

IN THE NEWS
Ground troops in Gaza

Israel sent troops into the Gaza Strip for the first time since it withdrew from the territory.

Commandos entered northern Gaza on Monday night and attacked a Palestinian squad about to launch a rocket into Israel.

Four suspected terrorists were killed and another five wounded.

There were no Israeli casualties. Israel had previously relied on its air force and navy for operations in Gaza, partly out of concern that a ground operation could bolster Palestinian claims that the coastal strip continues to be occupied despite the removal of all 21 settlements and army bases there last August.

Two West Bank gunmen killed

Israeli soldiers killed at least two Palestinian gunmen in the West Bank. Troops operating in Nablus fired on an armed fugitive, killing him and wounding one of his comrades.

In Kabatiya, a village close to Jenin, another gunman died in a clash with troops. There were unconfirmed reports of a third gunman killed in the West Bank town of Anabta.

Israel boycott recommendation vote blasted

British Jewish leaders blasted a decision by a British teachers union to recommend a boycott of Israel. [Story, Pg. 3]

Olmert, Mubarak to meet

Israel's Ehud Olmert will meet Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak next week.

The Prime Minister's Office in Jerusalem said the June 4 summit would take place in the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheik.

Egyptian officials said they expect the meeting to pave the way for a summit between Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and the Israeli prime minister.

WORLD REPORT

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Abbas' move challenges both Hamas and Olmert

By LESLIE SUSSER

JERUSALEM (JTA) — As Prime Minister Ehud Olmert presses ahead with plans for another unilateral withdrawal from the West Bank, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas is determined not to be sidelined by Olmert's go-it-alone approach.

In late May, as Olmert tried to convince President Bush of the need for unilateral action, Abbas urged the Hamas-led Palestinian government to accept a package that would enable the Palestinians to break out of diplomatic isolation and emerge as full-fledged negotiating partners with a say on Olmert's pullback plans.

The vehicle Abbas hopes to use to regain international legitimacy is an agreement hammered out between Palestinian prisoners from Hamas, being held by Israel, and his own Fatah organization, calling for the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel. The so-called "prisoners' covenant" is based on the Saudi-initiated peace plan of 2002, which received widespread international support at the time.

Abbas has given Hamas 10 days to accept the package.

If not, he says he will go to the Palestinian people and ask them to approve the prisoners' covenant in a referendum within six weeks. Should the Palestinians accept the covenant, analysts believe there could be strong international pressure on Israel to engage in peace talks on the basis of the Saudi plan. In this way, they say, Abbas hopes to re-establish the Palestinians as players and undercut Olmert's unilateralism.

But it won't be easy.

Hamas leaders have already rejected the plan and question Abbas' constitutional right to call a referendum. Moreover, without Hamas' compliance, Abbas may not have the power to stage and secure a nationwide ballot, even though most Palestinians seem to

want one. The latest polls show that between 70 percent and 80 percent of Palestinians favor a referendum.

The Saudi plan is based on a "land for peace" formula. It stipulates that if Israel withdraws from all territory gained in the 1967 Six-Day War, all the Arab states will normalize their relations with Israel. Hamas, however, continues to reject anything that implies recognition of the Jewish state.

The radical movement's leaders also reject other key elements of the "prisoners' covenant."

For example, they refuse to be bound by previous Israeli-Palestinian agreements and insist on the right of Palestinians to use force against Israel, not only in the occupied territories, but in Israel proper as well.

Abbas has evolved several strategies to overcome Hamas intransigence. One is the planned referendum. Another is the establishment of a national-unity Hamas-Fatah government in which he, as the senior Fatah representative, would be empowered to conduct negotiations with Israel, not only as the president, but in the name of the government as a whole.

Then there is the ultimate weapon: Abbas could dissolve the Hamas-dominated Parliament and call new elections.

If he manages to get the Palestinian people and polity to commit to the Saudi plan, Abbas

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■ As Olmert plans another unilateral pullout, Abbas is determined not to be sidelined

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will create a major dilemma for the international community.

On the one hand, senior American and European officials are highly skeptical about the Palestinian president's ability to deliver. They note that in the three years since the formulation of the internationally approved "road map" peace plan, Abbas has done virtually nothing to implement it, and doubt whether things would be different with the Saudi plan.

On the other hand, both the Americans and Europeans would much prefer a negotiated settlement to unilateral moves by Israel, which they fear might spark more fighting rather than less.

Olmert is not only skeptical about Abbas. He also has deep reservations about the Saudi plan, which calls for withdrawal to the 1967 lines, without Israel retaining any of the large settlement blocs he wants to keep.

Moreover, the Saudi formula insists on eastern Jerusalem as the capital of the projected Palestinian state and it suggests that Israel would have to accept the Palestinian refugees' right of return — positions Olmert rejects out of hand.

The prime minister, therefore, hopes to keep the Saudi plan off the international agenda. He plans visits to Egypt and Europe in the coming weeks to persuade key players that Abbas cannot be relied on to deliver, and that Israel's unilateralism is the only game in town.

Olmert, however, may not have things all his own way. If Abbas is able to get the

Palestinians to accept the Saudi initiative, Olmert could find himself under strong domestic and international pressure to make a serious negotiating effort, despite the skepticism about its efficacy.

After a recent meeting with Abbas, Ami Ayalon, a leading Labor Party legislator, declared that even though he rejected many of its stipulations, the Saudi plan "could be a basis for negotiation," because it "supports the idea of a two-state solution."

The key to whether the Saudi plan becomes a serious option — even if adopted by the Palestinians — lies in Washington. The American goal remains a negotiated two-state solution based on Bush's "vision" that he outlined in June 2002.

U.S. leaders hope to further this aim by strengthening Abbas and using economic and political leverage to bring Hamas down or force it to moderate its positions. Backing the Saudi plan as a basis for negotiations could promote these ends.

But there is another possibility: that the Saudi plan be put on the table only after Is-

rael completes its planned pullback or what Olmert is now calling "realignment."

In his Washington meeting with Olmert last week, Bush made it clear that the

United States was in no hurry to see unilateral Israeli moves, and wanted to give negotiations another chance.

But Bush also assured Olmert that as soon as it became apparent that negotiations are going nowhere, Washington would back Olmert's unilateral alternative,

as long as it does not contradict Bush's vision of a viable and contiguous Palestinian state.

Most importantly, Bush emphasized that the United States will not recognize the borders Israel pulls back to unilaterally as permanent. And he reiterated the American view that final borders must be agreed upon in negotiations between the parties.

It is here where some analysts believe the Saudi plan could come in: not as a means of pre-empting Israel's "realignment," but as a way of taking things further once it is achieved. ■

The key to whether the Saudi plan becomes a serious option — even if adopted by the Palestinians — lies in Washington.

Jail synagogue opens in Argentina

BUENOS AIRES (JTA) — A synagogue has opened inside a prison in Buenos Aires.

Sefer Chaim, or Book of Life, the tiny, butter-colored synagogue, is in the Villa Devoto Federal Penitentiary Service Unit 2.

It is believed to be the first prison synagogue in Latin America, according to Argentine Jewish officials.

Located on the jail's third floor, the synagogue — modestly decorated with two flickering lights and three tiny windows — marks a commitment to Judaism in Argentina, Jewish officials said.

Until its inauguration Monday, some of the 20 Jewish prisoners of Devoto, which has 2,056 prisoners, used to meet with a Jewish seminarian in the Catholic chapel.

The Marshall T. Meyer Rabbinical Seminar and AMIA, Argentina's central Jewish institution, promoted the initiative with the support of the Federal Penitentiary Service.

"There was a prejudgment that we were going to find a reluctant Penitentiary Service. Instead, the receptivity was enormous and sincere," said AMIA's director of social programs, Gregorio Spivak.

Hugo Soza, the national director of the Penitentiary Service, told JTA the project was immediately welcomed.

"Prisoners strongly pursue a link with their inner selves.

And inside the prison, tolerance among different religions is usually better respected than in the outside society," Soza said.

Some 50 people passed through 11 prison doors and stood in the small room for the traditional Jewish welcoming service.

Several Argentine officials showed up, including Argentina's secretary of religion, Guillermo Oliveri, and Penitentiary Service officials, as well as AMIA's president, Luis Grynwald, and the president of the Rabbinical Seminary, Mario Ringler. ■



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British boycott vote blasted

By VANESSA BULKACZ

LONDON (JTA) — British Jewish leaders and students are blasting a decision by a British teachers union to recommend a boycott of Israeli academics.

Monday's vote by the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education, which forces Israeli academics to "publicly declare their political views and subject them to the scrutiny of British academics, is especially pernicious," the Board of Deputies of British Jews said in a statement.

The boycott applies to Israeli lecturers and academic institutions that don't publicly declare their opposition to Israel's presence in the West Bank.

The boycott has sparked international outrage among pro-Israel scholars and Jewish groups for being both one-sided and counterproductive, even though its practical ramifications seem limited.

The resolution is being seen as largely symbolic, since it only "invites members to consider their responsibility" instead of enforcing a boycott.

Trevor Phillips, the press spokesman for the association, told JTA, "The resolution is not a union boycott, it is a matter for personal consideration. It was meant only to open up a debate about this topic and encourage members to think about their own responsibility in the issue."

Further, the vote could soon be moot, since the association is set to merge with the Association of University Teachers, which voted to boycott Israeli academics last year because of Israeli policy toward the Palestinians, but rescinded the decision in the face of international criticism.

After the merger of the two unions, which will form the largest higher education union in the world, the resolution would need to be re-approved to become effective.

The Association of University Teachers responded to Monday's vote by issuing a statement saying they do not endorse the policy and are "strongly advising members not to implement it."

Nonetheless, opponents of the boycott resolution were outraged at its passage and expressed hope that it would be rescinded.

The chief executive of the Board of Deputies, Jon Benjamin, decried the mo-

tion as "a policy that no one in academia should countenance."

Ronnie Fraser, an association delegate and the chairman of Academic Friends of Israel, an organization formed in 2002 to fight the academic boycott of Israel, said he is "not happy at all" with this outcome.

Fraser said that academics at 30 of Britain's 100 universities work with Israeli colleagues.

Monday's vote occurred amid a flurry of protest from academics both in Britain and abroad, as well as lawmakers in the

Israeli Parliament who convened an emergency meeting to discuss the proposed boycott, which they described as a "witch hunt."

Israel's education minister, Yuli Tamir, unsuccessfully called on the British government to intervene before yesterday's vote.

A campaign against the boycott was also waged in the media.

The Guardian printed a letter issued by Engage, an academic group that was formed last year to fight the boycott, signed by approximately 600 academics around the world who oppose the Israeli occupation of the West Bank.

The letter opposed "the inconsistency of blacklisting Israelis" while "adopting a different attitude to academics in the long list of other states that are responsible for equal or worse human rights abuses."

Engage's printed appeal was one of numerous public counters to the association's boycott.

Before the vote, more than 4,700 international academics also signed an online petition, organized by the Israeli-led International Advisory Board for Academic Freedom.

The petition states, "Academic boycott actions are antithetical not only to principles of academic freedom but also to the quest for peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict."

After the vote, the chairman of the

advisory board, Yosef Yeshurun, provost of Bar-Ilan University, said it was "unfortunate" that the British group "decided to adopt a negative approach, seeking to burn bridges instead of building them."

The British resolution called on the 69,000-member association "to consider the appropriateness of a boycott of those that do not publicly dissociate themselves" from "Israeli apartheid policies."

This part of the resolution passed narrowly, with just 53.5 percent of the vote.

Two other paragraphs of the same motion, including those that criticize "Israeli apartheid policies, including construction of the exclusion wall, and

discriminatory educational practices" and "invite members to consider their own responsibility for ensuring equity and non-discrimination in contacts with Israeli educational institutions or individuals" passed more easily by a show

of hands.

The resolution was supported by the Federation of Unions of Palestinian University Professors and Employees, which lauded the boycott as a "courageous initiative."

The British Committee for Universities of Palestine, which was set up "in response to a Palestinian call for a boycott," welcomed the vote, stating that the motion's passage "proves that many academics in the U.K. and beyond do not buy the disingenuous claim that a boycott of Israeli academic institutions conflicts with 'academic freedom' or inadvertently promotes anti-Semitism in any way."

Jewish student groups in Britain, meanwhile, expressed concern about the ramifications on campus. Mitch Simmons, campaign director of the Union of Jewish Students of Britain, said, "Israeli and Jewish students cannot be made to feel victimized or excluded due to their nationality or political beliefs."

"This boycott will only help to cement divisions on campus," he said.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

'Israeli and Jewish students cannot be made to feel victimized or excluded due to their nationality or political beliefs.'

Mitch Simmons

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