

IN THE NEWS
Fatah violates truce

Palestinian terrorists fired rockets from Gaza into Israel, defying a cease-fire.

No one was hurt in Tuesday's launch against Sderot, which was claimed by a terrorist wing of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah faction.

The attack was an embarrassment for Abbas, who on Sunday declared a truce with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and later this week will meet visiting U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Study: Europe not monitoring racism

European nations received poor marks on monitoring racist events in the European Union's annual report on discrimination.

The European Union Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia in Vienna said Tuesday that most of the E.U.'s 25 member countries did little to report, record or monitor discrimination and racist incidents.

The report said only Britain and Finland had "comprehensive data systems" that kept track of racist violence.

On the other end of the spectrum, the report noted that no official data were available on racist violence and crime from Greece, Spain, Italy, Cyprus and Malta.

Report: Jerusalem talks to Barghouti

Israel's government has been holding indirect talks with a Palestinian politician jailed for orchestrating terrorist attacks.

Channel 2 television reported Monday that Marwan Barghouti, a Fatah lawmaker sentenced to five life prison terms in 2003, helped broker this week's Gaza Strip cease-fire at the behest of the Olmert government, which contacted him through Chaim Oron, a Knesset member from the Meretz Party.

Oron declined comment.

WORLD REPORT

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

Conservative decision on gays will be a watershed, either way

By BEN HARRIS

NEW YORK (JTA) — Whatever decision the Conservative movement reaches next week on its approach to homosexuality, it will be a watershed.

The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, the movement's highest legal authority, is expected to vote on five separate teshuvot, or responsa, that range from a complete overturn of the traditional prohibition on homosexual intercourse to a restatement of the committee's 1992 decision upholding the ban.

Implicit in those opinions are views on whether gays and lesbians should be ordained as rabbis and whether Conservative clergy can officiate at commitment ceremonies.

Committee members were loath to speculate this week on the final outcome, but insiders expect the committee to endorse both the traditional ban and a more liberal opinion — leaving it to local rabbis to make determinations for each community.

But that's hardly a foregone conclusion, and the liberal opinion could still fail, particularly if the committee determines that lifting the ban on homosexual intercourse is so substantial a break from halachic precedent that it entails a takanah, an act of legislation overturning an established tradition.

A takanah requires an absolute majority of the committee's 25 members, or 13 votes, to pass. A normal interpretive teshuvah requires only six votes.

If the committee endorses one of the more liberal opinions, it would overturn

not only the policy of the Conservative movement but 3,000 years of Jewish practice and legal tradition that have upheld heterosexual marriage as the unquestioned ideal.

The debate has consumed the movement for months, and dire predictions abound on both sides. Traditionalists warn that any change in the prohibition would severely weaken the movement's moral authority and could cause the movement to fracture.

For liberals, a failure to become more accepting of gays and lesbians could further marginalize the movement, which has been losing ground to Orthodoxy and Reform in the American Jewish community.

Rabbi Joseph Prouser, a committee member opposed to liberalization, argued in a recent essay that endorsing conflicting opinions on the question "evinces doctrinal anarchy" that undermines the movement's ability to act as a moral authority.

"At best, the proposed halachic changes will achieve a Pyrrhic victory for their advocates," Prouser wrote. "A fractured Conservative movement undermines the cause of pluralism and reverence for halachic dissent, which we champion. The Conservative movement is rendered less viable at the very peril of klal Yisrael."

Rabbi Elliot Dorff, rector of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, the movement's West Coast seminary, and author of a middle opinion that retains the biblical prohibition on male sodomy while opening the door to gay rabbis and commitment ceremonies, believes a failure to liberalize

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■ *Dire predictions abound on both sides of the Conservative debate*

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would be disastrous.

"I think the vast majority of Jews under 40 are asking why we are still talking about this," Dorff told JTA. "I think there's a real generational difference herein, in part because of the openness of gays and lesbians. If none of the liberalizing positions pass, I think it will be a disaster for our movement."

The significance of the decision, and the extensive coverage it has received in the media, have posed a daunting challenge for Arnold Eisen, the incoming chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, the movement's principal rabbinic seminary.

Eisen, who is not a rabbi and who presumably would lack the authority to render halachic decisions for JTS, has said publicly that he supports ordination of gay rabbis but remains committed to a halachic process.

In an e-mail to the JTS community last week, Eisen said faculty had begun discussing the matter, but that a process for deciding whether JTS would admit openly gay rabbinical students — assuming such a step is sanctioned by the law committee — has yet to be determined.

In particular, it remained unclear whether the decision would be subject to a vote of the faculty and what the timetable for a decision would be.

The Ziegler School has said it would begin admitting gays and lesbians immediately if the law committee ruling allows it.

Beyond the United States, affiliated institutions of the Conservative movement are not expected to follow their American counterparts in the wake of a liberal decision, at least not initially.

Israeli, Canadian and Latin American Conservative rabbis are considered more traditional than their colleagues in the United States, and authorities from those communities have communicated their fears that any change could irreparably split the movement.

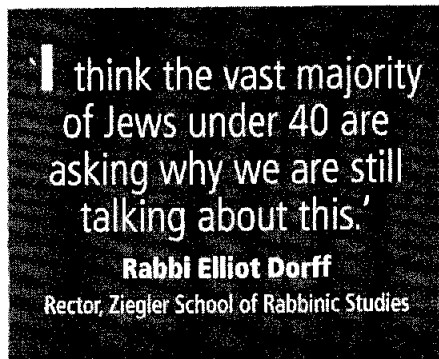
The pending vote on homosexuality has drawn comparisons to other landmark law committee decisions, like allowing worshippers to drive to synagogue on Shabbat and allowing the ordination of women rabbis.

As with homosexuality, observers say, those decisions were prefaced by warnings that they would split the movement and bring about its demise.

"It's not a surprise that this kind of talk surfaces again," said Rabbi Joel

Meyers, a committee member and executive vice president of the Rabbinical Assembly, the association of Conservative rabbis. "All I do is urge people to go back and think about history. We can learn a lot from significant events and how they unfolded.

We're going through now in our movement another significant discussion that has real emotion attached to it, and I think we'll come out just fine at the other end of this discussion." ■



I think the vast majority of Jews under 40 are asking why we are still talking about this.'

Rabbi Elliot Dorff
Rector, Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

Confusion reigns on Richards' religion

By JEWISH JOURNAL OF GREATER LOS ANGELES

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — Fellow comedians and fans have been quick to criticize Michael Richards for his religious screed at a Los Angeles comedy club — and to misrepresent his religious background.

Comedian Paul Rodriguez held a press conference at the Laugh Factory — where the actor who gained fame as Cosmo Kramer on "Seinfeld" lashed out at a heckler, spitting out the "N" word without humor and with abandon — saying Richards should know better because the Hollywood community defended Jews against actor Mel Gibson's anti-Semitic tirades.

The implication was that Richards, a Jew, should not be launching racist attacks. He shouldn't — but he also isn't Jewish.

"Someone needs to tell Rodriguez that Michael isn't a Jew," said a television director who has known Richards for years. The two worked together in 1980 on ABC's "Fridays" television show and have remained in touch ever since.

According to sources familiar with Richards, the actor was raised Catholic. A biography of him on the Wikipedia Web site lists no religion, but notes that Richards is very involved in the Masons.

Confusion over Richards' heritage grew

after the Anti-Defamation League issued a press release denouncing the actor's tirade.

"Richards' repeated use of the 'n-word' and apparent reference to lynching is offensive in any context," the release said. "There is no excuse for such insensitive and bigoted language. It has no place in a comedy club and no place in America and must be clearly repudiated."

The release did not address Richards' religion. The ADL regularly takes public stances against instances of racism unrelated to anti-Semitism.

Richards has apologized on "Late Night With David Letterman" and the Rev. Jesse Jackson's radio program for his outburst.

"For me to be in a comedy club and flip out and say this crap, I'm deeply, deeply sorry," Richards said on "The Late Show." "I'm not a racist. That's what's so insane about this."

The incident was caught on a cell-phone camera. Audience members booed, several walked out, and then Richards himself walked off stage.

Laugh Factory owner Jamie Masada, who is Jewish, posted this message on the company's Web site: "We do not support or condone the inappropriate, hurtful and offensive comments that Mr. Richards made ... at the Laugh Factory." ■



WORLD REPORT

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

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Virtually everyone in Washington agrees that Syria is a weak state. But differences arise over whether its peace feelers to Israel and the West are a genuine white flag or just a feint to entrap its stronger enemies.

A seminar Monday at the government-funded U.S. Institute of Peace outlined those dif-

ferences in the wake of the likelihood that a congressionally mandated commission will recommend engagement with Syria, currently a pariah state, as one means of reining in Iraq's burgeoning civil war.

"Syria is fundamentally a weak state that has very little to offer the United States and very little to offer its neighbors, either in peace or in war," said Robert Satloff, executive director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a pro-Israel think tank.

Engaging Syria would embolden its ambitions to reassert control over Lebanon, Satloff said, handing an unthinkable victory to the region's radicals.

But Robert Malley, a Clinton administration peace negotiator, said engagement would have the opposite effect.

"The mere sight of Israeli and Syrian officials sitting side by side and negotiating at a time when rejectionist ideology is spreading throughout the region — imagine the impact that would have!" he said.

The core of the debate is assessing Syria's seriousness about the endgame. The fear among Israelis is that talking only buys Syria time to gain strength.

In an interview last week at the Syrian Embassy in Washington, Ambassador Imad Moustapha said Syria's interests lie in comprehensive peace negotiations.

"We are offering Israel a comprehensive peace," Moustapha told JTA. "It will be a very different context, an Israel who is not occupying our territories anymore, an Israel who will allow the Palestinians to have their sovereign free state. Comprehensive peace, total normalization of relations: This is our strategy, this is our vision."

Israelis have made clear that they expect more than words from Syria: They want a crackdown on terrorist groups finding safe harbor in Damascus, including the more extreme wing of Hamas led by Khaled Meshaal, and an end to support for Hezbollah, the Lebanese terrorist army that launched

a war against Israel this summer.

"We would love to be able to have negotiations with Syria, but that must be based on a certain reasonable, responsible policy, which is not performed by Syria for the time being," Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said earlier this month after meeting with President Bush in Washington.

"Everything that they are doing is to the other direction — in Lebanon, in Iraq, and the sponsorship of Hamas and Khaled Meshaal as the main perpetrators of terror against the State of Israel," Olmert said.

Bush has been supportive. Outlining his vision for the NATO alliance Tuesday in Riga, Latvia, he included Syria among international threats.

"The regime allows Iranian weapons to pass through its territory into Lebanon, and provides weapons and political support to Hezbollah," the president said.

Still, the Baker-Hamilton commission could bring pressure to bear on Bush to change that tone.

The commission, now debating its recommendations and slated to present them to the White House before year's end, reportedly has agreed on the need to engage Syria, which has extensive intelligence about Iraq, and Iran, which has considerable influence with Iraq's Shi'ites.

Bush is under no obligation to act on the report, but will be under considerable political pressure to do so, not least because his father's secretary of state, James Baker, heads the commission.

Commissioners have met three times with Moustapha, and he seemed cheered by the prospects of what the commission would recommend. For one thing, he said, there was no talk of drawing Syria away from Iran's influence, a prospect he dismissed.

"I don't think the Baker-Hamilton report will discuss the notion about creating a rift between Syria and Iran," he said. "The guys on the Iraq study group are more sophisticated and more learned than to make such naive policy positions."

FOCUS ON ISSUES

I don't think the Baker-Hamilton report will discuss the notion about creating a rift between Syria and Iran.

Imad Moustapha
Syria's U.S. Ambassador

Iran would not prevent Syria from pursuing peace with Israel, Moustapha said, despite Iran's rejection of Israel's existence.

"It's not this bizarre image of Syria and Iran, two countries in isolation toward the rest of the world and entrenched in one position," he said. "We respect that Iran has its own national interests to look for, to sustain and to promote, and they respect that we have our own national interests to promote."

Moustapha dismissed the demand that Syria drop its support for Hezbollah and Hamas as "details" and "pretexts."

"Once there is a context for peace, the whole paradigm will change," he said.

Malley, the Clinton administration negotiator, said it was unrealistic to expect Syria to abandon the terrorist groups, but said re-engagement could persuade Damascus "to use its leverage with Hezbollah and Hamas in constructive ways."

The debate comes as there are pressures in Israel from top officials — including Defense Minister Amir Peretz and Amos Yadlin, the military intelligence chief — to at least feel out Syria.

Engaging Syria could weaken the axis between Iran and the terrorist groups it sponsors, said Shlomo Aronsohn, a Hebrew University political scientist.

"If you succeed in removing Bashar Assad," the Syrian dictator, "from his current role supporting Hamas and Hezbollah, we may have a strategic breakthrough," Aronsohn said.

Satloff, the Washington Institute director, suggested that the reverse was true — engaging the Palestinians would further isolate Syria, which in turn might moderate Assad. He hailed Olmert for employing just such a strategy in offering this week to restart negotiations with the relatively moderate Palestinian Authority president, Mahmoud Abbas.

"If we concretize the outreach Israelis are making to Abbas and the moderate Arab states, we can concretize the pressure" on Syria, he said. ■

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

West Bank truce seen

Israel and the Palestinian Authority are trying to extend the Gaza Strip cease-fire to the West Bank.

Following Sunday's declaration of a Gaza truce, spokesmen for both sides said negotiations were under way for a similar deal in the West Bank.

"I hope we are going to move in the next few days to have a similar arrangement in the West Bank," Saeb Erekat, an aide to Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, told Israel's Army Radio. Israeli diplomatic sources confirmed this in comments to the Jerusalem Post on Tuesday.

Report: Hezbollah trained Iraqis

Iran reportedly arranged for Iraqi Shi'ite fighters to train with Hezbollah.

The New York Times quoted senior Bush administration officials Tuesday as saying that the fighters in the Mahdi Army, loyal to the Shi'ite cleric Muktada al-Sadr, trained in Lebanon this summer during Israel's war with Hezbollah. A U.S. intelligence official said the administration believed that Iran hoped to undermine U.S. efforts to end Iraq's civil war on Western terms.

Jordan doesn't want Palestinians

Jordan's leader called for a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that did not involve a Palestinian influx to his country. King Abdullah II made the comments Tuesday to Jordanian lawmakers, The Associated Press reported, in advance of a meeting Wednesday with President Bush in Amman.

"Jordan will not accept an unjust settlement of the issue, nor will Jordan accept any settlement that comes at its expense," the king said.

Israel allows pro-Abbas deployment in Gaza

Israel agreed to allow Mahmoud Abbas to send a loyal security force to the Gaza Strip. Israeli sources said Tuesday that the Palestinian Authority president had requested permission to redeploy the 1,000-strong Badr Brigade, which is currently stationed in Jordan, to Gaza, and that it had been approved by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

Israel to go on strike?

Israeli trade unions threatened to launch an open-ended strike Wednesday.

The Histadrut umbrella union was in 11th-hour talks with the Finance Ministry on Tuesday over a wage dispute, but said that barring a breakthrough, a general strike was planned. The action would begin at 6 a.m. Wednesday and would mean the effective closure of Ben-Gurion Airport as well as seaports and train services.

WORLD

Poles sue publisher of anti-Semitic texts

Ten well-known Polish intellectuals filed a lawsuit against Leszek Bubel, a major publisher of anti-Semitic tracts. Signatories to the suit include former Foreign Minister Wladyslaw Bartoszewski and filmmaker Kazimierz Kuz, according to a recent report in the daily Gazeta Wyborcza.

All of those who signed the complaint are non-Jews. Bubel has been prosecuted several times for promoting hatred of a racial group, but courts have acquitted him. The lawsuit contends that Bubel's anti-Jewish campaigns "violate the public good" and are an act against all Polish citizens.

Holocaust hero Fisera honored

A plaque was unveiled in a southern French town for Josef Fisera, who saved dozens of Jews from the Holocaust. Fisera, a leading figure in the Czechoslovak exile movement during World War II, established the Christian Children's Home in 1941.

At the school he provided Jews, including 82 children, with false papers indicating they were Czechoslovak Protestants. The plaque was unveiled Monday in Venice.

Born in 1912, Fisera operated as a courier for the French resistance and eventually went underground. After the war he remained in France as a professor of social sciences at the Sorbonne in Paris.

Fisera was awarded the French Legion of Honor, the Czech Order of Tomas Garrigue Masaryk and Yad Vashem's Righteous Among the Nations medal. He died last year in Paris.

Group to track husbands of agunot?

Husbands who refuse to give their wives Jewish divorce papers soon may be unable to evade the rabbinate in Europe.

At a meeting in Brussels next month, the Rabbinical Center of Europe is to discuss creating an "Interpol-style" organization to document and track such men, the Jerusalem Post reported.

The organization would work with local Jewish courts to disperse information about such men and find men who disappear to avoid the ramifications of refusing to give Jewish divorce papers, or gets, to their wives.

NORTH AMERICA

Rice aide resigns

A top aide to Condoleezza Rice, who said overall progress in the Middle East hinges on Israeli-Palestinian peace, resigned. Philip Zelikow, the State Department's counselor, said this week that he was quitting because he needed to earn a private-sector salary.

Zelikow made headlines two months ago when he told the Washington Institute for Near East Policy that in order to get Arab states to cooperate with the United States on Iraq, resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was a "sine qua non."

Canadian Muslims send anti-Semitic cartoons

The Canadian Islamic Congress circulated anti-Semitic cartoons to Jewish homes in Ontario, B'nai Brith Canada charged.

According to a B'nai Brith statement, Jewish residents of London, Ontario, received the cartoons in their mailboxes along with political flyers from the Canadian Islamic Congress, days before a Monday federal election.

One cartoon shows Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper draped in an Israeli flag with a slightly exaggerated hook nose.

"We are concerned by the injection of anti-Semitism into this election campaign," said Frank Dimant, B'nai Brith Canada's executive-vice president.

Philanthropy exec Weinberg dies at 89

Nathan Weinberg, former trustee and vice president of the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, died at age 89.

The Pikesville, Md., resident succumbed to pneumonia Saturday. Born in Baltimore, Weinberg worked in military intelligence during World War II.

After the war he worked in a car repair shop that was a family business, then ran transit companies in Dallas and Scranton, Pa. He joined the Weinberg foundation, started by his brother and sister-in-law, as a trustee in 1960.

Shortly after his brother's death in 1990, Weinberg became vice president of the foundation.