing Jewish identity through the lens of Jewish cultural and historical traditions.

At a time when Jewish organizations are continuing their seemingly eternal quest to attract younger Jews, leaders of the Society of Humanistic Judaism say the tenets of their philosophical, humanist approach to Judaism most resembles the secular character of a majority of Jews today.

Its leaders are embarking on fresh initiatives to attract new members in the United States, Israel and, increasingly, in Europe and South America.

The April 28-30 conference of 120 participants from across the United States attracted 40 teens and college students who participated in workshops such as Women in Humanism and volunteered for a community service program at a local charitable organization.

The conference posthumously honored Sigmund Freud on the 150th anniversary of his birth. The society says the beliefs of the leading figure in modern psychology

epitomized the tenets of secular Judaism.

The humanistic movement would be wise to avoid the tactic of merely trying to reel in young American Jews, cautions Joshua Neuman, who is editor and publisher of Heeb Magazine, which caters to young Jews in their 20s and 30s.

In his keynote speech at the Cambridge, Mass., convention, Neuman, who is not affiliated with the movement, describes his generation as having no connection to organized Jewish life, “although many [have] a feeling of deep connection to their Jewish identities.”

Young people are looking for authentic experiences, and are drawn to “real, open-ended conversations where there aren’t preordained answers, and about what it means to be Jewish in the 21st century,” Neuman told JTA.

The Society for Humanistic Judaism is in a unique position to connect with young Jews if they respond to these needs, he says.

While a majority of Jewish college students define themselves as secu-

lar, this does not mean they subscribe to the principles of humanistic Judaism, says Amy Sales, co-author of the recent Brandeis University study “Particularism in the University: Realities and Opportunities for Jewish Life on Campus.”

Sales cautions that college students don’t use the same language used by followers of humanistic Judaism. “We find that there are students who define themselves as secular or non-denominational Jews but they’re not atheists.”

The mission of attracting new members of all ages rests in large part on the increasing number of leaders being trained in the secular Judaism movement.

From the first humanistic congregation at the Birmingham Temple in Farmington Hills, Mich., in 1963, the Society of Humanistic Judaism has grown to 31 local branches in North America serving 10,000 members.

While the society began with individual memberships, it found people were looking

for a group or congregation, explains Rabbi Miriam Jerris, director of the society’s international rabbinic program.

The rabbinic program, which Jerris says includes traditional studies of biblical text and Talmud, as well as practical studies in congregational life, is a four-year program, including one year of field work. Students are required to have at least an accredited master’s degree in Jewish studies, which they can earn simultaneously, Jerris says. They must also know Hebrew.

The society is attracting a growing number of students into its own rabbinical program.

Since 1997, eight rabbis have been ordained, and three more are enrolled in the four-year program, says Jerris, who was the group’s first executive director. Jerris has known Wine since her childhood, when

he was the rabbi at her Reform congregation in Canada.

Last Friday, Rabbi Peter Schweitzer was inducted as the first full-time humanistic rabbi in New York, at the City Congregation, a humanistic congregation that will receive a \$50,000 Pivnick community development

grant established by Lorraine and Ben Pivnick.

But the latest and most exciting frontier for the society is unfolding in Israel, according to Wine, where, in December, for the first time, nine rabbis who are enrolled in the Israeli branch of its rabbinical institute will be ordained.

Others will follow, Wine predicts, as there are 34 Israeli students currently enrolled in the institute, located in Jerusalem.

The Israeli rabbinical students range in age from 30 to 50 years old, and are choosing a second career, Wine says, many having worked as teachers, social workers and community organizers.

“They really feel they have a mission. They have organized themselves as a group of people who can perform secular ceremonies for people, for newborn babies, bar and bat mitzvahs, and funerals, and are beginning to create their own communities.”

FOCUS ON ISSUES

‘There are students who define themselves as secular or non-denominational Jews but they’re not atheists.’

Amy Sales
Brandeis University

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Israeli meets with Hamas lawmakers

An Israeli government official reportedly held talks with jailed Hamas lawmakers.

Although Israel cut formal ties with the Palestinian Authority since Hamas took power, an Arab affairs adviser in the Internal Security Ministry recently met with several lawmakers from the radical Islamic group held in Israeli prisons, Yediot Achronot reported Tuesday.

The ministry confirmed that the official had met with Palestinian security prisoners but had no further comment.

Poll: Israeli Jews want Arabs out

Almost two in three Israeli Jews want their Arab compatriots to leave the country, a poll found.

According to the Israel Democracy Institute survey released Tuesday, 62 percent of Israeli Jews answered yes when asked if they would support the government encouraging Israeli Arabs to emigrate.

Arabs make up 20 percent of the Israeli population and many are thought to be generally sympathetic to the Palestinian cause.

Israelis warned over Sinai

Israeli tourists were urged to leave Egypt's Sinai Peninsula for fear they could be kidnapped.

The Israeli government's Counter-Terrorism Unit issued an advisory Monday against travel to Egyptian Red Sea resorts, citing "concrete" intelligence warnings of a terrorist plot to abduct Israelis.

The number of Israelis vacationing in the Sinai has dropped off sharply since the area became a target for Islamist suicide bombers over the past two years, but a hardcore group of travel aficionados remains loyal.

Israeli border officials reported that, as of noon Tuesday, no Israelis had returned from Sinai.

But they allowed that word of the travel advisory may not yet have reached the remote Red Sea resorts.

Israel blasts Iranian letter

A senior Israeli official wrote off the rapprochement letter sent by Iran's leader to President Bush. "Is he suddenly in love with President Bush? He merely wants to soften the diplomatic blow," Amos Gilad, chief strategist for Israel's Defense Ministry, said Tuesday at a military conference in Herzliya, referring to the 18-page treatise sent by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

The letter, made public Monday, called on Bush to reconsider U.S. foreign policy, especially where it concerned efforts to curb Iran's nuclear program.

Washington officials said Ahmadinejad is probably trying to win over international opinion ahead of U.N. Security Council talks on sanctioning Iran.

"Iran is determined to obtain nuclear weapons. They are willing to show flexibility in terms of tactics, but not beyond that," Gilad said.

Buffett buys second Israeli firm

Investor Warren Buffett purchased his second company in Israel.

CTB, a subsidiary of Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway, bought a 60 percent interest in Israel's Agrologic, which designs and manufactures systems for agricultural use, Globes reported.

Buffett made big news over the weekend when Berkshire Hathaway invested \$4 billion in Iscar, an international metalworks consortium based in Israel.

WORLD

British union to vote on Israel boycott

Britain's largest union for college teachers is reportedly set to vote later this month on an Israel boycott.

The National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education, which has 65,000 members, will take up the issue at its May 27-29 conference, Ha'aretz reported. The boycott would apply to Israeli lecturers and academic institutions that don't publicly declare their opposition to Israel's presence in the West Bank.

Another British teachers union, the Association of University Teachers, voted to boycott Israeli academics last year because of Israeli policy toward the Palestinians, but rescinded the decision in the face of international criticism.

NORTH AMERICA

Iran called major threat

Iran is the major destabilizing factor in the Middle East, said Mark Warner, a likely candidate for U.S. president in 2008. Warner, a Democrat who completed a term as Virginia governor last year, toured Israel and Jordan last week.

He met with top Israeli security officials. "It is foremost in everyone's mind that we keep Iran from obtaining nuclear arms, but even if there was a solution to Iran nuclear ambitions, it's not enough," Warner said Monday in a conference call with Jewish reporters.

"Iran is a major destabilizing force in the region," Warner said, citing Iran's funding for terrorist groups, including Hamas. He favored the continued isolation of the Palestinian Authority government as long as Hamas is in power.

Congressman blasts Israel placement on patent list

A U.S. congressman criticized the Bush administration for keeping Israel on a trade watch list because of its manufacture of generic drugs.

Israel is on the U.S. Trade Representative's "priority watch list" because it manufactures generic versions of patented U.S. drugs. The pharmaceutical lobby wanted Israel named on the "priority foreign country" list this year, which would have included trade restrictions.

The trade representative resisted, but kept Israel on the other list. Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.), who helped draft laws protecting drug innovations, said in a statement that Israel should be removed.

"Israel has worked in steadfast consultation with the U.S. to adopt broader protections for pharmaceutical products," Waxman said last Friday.

Congress wishes Israel happy birthday

Both houses of the U.S. Congress unanimously passed resolutions marking Israel's 58th anniversary.

A bill introduced by Rep. Joe Wilson (R-S.C.) passed 413-0 on May 2, and a bill introduced by Sen. Bill Frist (R-Tenn.), the Senate majority leader, passed May 3 by unanimous consent.

Reform calls for Medicare extension

The Reform movement called for the deadline for the Medicare prescription drug plan to be extended. Senior and disabled Americans must choose a plan by Monday or face a penalty.

The plan, in place since November, extends prescription benefits to all those covered under Medicare. Many seniors have yet to sign up because choosing a plan from among some 40 plans can be confusing, and in some cases could cost more than their current arrangements, the Reform movement says.

Reform's Religious Action Center backs a bill proposed by Democrats that would extend the deadline.