

IN THE NEWS

Israel rebuffs Assad overture

Israel rebuffed a peace-or-else ultimatum issued by Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Assad told a German newspaper Sunday that his country sought peace with Israel but could resort to war if necessary, an apparent reference to Syria's bedrock demand that it regain all of the Golan Heights under any accord.

The comments were rejected by Israeli officials, who have long insisted that Syria should not impose preconditions for peace.

Olmert denies meeting Saudi king

Ehud Olmert denied that he held talks with Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah.

Saudi officials also denied the story, reported Monday by the Yediot Achronot newspaper, that the Israeli prime minister met Abdullah earlier this month to discuss Middle East peace.

But the daily said that other Israeli sources indicated the talks may have been with another member of the Saudi royal family.

According to Yediot, Olmert and his Saudi interlocutor also discussed Iran's nuclear program.

Presbyterians talked to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

U.S. Presbyterian leaders met with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

The meeting took place Sept. 20 in New York.

The leaders of one of the leading U.S. Protestant denominations said they wanted to tell Ahmadinejad of their support for Israel and their opposition to his denial of the Holocaust, Religious News Service reported.

Earlier this year, the U.S. Presbyterian Church replaced a 2004 call for divestment from Israel with a policy of peaceful investment in Israel, the Gaza Strip and West Bank.

WORLD REPORT

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Amid new crises in Mideast, world seeks Palestinian unity government

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The call for a Palestinian national unity government has unified just about everyone except the Palestinians.

After navigating sessions clouded over with vituperation and nuclear threat, leaders attending last week's U.N. General Assembly seized upon the faint prospect of Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian Authority president, co-opting the Hamas-led Cabinet and moderating its radical Islamist government.

"The world is waiting to see whether the Hamas government will follow through on its promises" of government reform "or pursue an extremist agenda," President Bush said in his address to the General Assembly on Sept. 19.

"And the world has sent a clear message to the leaders of Hamas: Serve the interests of the Palestinian people. Abandon terror, recognize Israel's right to exist, honor agreements and work for peace."

The message was startling only because just months ago there was little doubt that the world had waited long enough since Hamas' election in January for a reform platform. A sharp uptick in rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip on Israel's southern region and the June 25 cross-border raid in which Hamas-affiliated gunmen killed two Israeli soldiers and captured another seemed to close the book on Hamas.

Then, there was little question that the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority would remain isolated and there was open talk in Washington of helping Abbas overthrow the

separately elected P.A. Cabinet.

Three months later, the sudden war between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon and Iran's steadfast refusal to cede the prospects of a nuclear weapon transformed the prospect of a Gaza Strip collapsed into chaos into an intolerable threat.

The fear was apparent in the statement released last week from the Quartet — the grouping of the United States, Russia, the United Nations and the European Union that guides the Middle East process.

"Taking stock of recent developments in the region, the Quartet stressed the urgent need to make progress towards a just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the Middle East," the statement said. "The Quartet expressed its concern at the grave crisis in Gaza and the continued stalemate between Israel and the Palestinians. The Quartet welcomed the efforts of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to form a Government of National Unity, in the hope that the platform of such a Government would reflect Quartet principles and allow for early engagement."

The three Quartet principles are recognition of Israel, renouncing terrorism and commitment to abide by previous accords.

Abbas capped the General Assembly's opening week with a Sept. 21 speech that recommitted to those principles.

"Any future government will commit to imposing security and order, to ending the phenomena of multiple militias, indiscipline and chaos, and to the rule of law," he said.

Hours after Abbas' optimistic speech,

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ANALYSIS

■ Just months ago, there was little question that the Hamas-led P.A. would remain isolated

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Hamas was already saying it would not recognize Israel.

"I personally will not head any government that recognizes Israel," Ismail Haniyeh, the P.A. prime minister, said at a mosque in the Gaza Strip during last Friday's prayers.

As of Monday, Abbas suspended talks over unity, canceling a trip from his headquarters in the West Bank city of Ramallah to the Gaza Strip, where Hamas predominates.

Hamas continued to press Abbas to return to talks, desperate for the cash that a unity government could bring even if it was not ready to meet the international community's conditions for the cash.

"We have not reached a dead end," Ghazi Hamad, the Hamas government spokesman, said in an interview in Hebrew on Israel Army Radio.

Western leaders indicated they were more than ready to deal if Abbas returns to talks and is able to pull Hamas into a compromise that the West could recognize as meeting the Quartet's principles.

Elliott Abrams, the U.S. deputy national security adviser, made it clear that the Bush administration was ready to ignore pending congressional legislation that would place strict controls on money headed for the Palestinian Authority or for nongovernmental organizations that assist Palestinians.

It is possible, Abrams told reporters last week, "to give humanitarian aid to the Palestinian people through NGOs, and to work with parts of the P.A. that do not report and

are not under the control of Hamas, of the prime minister, of the cabinet, but rather are under the control of President Abbas, or are independent agencies that are like the judiciary," Abrams said. "For parts of the P.A. that are not, or for direct aid to the Palestinian people through NGOs, that's fine. That's neither illegal, nor a policy problem."

Proposed legislation passed this year by both houses of the U.S. Congress and now stuck in conference — and unlikely to emerge until well into 2007 — does not recognize agencies "independent" of Ab-

bas or Hamas, and places strict limits on money to NGOs.

The fact that Abrams, probably Israel's fiercest defender in the Bush administration, was ready to blur the lines over how money gets to the Palestinians — even before Hamas made any concession on the Quartet's three principles — underscored how much had changed since the low point of June 25, when Hamas was declared off limits and Abbas was dismissed as ineffectual.

At that time, the Quartet did not object to Israel's decision to cut off tax transfers to the Palestinian Authority, as it conformed to an international consensus that Hamas needed to be isolated.

In its statement last week, the Quartet called on Israel to resume the transfer of \$500 million in taxes and customs. "The resumption of transfers of tax and customs revenues collected by Israel on behalf of the Palestinian Authority would have a significant impact on the Palestinian economy," it said.

It was a new reality recognized by Tzipi Livni, Israel's foreign minister, in her speech to the General Assembly last week.

"There are no shortcuts on the road to peace, but stagnation is not in our interest and it is not our policy," she said. "It is in this spirit that I met with Chairman Abbas two days ago and we agreed to re-energize the dialogue between us, and create a permanent channel to pursue ways to advance together." ■

'I personally will not head any government that recognizes Israel.'

Ismail Haniyeh
Palestinian Authority prime minister

Cochin's last Kohen dies

COCHIN, India (JTA) — The Jewish community of Cochin has witnessed a series of "ends of eras" during its 500-year history on India's southwestern coast.

Last Friday marked yet another sad milestone: Shalom Cohen, 87, the community's last Kohen, or member of the priestly caste, died just two weeks before he would have blessed the dwindling congregation on Rosh Hashanah.

With Cohen's passing, 13 Jews remain in Jew Town, the section of Cochin famous for the Paradesi Synagogue, one of the oldest synagogues in continuous operation.

The shul was built and dedicated in 1568, just one generation after Portuguese explorer Vasco de Gama discovered, on the same stretch of coastline, the sea route from Europe to India.

All the Jews of the Fort Cochin neighborhood of Mattancherry turned out for Cohen's funeral, as well as neighbors and shopkeepers from Jew Town Road. A local newspaper was on hand to cover the story.

Cohen came from the last family to have a member who could lay claim to being a hacham: His older brother, who died a few

years ago, was the shochet, or ritual slaughterer for the community.

Cohen is survived by a sister. There are hardly any Jews of marriageable age left in Cochin and no children, since a mass migration to Israel in the 1940s and 1950s.

A few families linger, remnants of a once-influential merchant and landowning community that maintained excellent relations with the local maharajahs of pre-independence India. A lucky visitor today might be shown one of the synagogue's rare treasures: a gold Torah crown donated by a generous maharajah.

The funeral was held in the Sasson House, a former community center-turned-senior citizens' home across from the Paradesi Synagogue.

The funeral procession was short: The Jewish cemetery is around the corner from the synagogue, and everyone except for the very aged — who rode with the coffin — followed behind the slow-moving vehicle on foot. Though the monsoon season is virtually over, as soon as the cortege reached the gates of the cemetery, which had been refurbished in 1848, it began to drizzle. ■

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Two Jews, three synagogues in Prague

By DINAH A. SPRITZER

PRAGUE (JTA) — Squinting through one of five tiny peepholes in the thick stone walls of Prague's medieval Old New Synagogue, it takes a bit of effort for the occupants of the women's section to see or even hear a Torah reading.

The advantage, however, is that amid the group head craning, there is a surprising level of female bonding. You don't get "shooshed," because you are so far removed from the service that whispering is not overheard. Thus it's acceptable on the second morning of Rosh Hashanah to ask an elderly worshiper where she lives.

"I came to Prague from Auschwitz," she replies, "And I am here because I am Orthodox, and thanks to He above us, I can be."

Typically Prague? No such thing.

Another Czech Holocaust survivor sits down to a Reform Shabbat service on the first night of the Jewish New Year in what appears to be a classroom with 1970s-era decor. The service is followed by a run for bagged kosher tuna fish sandwiches,

consumed on pockmarked wooden tables surrounded by bowling trophies.

Prague's Jewish Liberal Union warmly welcomes strangers as honored guests without reservation, not a common phenomenon in the Czech capital, still hampered by an inwardness long fostered by the Communist regime.

Although it's Shabbat, \$9 is collected for the no-frills meal and the shofar is blown, with great skill, by a messianic Czech-born Australian whose card says "Jesus is Lord."

There may be 1,500 Jews registered in the official Prague Jewish Community, and some 500 attending services for the Jewish New Year, but there is no lack of diversity. Personality conflicts, myriad degrees of observance, linguistic differences and economic barriers all play a role in preventing many Jews in Prague from ever meeting one another.

But this Rosh Hashanah, there were some hints at a greater desire for unity.

Professor Alexander Fried, schooled at a yeshiva before World War II, is the cantor for the Jewish Liberal Union.

The Slovak native later turns up at Chabad's services over the weekend.

"I'm a general Jew," Fried says. "I am comfortable in any setting."

Fried has lived in Israel and Canada and is comfortable slipping in and out of cultural milieus. For others, it's not so easy.

Prague's Jewish community is comprised of Czech Holocaust survivors living on a few hundred dollars a month; Americans whose conversations turn to "millions of dollars" paid in taxes and where to get cosmetic surgery, and everyone in between.

There are three congregations of Jews that define themselves as non-Orthodox. They would like to be together, but personality clashes that have gone on for more than a decade among their leaders ensure that they remain split.

The Jewish Liberal Union service is in part presided over by a Czech writer and convert, Benjamin Kuras, who is also a

member of a Liberal synagogue in London.

Like Kuras, who has written editorials on the subject, many of the congregants express distaste for the official umbrella group in Prague, the Prague Jewish Community, overseen by another writer and convert to Orthodoxy, Rabbi Karol Sidon. The conflict is at times more about personalities than levels of observance.

Hana Benesova, a 27-year-old nature conservationist at the Jewish Liberal Union service, says due to tensions within the community, she no longer has any Jewish

friends "I used to when I was younger, but they all seem to have disappeared." But asked if she would be willing to attend services at other shuls around town, where she might meet some Jews her age, she smiles shyly, "Yes, Ok, why not?"

The disunity in Prague also follows ethnic lines. Israe-

lis seek out Manes Barash, a Brooklyn-born Chabad rabbi, for his flawless Hebrew.

He is also popular with some Americans, but many expatriate women as well as men feel comfortable in the 19th century Spanish Synagogue with Bejt Praha, which is a non-denominational group that follows a Conservative model.

Bejt Simcha, like the Jewish Liberal Union, appeals mostly to Czechs interested in Reform Judaism, although holiday services at the Pinkas Synagogue are led by Ron Hofberg, an American Conservative rabbi. There is also the Jerusalem Synagogue, where a mostly Czech Orthodox congregation has an Israeli cantor whose large family goes to Chabad House, where he turned up for the end of services on Sunday.

It's all a bit hard to keep track of.

For the first time ever, the Prague Jewish community bulletin board offered a schedule of all the services in Prague, not only those at the Orthodox shuls.

"I only go to Chabad, but I would like to know what goes on at the other shuls. Hey, can I come with you when you synagogue hop?" asks Alan Fleischman, an American architect in Prague.

There are three non-Orthodox congregations. They would like to be together, but personality clashes among their leaders ensure that they remain split.

THIS WEEK

TUESDAY

■ The U.S. House of Representatives considers a nonbinding resolution urging Lebanon to comply with all aspects of the cease-fire that ended the Israel-Hezbollah war, including allowing international troops to secure the border with Syria.

■ Both houses of the U.S. Congress will vote on a Homeland Security appropriations bill that releases \$25 million in 2006 to non-profits and grants new money for 2007.

WEDNESDAY

■ Both congressional houses will vote on a defense authorization bill. Democrats have been striving to remove or modify language that would allow military chaplains to mention Jesus in official prayers.

■ Leaders from around the world gather in Kiev, Ukraine, for the 65th anniversary of the Babi Yar massacres. Some 33,000 Jews were killed in the ravine in September 1941, and some 100,000 people killed during World War II.

SATURDAY

■ A conference at Washington University in St. Louis commemorates 60 years of the judgment handed down to Nazi war criminals at Nuremberg. U.S. Sen. Chris Dodd (D-Conn.), whose father, Sen. Thomas Dodd, was a prosecutor at Nuremberg, delivers the keynote speech.

NEWS IN BRIEF

WORLD

Russia makes move against hate crimes

Russia formed a special department to deal with hate crimes, Russian news agencies reported.

Yuri Chaika, the public prosecutor general, announced the news last Friday during his visit to the former Soviet republic of Armenia.

According to Chaika, over the last year his agency pressed hate crime charges against defendants in five criminal cases.

Human rights activists and minority groups have long criticized Russian police and prosecutors for playing down the existing level of hate crimes, and Russian courts for their unwillingness to qualify crimes motivated by racism and religious hatred as hate crimes.

The leading Russian Jewish group, the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, on Monday praised the creation of the new department.

Charges in Norway synagogue attack

Norwegian police charged four men in the shooting attack on an Oslo synagogue.

The men were initially charged with vandalism Sept. 21, but the charge was upgraded to organizing an act of terrorism, an offense punishable by up to 12 years in prison.

Police said one suspect was Norwegian, and the others had different backgrounds. They declined to provide more information about the suspects.

However, Norwegian news outlets have reported that one suspect was a 29-year-old Norwegian of Pakistani origin who had been held briefly in Germany in June on suspicion of planning an act of terrorism against the soccer World Cup. No one was hurt in the Sept. 17 incident.

Interpol European branch accepts Israel

Israel was accepted into the European branch of Interpol. Monday's acceptance of Israel into the European branch of the international police agency came over the weekend in Brazil, five years after Israel made its request.

A spokesman for the Israeli police, Mickey Rosenfeld, called the move "a breakthrough," saying that 70 percent of Israel's international police operations occur in Europe.

NORTH AMERICA

Swastikas fly over U.S. highways

Swastikas were found flying from highway overpasses in Florida and California just before the Jewish New Year.

The swastika flags were taken down after they were discovered in the Orlando and San Diego areas last Friday.

Jewish leaders in both communities denounced the acts, which do not appear to be related.

Clinic closed on Sabbath accused of bias

The NAACP filed a complaint accusing a New York dental clinic of religious discrimination because it is closed on Shabbat.

The complaint filed Sept. 6 with the New York state Division of Human Rights accuses the Ben Gilman Medical and Dental Clinic in Spring Valley, N.Y., of imposing its religious beliefs on others by remaining closed on Saturdays, the Rockland Journal News reported.

The clinic's operators declined to comment on the matter.

Miami Jews react to radio caricature

Hispanic Jews in Miami formed a group to monitor Spanish-language media for anti-Semitism.

The establishment of the Hispanic Jewish Initiative comes after Jews said they were offended by Goldstein, a Jewish character on a top-rated 95.7 FM show, known in English as "The Morning Hijinks," local media reported.

A Web page, until recently linked to the show, depicts a black character, Al Jackson, with the mug shot of a man whose lips balloon from his face.

In place of a photo for Goldstein is a Nazi eagle and swastika.

The group, created under the state chapter of the Anti-Defamation League, will monitor and address other concerns of Florida's Spanish-speaking Jewish population.

Jewish group earmarks \$3 million for Israel

A U.S. Jewish foundation is giving \$3 million to northern Israel after the recent damage there caused by Hezbollah rockets.

The San Francisco-based Koret Foundation announced that the group is committing the funds to the Jewish state in light of damage done during the recent conflict with Hezbollah.

Over the next year, the group will identify organizations in the United States and Israel to aid the region's needs.

MIDDLE EAST

Abbas downbeat on Hamas talks

Mahmoud Abbas said talks on forming a Palestinian Authority coalition government had reached the point of collapse.

The Palestinian Authority president said Saturday that negotiations between the governing Hamas and his more moderate Fatah faction were at "point zero."

The radical Islamist group has refused to recognize Israel or renounce violence.

Abbas and Hamas hope a unity government will lead to a resumption of Western donor aid to the Palestinian Authority, but the "Quartet" of foreign power brokers want clarification on the proposed coalition's platform.

A spokesman for the Hamas government, Ghazi Hamad, told Israel Radio on Monday that the coalition talks could still be salvaged "within a week or two."

But Hamad, who spoke in Hebrew, gave no sign that Hamas would soften its stance against the Jewish state.

Israeli legislator indicted for cronyism

A senior member of Israel's Kadima Party was indicted.

Tzachi Hanegbi, head of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, was charged in Jerusalem Magistrate's Court on Monday with fraud, bribery, breach of trust and perjury.

Hanegbi is accused of illicitly appointing dozens of his friends to civil service positions while in his previous post of environment minister.

Also indicted in the case is his former director-general at the ministry, Shmuel Hershkowitz. Hanegbi has denied wrongdoing.

Bail for Hamas men overturned

An Israeli military court reversed its decision to release 21 jailed Palestinian Authority officials on bail.

The Ofer Military Court on Monday accepted arguments by prosecutors that 21 Hamas legislators and Cabinet ministers should not be allowed out of jail for security reasons.

The officials were rounded up after Gaza Strip gunmen abducted an Israeli soldier, Cpl. Gilad Shalit, on June 25, prompting speculation that they would be held for a future prisoner swap.

The court announced the bail decision earlier this month, but put it on hold pending appeals by prosecutors.