

Israeli news

Pollard-Barghouti swap plan denied by Israeli and U.S. officials

By DAN BARON

JERUSALEM (JTA) - Israeli and American officials have dismissed reports that convicted spy Jonathan Pollard might be released in a swap. Landmark elections in Israel and the

Palestinian Authority have raised fresh speculation that Pollard, the former U.S. Navy analyst



JONATHAN POLLARD, in an undated prison photo.

servicing a life prison sentence for spying for Israel, could win clemency as part of wider diplomatic Mideast maneuvering. Israel Army Radio reported Sunday that Israel planned to offer to release jailed Palestinian terrorist Marwan Barghouti in exchange for Pollard after Prime Minister-elect Ehud Olmert forms his new government.

The rationale for such a swap is rooted in Hamas' political takeover in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. As a leader of the rival, more pragmatic Fatah, Barghouti, if freed, could be expected to undermine the radical Islamic group - some-

thing both Jerusalem and Washington want. Barghouti is serving five life sentences plus 40 years for murder and attempted murder in the form of terrorist attacks.

Israeli government officials denied the reported plan, and a spokesman for the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv dismissed it as "speculation." That left open the possibility that someone in Olmert's office was floating a trial balloon, testing reaction in Israel and the United States to the idea of a Pollard-Barghouti swap.

Pollard's wife, Esther, suggested that the report might serve a narrower Israeli interest. Olmert, who narrowly won last month's general elections as head of the centrist Kadima Party, is keen to shore up right-wing support ahead of planned withdrawals from the West Bank. Being perceived as campaigning for Pollard to be pardoned could help Olmert with more conservative voters.

Still busy trying to build a governing coalition, Olmert is widely expected to turn the Pensioners Party led by Rafi Eitan - Pollard's recruiter and handler. Eitan, who was then head of the industrial espionage unit Lakam, took responsibility for the Pollard affair. He told Yediot Achronot last week that the young Navy analyst provided "information of such high quality and accuracy, so good and so important to the country's security" that "my desire, my appetite to get more and more material overcame me." Eitan, now 79, has vowed to lobby for Pollard from the Knesset.

But that has done little to mollify the ex-spy, who accuses Eitan of forsaking him. Through his lawyer, Nitzana Darshan-Leitner, Pollard has threatened to petition Israel's High Court of Justice against any Cabinet portfolio appointment offered to Eitan.



Passover in Jerusalem
Israelis do last minute shopping for the Passover holiday at Jerusalem's Machane Yehuda market, April 9, 2006. Passover started on the eve of April 12. Credit: Brian Henderl/JTA.



Bakers race against the clock to roll out dough to prepare matzah for the upcoming Passover holiday, in the Mea Shearim neighborhood of Jerusalem, April 6, 2006. According to the Bible, the Israelites did not have time to allow their bread to rise before fleeing Egypt, and to this day matzah is prepared and baked quickly to prevent the dough from rising. Credit: Brian Henderl/JTA.

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Israeli news

News analysis

As Iran again rattles the sabers, Israel considers available options

By LESLIE SUSSER

JERUSALEM (JTA) - Though hardly unexpected, Iran's recently announced capacity to produce enriched uranium, and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's latest call for Israel's destruction, have sent shock waves through Israel's defence and political establishments.

But Israeli leaders are deliberately playing down their public response. Analysts say they don't want to be perceived as leading the international campaign against Iranian nuclear weapons or give the impression that Iran's quarrel is primarily with Israel, rather than with the West as a whole.

Nevertheless, the decision-makers are extremely concerned on two counts: the threat of a fanatical Iranian government actually using a nuclear device against Israel, or providing a nuclear umbrella for aggression and terrorism.

While Israel isn't taking the lead for now, its leaders say they're determined to prevent Iran from achieving nuclear-weapons capability. "Israel will not tolerate Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons," Prime Minister Ehud Olmert declared recently. If all else fails, that could mean Israel acting on its own to pre-empt an Iranian bomb.

Israeli generals take the Iranian threat at face value. "Ahmadinejad's vision is to wipe Israel out, and he means what he says," the military's deputy chief of staff, Maj. Gen. Moshe Kaplinsky, declared in a weekend interview with Yediot Achronot.

Commenting on Ahmadinejad's latest statement that "Israel is a dried-up, rotten tree that will be destroyed by a single storm," Ha'aretz wrote in an editorial, "It is not Ahmadinejad's style that is troubling, but rather what is behind it - for the storm the president of Iran is promising might be a nuclear one."

Even if the Iranians don't put their own survival at risk by attempting to attack Israel, their possession of a nuclear bomb would radically alter the balance of power in the Middle East.

Giora Eiland, head of Israel's National Security Council, argues that every crisis would be played out "under the shadow of the Iranian bomb" - a fact that could severely limit Israel's freedom of action against terrorists. For example, Eiland asks, if the Iranian-backed, Lebanese-based

Hezbollah were to launch a heavy rocket attack across the northern border, would Israel dare escalate its response?

Other generals suggest Israel's hands also could be tied in the battle against Palestinian terrorism, for example in retaliating against Kassam rockets fired from the Gaza Strip.

Israeli officials are convinced Iran is determined to push ahead with its military nuclear program, regardless of Western efforts to forestall it. So why should the Iranians provoke the West and jeopardize their program by making public statements about a technological breakthrough in uranium enrichment?

According to Maj. Gen. Amos Yadlin, chief of Israeli military intelligence, the Iranians are trying to create the impression that their argument with the international community on the principle of enrichment is over, and that it's pointless to try to impose technological restrictions. "They are trying to move the debate to the next phase: the extent of enrichment," Yadlin says. If the Iranians are allowed to press ahead, Yadlin expects they'll be able to produce a nuclear bomb "around the end of the decade."

According to Yadlin, Iran needs six months to complete its research on uranium enrichment; two years to build a large centrifuge plant to produce enriched uranium in industrial quantities; and another year to produce enough uranium for a nuclear bomb.

That estimate doesn't take into account suspected clandestine programs that may be further advanced than Iran's small, experimental centrifuge enrichment plant at Natanz. Unconfirmed reports suggest the Iranians might have a secret program using far more advanced P-2 centrifuges, purchased through Pakistan's rogue nuclear expert, Abdul Qadeer



MAJOR GENERAL MOSHE KAPLINSKY: Iran's possession of a nuclear bomb would radically alter the balance of power in the Middle East.

Khan. If so, the timetable could be significantly accelerated.

Given the enormity of the threat, what does Israel intend to do about it? For now, it seems the Israeli government will go along with international diplomatic efforts to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, even though they don't believe the diplomatic road has any real chance of success. Ultimately, Israeli officials believe that only the threat or use of force will deter Iran. And though many doubt that the U.S. will take military action, others point out that Washington has not taken any option off the table.

The Israeli defence establishment is convinced there's a military solution to the Iranian nuclear problem, even though it would be risky and logistically complex. To be effective, a military strike would have to be directed at many different targets simultaneously - nuclear installations, command-and-control centers, airfields and missile sites. Israeli officials acknowledge that the United States is much better equipped to handle an operation of this nature, but they do not rule out the possibility of Israel going it alone if need be.

During a February visit to Washington, Kaplinsky reportedly discussed the Iranian situation with American defence officials. According to American media reports, subsequently denied in Israel, he pressed the United States to take military action. But Kaplinsky acknowledges that Israel has long-standing contingency plans of its own. These include the Arrow anti-missile defence system to keep Iranian missiles out and an offensive capacity to hit targets deep inside Iranian territory.

In an address at the Washington-based Hudson Institute in early March, Israel's former military chief of staff, reserve Lt. Gen. Moshe Ya'alon, spelled it out: Israel has the military capacity to destroy Iran's nuclear installations and set its nuclear weapons' plans back by several years, he declared.

Would Israel be prepared to attack Iran on its own, given the potential regional and global consequences? The Iranians seem to be betting that neither Israel nor the United States will be ready to take the chance. But like Saddam Hussein, they could be miscalculating.

Olmert divvies up cabinet posts (Cont. from page 1.)

ness and prudence, an ability to assess and decide," traits that Peretz possesses, Sneh said.

Labor was promised four other ministries - education, agriculture, infrastructure and tourism - as well as two ministries without portfolio. As the nominations became clear, there were disappointed candidates on both sides of the talks. Former Shin Bet chief Ami Ayalon and veteran economist Avishay Braverman, denied portfolios, said in interviews that by joining Labor, they had helped Peretz in the polls. Uriel Reichman tendered his resignation from Kadima, saying he had only entered politics on the understanding he would be education minister.

Also miffed was Meir Sheerit, a former finance minister who looks likely to lose out on a new stint in the post to Avraham Hirschson. Mofaz was more reticent. According to media reports, Olmert may tailor a new, trade-related portfolio for the ex-defence minister in order to keep him in the Cabinet. That left only Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni keeping her position, while Shimon Peres was promised the Regional Cooperation Ministry he ran under the Barak government.

What does that leave for the other prospective coalition partners? Avigdor Lieberman, head of the hawkish, pro-immigrant Yisrael Beiteinu, looks likely to win the Internal Security Ministry, though objections by Israel's attorney general threaten this.

Lieberman has vowed to crack down on crime in Israel. He has been more circumspect on Olmert's West Bank plans, saying unilateral withdrawals will only embolden Palestinian terror. Lieberman will also gain the Immigrant Absorption Ministry.

Shas, the religious party appealing mainly to Sephardi Jews, is expected to receive the welfare and housing portfolios. It is also expected to appoint a minister without portfolio who will have authority over religious matters - perhaps an indirect effort to rebuild the Religious Affairs Ministry, dismantled by the secular Shinui Party in the last government.

The last clutch of Cabinet posts will go to the Pensioners Party, which took a surprising seven seats in the elections. The party's leader, former spymaster Rafi Eitan, will become the first Israeli pensioners minister, having had the post custom-made. One of his colleagues is expected to take over the Health Ministry.



Olmert/Katsav
Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ehud Olmert, left, shakes hands with Israeli President Moshe Katsav after Katsav announced that Olmert will form the next government during a news conference in Jerusalem, April 6, 2006. Credit: Brian Henderl/JTA.