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EJC race heats up over nukes' forum

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PRAGUE (JTA) – Add a high-level conference on nuclear disarmament to the bitter battle being waged for European Jewish Congress president.

An Israeli security expert suggested one candidates was playing "political football" with last week's two-day conference in Luxembourg, which was sponsored by a Jewish group supported by one of the EJC hopefuls, "in a way that dangerously plays with Israeli security interests."

Uzi Arad, an academic involved with Israeli defense for 25 years, said he was appalled when he received a "warning call" from a Likud Party operative in France about his planned attendance at the International Conference on Preventing Nuclear Catastrophe.

Although Arad refused to name incumbent EJC President Pierre Besnainou as the source of the pressure against him, saying he did not want to be involved in European Jewish politics, he made it clear that the Tunisian-born French millionaire was disseminating information about the conference that was incorrect.

In the June 26 EJC elections, Besnainou is facing off against Moshe Kantor, a wealthy businessman and president of the Russian Jewish Congress, who organized the Luxembourg event through his European Jewish Fund, a non-profit institution.

Meyer Habib, a board member of France's largest Jewish umbrella group, CRIF, and a close ally of Besnainou, confirmed to JTA that he urged Arad "not to attend the conference because I had heard it called for the nuclear disarmament of Israel."

But Arad said Habib was woefully misinformed.

"It was a professional meeting of top experts, and the agenda was focused on the serious threat of Iran and North Korea," said Arad, a former Mossad intelligence director and an adviser to the Knesset's foreign relations and defense committee. Arad is also the director of the Institute for Policy and Strategy in Herzliya.

More than 50 nuclear proliferation experts -- including 19 Russians and 12 Americans -- participated in the conference. Among the speakers were Mohamed ElBaradei, director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency; William Perry, defense secretary in the Clinton administration; Hans Blix, former director of the IAEA; and Nikolay Laverov, vice president of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

In the run-up to the EJC elections, supporters of Besnainou and Kantor have exchanged vitriol over such issues as election dates and Besnainou's alleged ambitions for a prominent position in the World Jewish Congress. The WJC is holding its presidential elections June 10.

Arad noted that the other Israeli conference attendee, Ariel Levite, principal deputy director general of the Israel Atomic Energy Commission, received a similar warning from a mid-level employee at the Israeli Foreign Ministry.

"Someone had the nerve to tell me that going to this conference was like Neturei Karta going to see President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad," Arad said, referring to the Chasidic sect that was widely condemned for participating in an Iranian Holocaust denial conference last year.

Arad said Israeli journalists "who had clearly been fed erroneous information" kept calling him to ask if the conference was against Israel and soft on Iran.

Besnainou was unapologetic about his role in stirring up concern about the conference, which was also

sponsored by the East-West Center at the University of Maryland and Russia's Institute for Strategic Assessments.

He sent to JTA by e-mail what he described as a conference "road map" that said delegates should address ways to make a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East and provide incentives for the gradual nuclear disarming of Israel. The document also included a recommendation that members of the United Nations Security Council apply Articles 41 and 42, which call for sanctions and military action against violators of the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

"Israeli officials saw this, called me and were very upset that a Jewish organization could sponsor such a conference," Besnainou said. "They urged me to do something about it."

But the road map distributed by Besnainou was not an official conference document or declaration, according to Arad and a Kantor spokesman, Charlie Levine.

"The document you received was merely a proposal circulated before the conference," Levine said. "It was one of perhaps a dozen suggestions by a participant, and it was quickly rejected by the other participants, and now someone is circulating it with malicious intent."

The actual draft conference declaration, among other things, focuses on non-proliferation and urges India, Israel and Pakistan "to come closer to, through incentives and where appropriate, the nuclear non-proliferation regime."

Israel is widely assumed to have a nuclear arsenal, though it has never officially confirmed its status as a nuclear power.

Arad said the Israelis found the draft declaration "plausible and positive."

Besnainou nonetheless suggested that the conference was steered toward the interests of the Russian political elite, which is often criticized by the U.S. and Israeli governments for being soft on Iran.

Besnainou's supporters have presented Kantor as an ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin and thus without Israel's best interests in mind.

Levine said Kantor preferred not to discuss accusations against the conference, but that the forum "aimed to bring serious and pragmatic discussion of the Iranian threat, which is a threat to the whole world and should be immediately addressed by the international community."

One conference observer and Besnainou ally who would speak only on condition of anonymity declared that Iran would have approved of its content because speakers "widely expressed condemnation of 'double standards' by the international community." This observer added that speakers widely condemned "the threat of use of force" against Iran "and stressed the point that Iran has a legitimate right to peaceful nuclear technology."

He noted that Blix has called repeatedly for Israel to end its nuclear program and that ElBaradei is quoted by the Iranian press as saying that force cannot dissuade countries from developing atomic weapons.

But two American conference attendees said accusations of an anti-Israel or pro-Iran bias were bizarre.

"There were no conversations about Israel," said Henry Gaffney, director for strategy and concepts at the federally funded CNA Corporation Center for Naval Analyses in Alexandria, Va. "It was made clear that Iran violated the non-proliferation treaty. The whole conference was about Iran and North Korea."

Robert Nurick, a senior fellow at the Center for Non-Proliferation Studies of the Monterey Institute of International Studies, said anyone who was worried that the conference was against Israel's interests "should rest easy."

Nurick, who is Jewish, said, "For the Russians in this field, their spread of ideas on how to disarm Iran was not noticeably different than the spread you will find anywhere, including in the U.S."