
Israel

Safra and friends are under pressure

by Dean Andromidas

In the last week of December, Israeli Interior Minister Haim Ramon barred entry into Israel of seven U.S.-based right-wing extremists. Among those barred were five members of the outlawed Jewish Defense League, as well as Bizad Cohen, who was excluded for "supporting extremist organizations that have been outlawed in Israel." The seventh person kept out was Rabbi Abraham Hecht of New York.

Rabbi Hecht, chief Rabbi at Shaare Zion congregation of the Brooklyn Syrian Jewish community, became infamous internationally for indirectly blessing the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, by naming him a *moser*, one who hands over Jews to non-Jews, a crime that warrants the death penalty. Although Hecht claims to have taken back the statement just days prior to the assassination, he nonetheless is one of the key spiritual leaders of the American-based Jewish right-wing extremist organizations, including the Jewish Defense League. These are the organizations and individuals who have backed the extremist settlers movement or the terrorist operations in Israel.

Backed by Safra

Rabbi Hecht is perhaps the richest rabbi in the world, reportedly with an income of anywhere from \$300,000 to \$1 million a year. His benefactor is international banker Edmond Safra, owner of several international banks, including the New York-based Republic National Bank. Safra is one of the leading financial backers of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith in the United States, as well as leading right-wing extremist groups which are mobilizing to sabotage the Middle East peace process. He is also a founding member of Prince Philip's "1001 Club." Hecht is said to be Philip's "spiritual adviser." It is this network that bears true responsibility for the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin.

Although Safra has not been denied entry into Israel, the Geneva-based banker has also come under pressure from the Israeli government. According to reports in the Israeli press, the Israeli Central Bank has opened an investigation into his First International Bank of Israel (FIBI), Israel's fourth largest bank. The investigation was prompted by a civil suit against Edmond Safra and his two brothers by a former busi-

ness associate and Israeli businessman Jack Nasser. If Nasser were to win his case, Safra would lose control of FIBI, his only foothold in Israel.

According to legal sources close to the case, Nasser claims that he purchased a controlling interest in FIBI in 1986, and transferred ownership to the Safra brothers in 1990 as part of a deal with Edmond Safra. Nasser claims that he, in effect, fronted for the Safras in 1986, because the Safras could not buy the bank openly because of their partnership at that time with American Express Corp. in the Geneva-based Trade Development Bank. The latter recognized the Arab boycott of Israel and refused to enter the Israeli market. By 1990, Safra had dissolved his partnership with American Express and, according to the agreement with Nasser, took control of FIBI shares in an mutually agreed upon arrangement arbitrated by Geneva-based lawyer Charles Junod. Nasser now claims that Junod did not act as a neutral mediator, but purely in Safra's interest. Junod is currently a member of the board of directors of Republic National Bank Switzerland, a fact that supports Nasser's case. The case went to court on Jan. 9.

A boon to the peace process

If one understands the role that Safra plays in Middle East banking, it becomes clear that a weakening of his position within the Israeli political scene would have a significant impact on undermining the opposition to the peace process. Recent developments vis-à-vis the "Syrian track," underscore the importance of such a move.

The Safra brothers are from an old banking family, originally based in the Aleppo, Syria Jewish community, who served as bankers for the Ottoman Empire. It is Aleppo from whence famous Jewish banking families, such as the Dweks of S.G. Warburg, the Recantis, and the De Picciottos, originate. Acting on behalf of British oligarchical interests, and despite their Jewish background, they continue to serve as bankers to key Arab families in the Middle East. It is well known that, during the brutal Lebanese civil war, the safest place in Beirut was Safra's bank. It is this banking network which controls a large portion of the international weapons trade, drug-trafficking, and money-laundering operations internationally. Of particular interest in the Middle East is the Syrian, Lebanese, northern Israeli, and Turkish drug-trafficking and illegal-weapons trade. This latter network plays a key role in controlling both Jewish and Arab terrorism.

Now that the Syrian track in the peace process is on the front burner and appears to be moving forward at an unprecedented pace, keeping pressure on this network is absolutely crucial. This is especially important following reports from the Israeli security services that the threat against Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres is at unprecedentedly high levels, and that another political assassination attempt could occur.