

Israeli news

Behind the headlines

Not all Israeli Arabs cheer appointment of Druse minister

By GIL SEDAN

JERUSALEM (JTA) - Only in Israel would a government minister refrain from singing the national anthem. Saleh Tarif, the first Arab appointed to the cabinet in Israel's history, refused to sing Hatikvah during an event at the Tel Aviv fairgrounds at the end of an intensive week of struggle within Israel's Labor Party over whether to join the national unity government.

Standing among his proud, singing friends in the Labor Party, Tarif kept his mouth shut. "Do you really think I could stand there and sing, 'So long as still within our breasts the Jewish heart beats true?'" Tarif asked during an interview with JTA. "It is the Jewish anthem, it is not the anthem of the non-Jewish citizens of Israel."



The first Israeli Arab to be appointed to an Israeli cabinet, Saleh Tarif will be minister without portfolio, responsible for Arab affairs, in Ariel Sharon's government. Many Arab Israelis doubt Tarif, a member of the Druse community, really represents them. Credit: Israel Government Press Office.

It took the Arab citizens of Israel almost 53 years before they could finally have their own person in the cabinet -

even though they are 18 percent of the population. It was an impressive political achievement, but it could not have come at a more tense moment between Israel and its Arab citizens. In the past five months, relations between the Jewish State and its Arab minority reached an all-time low, as Israeli Arabs rioted in solidarity with the first

days of the Palestinian uprising in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and police killed 13 Arabs in ensuing

clashes.

Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat was one of the first to phone his congratulations to the newly-elected minister in Tarif's Galilee village of Julis. Tarif will be a minister without portfolio, responsible for Arab affairs. But many among Israel's Arab population doubt whether Tarif really represents them. Tarif, 47, is a member of the Druse community, a secretive religious sect derived from Islam.

Some 100,000 Druse live in 18 villages in the Carmel, Galilee and Golan. Like their 300,000 brethren in neighboring countries, the Druse are ethnically Arabs. However, most of the Druse in Israel allied themselves with the Jewish state as early as Israel's 1948 War of Independence.

Sharon says car-bomb threat is reason to blockade Ramallah

By NAOMI SEGAL

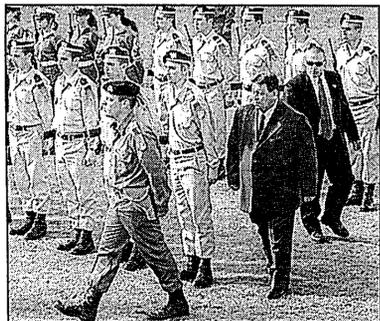
JERUSALEM (JTA) - The first major challenge of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's young tenure is shaping up over Israel's blockades of Palestinian cities.

Palestinians decry Israel's tightening "siege" of Ramallah, and one Israeli Arab Knesset member compared the blockades to Nazi concentration camps. Israel defends the blockades as necessary for security reasons, citing an alleged plot by Ramallah-based militants to carry out a massive terror attack in Jerusalem.

The Palestinian Authority this week renewed a call on the UN Security Council to send in peacekeepers to protect the Palestinian people. For its part, the U.S. State Department said Israel's attempts to end the violence through economic pressure only provide economic hardship and do not enhance security.

U.S. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher made the comments urging Israel to ease the economic restrictions on Palestinians on March 12, as he reiterated that Israel should also release tax revenues Israel has withheld from the Palestinians. The United States "opposes any measures that make it impossible for ordinary Palestinians to survive economically," said Boucher.

On March 12, Israel's defence minister eased the blockades around four Palestinian cities in the West Bank, but said a blockade around Ramallah



Israel's new Defence Minister, Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, front right, reviews an honor guard at the Defence Ministry in Tel Aviv on March 8. Ben-Eliezer said a tightened closure on Ramallah would remain for now because of indications terrorists there are trying to infiltrate Israel with a car bomb. Credit: Brian Hendler/JTA.

Israel for a "very big operation," Ben-Eliezer told Israel Radio. Israel Radio quoted senior Palestinian security forces as denying that any terrorist cell was planning such attacks from Ramallah.

Meanwhile, the first ministerial-level meeting between Israel and the Palestinians since Sharon took office was canceled because Israeli security officials did not want the Israel's minister for the closure of Ramallah, cutting the city off from surrounding Palestinian towns and villages with trenches, roadblocks and tanks.

On March 11, Israel finished tightening the closure of Ramallah, cutting the city off from surrounding Palestinian towns and villages with trenches, roadblocks and tanks. Some 1,500 Palestinians joined a protest March 12 aimed at breaking the Ramallah blockade.

ISRAELI NEWS BRIEFS

IDF official: Violence likely to continue

JERUSALEM (JTA) - The head of the Israel Defence Force's intelligence branch says Palestinian violence is likely to continue for an extended period. Briefing the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee, Maj. Gen. Amos Malka said Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat is encouraging terrorist organizations to continue their activities.

Hamas: We're responsible for bomb

JERUSALEM (JTA) - The military wing of Hamas claimed responsibility for the March 4 terrorist bombing in the Israeli coastal city of Netanya, in which three Israelis were killed and 93 wounded. Israel Radio also reported that the Hamas Internet site had identified the bomber, who was killed in the explosion, as a 22-year-old resident of a refugee camp near the West Bank town of Tulkarm. The man's father told Reuters he was "honored" by his son's act, adding: "We hope that every Palestinian is ready to do what our son did and to banish the Zionists from our sacred homeland."

Violence harms Purim parties

JERUSALEM (JTA) - The security situation in Israel casted a pall over last week's Purim celebrations, with one Tel Aviv suburb considering canceling its annual costume parade because of possible terrorist attacks. The commander of the Tel Aviv district police, Yossi Sidbon, urged the Holon municipality not to cancel the parade, saying more than 1,000 police officers and volunteers were being allocated to secure the event.

U.S. presses Israel on commission

JERUSALEM (JTA) - The United States is urging Israel to cooperate with a commission investigating the violence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, according to Israel Radio. The United States is reportedly telling Israel that a failure to cooperate with the Mitchell Commission could lead the Palestinians to press for a United Nations resolution condemning Israel. Meanwhile, the commission scheduled a March 19 visit to the Middle East.

Report: Gun permits requests up

JERUSALEM (JTA) - Requests for gun permits are up 300 per cent in Israel since Palestinian violence erupted in late September, Israel Radio reported. The greatest increase has been in the environs of Jerusalem and around the West Bank's Ariel settlement.

Woman in Rabin death backed

JERUSALEM (JTA) - A right-wing women's group in Israel has launched a petition drive to secure a presidential pardon for a woman convicted for her role in the 1995 assassination of Yitzhak Rabin. Margalit Ha-Shefi is set to be jailed on charges of failing to notify the authorities of her friend Yigal Amir's plan to kill the prime minister. The Women in Green group says Israeli officials themselves knew of Amir's intentions.

Lawmaker loses immunity

JERUSALEM (JTA) - An Israeli parliamentary committee lifted the immunity of Israel, Our Home leader Avigdor Lieberman so he can stand trial for allegedly assaulting youths who beat up one of his children. The attorney general said the allegations against Lieberman would not bar him from serving as national infrastructures minister in the government of Prime Minister-elect Ariel Sharon.

Beilin wants to head Labor Party

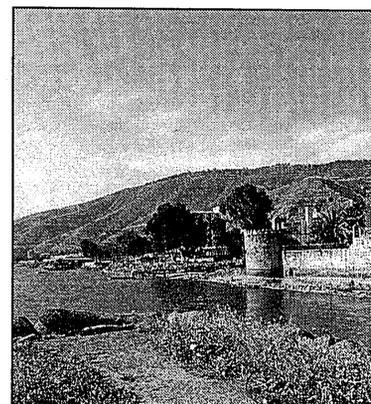
JERUSALEM (JTA) - Outgoing cabinet minister Yossi Beilin announced his candidacy for acting chairman of the Labor Party. Shimon Peres, expected to be foreign minister in Israel's new government, also has been touted as a possible interim leader. Beilin, a Peres protégé, said he will not run if Peres does.



BRENDAN LOMOW, a child in the Asper Jewish Community Campus's Aleph-Bet Day Care Nursery, watches intently as **Gabbi Raizman**, a Grade 6 Shore Elementary School student, pretends to wind up a "jack in the box" in a classroom transformed into a circus for the school's March 9 Purim Carnival. (See photo below.)



LEXIE LEIBL, a Grade 6 Shore student, pops out of the box (see above photo) on cue as Grade 6 Shore student **Shira Lerner** and Aleph-Bet Day Care Nursery child **Brendan Lomow** watch, in the background. Students in different grades were assigned to organize the circus and other events for the carnival, which Shore students and Aleph Bet children attended, going from room to room. More Purim pictures on page 10.



Sea of Galilee at Tiberius: Work to build a waterpumping station on the Hatzbani River in southern Lebanon, one of the main feeders of Israel's water supply, has raised concerns in Israel. IPPA photo.

Reeling from drought, Israel wary of Lebanese water works on border

By NAOMI SEGAL

JERUSALEM (JTA) - Israeli security sources are expressing concern over work on the Lebanese side of the border to build a water-pumping station on the Hatzbani River, one of the main feeders into Israel's water supply. The Hatzbani, Dan and Banias rivers feed into the Jordan River, which leads into the Sea of Galilee, Israel's main supply of drinking water.

Uri Saguy, chairman of the Mekorot water company and a former Israel Defence Force intelligence chief, called the Lebanese step illegal and a violation of the delicate status quo. He cautioned that some sort of arrangement must be reached on the matter, which he described as a potential *causis belli*. A French news agency quoted an Israeli security source as calling the Lebanese actions very grave, and warning that Israel would be forced to respond. Legislator Michael Kleiner of the hawkish National Union Party called the work in Lebanon a "provocation."

The development comes as Israel faces a severe water crisis due to several years of low rainfall. Israel is considering a number of remedies, including importing water from Turkey and building water treatment and desalination facilities.

During deliberations on the water shortage last week, Water Commissioner Shimon Tal said the situation is so bad that the country will be hard pressed to provide water for basic needs. "In order to ensure that there will be drinking water in faucets next year, drastic steps must be taken," he said. "We have to cease watering lawns and gardens."

Despite its own shortfall, Israel provides water to Jordan under the terms of the peace agreement between the two countries. In past drought years, Jordan has rejected any suggestions that Israel be allowed to reduce the amount of water it provides.

Just before taking office earlier this month, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was presented with several recommendations for dealing with the water crisis.

(Cont. on page 20. See "Israel wary of Lebanese water works".)

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Inside

Community news:

Winnipeg hijack victim recalls her eight-day ordeal ...page 2



Community news:

Birthing Israel participants saw a more "peaceful" Israel ...page 3



People:

Winnipeggers recall travel adventures in Spain ...page 6

Sports news:

Toronto moms have own ice hockey league ...page 12

Index

Community news ... pages 1-3, 10
Editorial ...page 4
Comment ...pages 4, 5
Letters ...page 5
Recipes ...pages 8-9
Student writing ...page 11
Arts & entertainment ...pages 14-15
Books ...page 15
Canadian Jewish news ...page 16
U.S. Jewish news ...pages 17-18
World Jewish news ...page 19
Israeli news ...pages 20, 21, 24