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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

April 10, 2017

Times of Israel

Trump Adviser: US seeks both to oust Assad and fight IS

President Donald Trump's national security adviser on Sunday left open the possibility of additional US military action against Syria following last week's missile strike but indicated that the United States was not seeking to act unilaterally to oust Syrian President Bashar Assad. In his first televised interview, H.R. McMaster pointed to dual US goals of defeating the Islamic State group and removing Assad. But he suggested that Trump was seeking a global political response for regime change from US allies as well as Russia, which he said needed to re-evaluate its support of Syria. See also, ["McMaster: U.S. eager for regime change in Syria" \(Politico\)](#)

Time

Deadly Bombs at Two Egyptian Churches on Palm Sunday

Egypt's President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi has called for a state of emergency for three months after two suicide bombings killed scores of Christians in two church attacks on Palm Sunday. El-Sissi accused countries he didn't name of fueling instability in Egypt, saying that "Egyptians have foiled plots and efforts by countries and fascist, terrorist organizations that tried to control Egypt." The army chief-turned-president hasn't detailed the legal measures needed to declare the state of emergency but according to the constitution, the parliament majority must vote in favor of the state of emergency. See also, ["Palm Sunday bombs rock Egyptian churches; state of emergency is declared" \(Washington Post\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Travel Warning for Sinai: Israelis Should Leave Immediately

Following assessment of the situation in Egypt, in light of today's deadly terror attacks, Israel's Counter-Terrorism Bureau issued a travel warning for all Israelis in the Sinai Peninsula. Due to the gravity of the situation, the Bureau recommended all Israeli citizens currently in Sinai to leave the area immediately and return to Israel. Additionally, the Bureau requested that all Israelis located in Sinai contact them directly for status updates. Any persons intending to travel to Sinai are advised to refrain from doing so at this time. See also, ["After bombings, Israel again urges citizens to leave Sinai" \(TOI\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Israel to Offer Treatment to Syrian Wounded Children

Israel will offer to increase humanitarian aid to the victims of the civil war in Syrian, the security cabinet decided on Sunday. Israel, which is currently offering medical treatment to wounded Syrians in the Golan Heights, will try to take in and treat children who were wounded in last week's chemical attack in Idlib Province in northern Syria, the ministers decided. It was unclear at this time how the decision would be implemented, since Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman opposed it. The proposal was put forward by Transportation Minister Yisrael Katz, who also holds the Intelligence and Atomic Energy portfolio. See also, ["Israel welcomes U.S. airstrikes in Syria, will keep to sidelines" \(Reuters\)](#)

Interior Minister Calls to Establish Ministry of Pal' Affairs

Interior Minister Aryeh Deri is calling on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to establish a new ministry to deal with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In an interview with Yedioth Ahronoth, Ynet's sister publication, Deri spoke about many issues, starting with The Israeli Palestinian conflict. When asked about it, the minister responded that it is a very complex problem. "There is an open strife (between us)," Deri said, adding that in spite of that, "they live among us and we live among them." "I'm going to candidly say that, unfortunately for us all, Mahmoud Abbas does not want to progress with diplomacy. He is not willing to, and this was also claimed by John Kerry (who was the US Secretary of State at the time) and Tzipi Livni (who was the Foreign Minister at the time)."

Jerusalem Post

Basel Ghattas Officially Sentenced to Two Years in Prison

Recently resigned Balad MK Basel Ghattas was sentenced late Sunday by the Beersheba Magistrate's Court to two years in prison and an NIS 120,000 fine when it accepted a plea bargain leading to his conviction for smuggling cellphones to security prisoners in Ketziot Prison in the Negev. Ghattas will start serving his sentence on July 2 at Dekel Prison and the court's decision also carried a finding of moral turpitude which blocks him from returning to public office for seven years after his release as well as entails the loss of certain financial benefits which normally accrue to a former Knesset member. However, the hearing was not without drama, and at several points it seemed that the court would toss the plea bargain as too lenient. See also, ["Ex-Arab Israeli lawmaker sentenced in Israel" \(ABC News\)](#)

Globes

Another Billionaire Tells Police about Gifts to Netanyahu

Billionaire Chaim ("Poju") Zabludowicz testified in the past few days to the Israel Police Lahav 433 fraud unit concerning benefits and gifts he had given to Benjamin and Sara Netanyahu during the former's terms as minister of finance and prime minister, Channel 2 News reports. Zabludowicz, who resides in London, has a stake in El Al Israel Airlines Ltd. (TASE: ELAL) and owns the "Daniel" hotels in Herzliya and at the Dead Sea, as well as other businesses in Israel. He is also known as an art collector and a philanthropist. Zabludowicz told Channel 2 News that he testified voluntarily in response to a request from Israel Police. He stressed that he was not a suspect. See also, ["British Billionaire Testifies in Netanyahu Graft Case" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Le Pen: France 'Not Responsible' for WWII Jews Roundup

Marine Le Pen, the leader of the far-right National Front, said Sunday that she believes that France was "not responsible" for the arrest of Parisian Jews and for their deportation to the death camps. Thirteen thousand Jews, including 4,000 children, were arrested by French police in July 1942, in Paris and its outskirts. They were crowded into the Velodrome d'Hiver arena in what was termed the Vel d'Hiv roundup, before being sent to the death camps. Fewer than one hundred returned. The Jews were held under terrible conditions. Some were later sent to concentration camps south of Paris. At the end of July and in early August the adults were sent to Auschwitz and murdered there.

The World's Watchdog is Back in Town

Through the US strike in Syria, Trump conveys a message to both Assad and Putin—as well as to Iran, China and North Korea—that, unlike Obama, he has red lines which must not be crossed. Russia's response to the attack will likely remain diplomatic, as it's hard to see Putin operating directly against US military targets.

By Ron ben Yishai, Columnist at Yedioth Ahronoth

- In its strike in Syria on Thursday night, the United States conveyed a message to the world: We have red lines, and anyone who crosses them will experience the military force of the strongest power in the universe.
- This message is directed first and foremost at rebellious regimes acting against international treaties, including Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, North Korea and Iran. This message is also directed at Russia and China, who are provoking the Americans in the Indian Ocean. The US, President Donald Trump is essentially saying, won't stand idly by while human ethics are being violated.
- It was a surgical strike. It included accurate cruise missiles, which are capable of hitting the window of a house but carry extremely heavy warheads, against hardened aircraft shelters (HAS) and against fueling stations and facilities, which were likely the cause of fires at the Syrian military airfield in the Homs area. The same airbase serves the Russians as well, but Trump was undeterred by that. Israel struck in the surrounding area two weeks ago, and antiaircraft missiles were fired at the Israel Air Force planes from the same area.
- The red line set by Trump has to do with four reasons for a violent yet proportional and focused response: The use of deadly chemical weapons (and not chlorine gas); the violation of the international treaty which outlaws the production, stockpiling and use of such weapons; the violation of a United Nations Security Council resolution; and the threat to US interests. By these interests, Trump is referring to the threat to US allies in the region, led by Turkey and Israel, which may be the next target of the chemical weapons.
- In order to limit the damage and keep the message focused, the US informed all parties involved—including Russia, apparently. Trump emphasized that he has no intention of toppling Assad, but that if American interests are threatened, Russian President Vladimir Putin will suffer too. The main message is: You can't do as you please in the Middle East.

Solid intelligence

- I believe Russia will protest the strike, but a military response is unlikely. It's hard to imagine Putin operating directly against the US, against the Sixth Fleet destroyers that the Tomahawk missiles were fired from or against American bases in Turkey.
- There will be a harsh diplomatic response, but that's it. In its current situation, both economic and military, Russia cannot afford an overall conflict with the US. The military activity against the rebels in Syria may be intensified, while at the same time—in order to protect his

interests—Putin will restrain Assad. He will do it quietly, but with an iron fist, so that the Syrian president doesn't embarrass him once again.

- The Russians are embarrassed anyhow by the fact that their planes are operating from the same airfield out of which the aircraft with Assad's chemical weapons departed. It's safe to assume that Trump would have not attacked the base near Homs, which includes Russian presence, without receiving solid intelligence, from different sources, on the operation.
- The message which was conveyed in advance to the Russians—and to Israel too—came shortly before the strike, leading to losses in the Syrian army, which had no time to prepare for the attack. Assad suffered considerable damage, as this is the base which is used for attacks against Islamic State targets in eastern Syria.

A mini Pearl Harbor

- As far as the Middle East is concerned, this is a mini Pearl Harbor. The operation is good news for Israel, Saudi Arabia and Turkey because the US has made it clear that it views the use of non-conventional weapons as a red line, and that if such weapons are used—it will act as if the US itself has been attacked.
- The bad news is for Iran, which keeps testing ballistic missiles in defiance of a UN resolution. The US is now warning the Iranians with a yellow card, not just in regard to its missile tests but also in regard to its nuclear agreement with the world powers. If they thought they would be able to violate the agreement and get away with it like Assad, they will now think twice. This holds good news for Israel too, which has voiced concerns over Iranian presence in the Golan Heights.
- From a broader perspective, the diplomatic message is directed at China as well, which is violating treaties in the South Sea. The fact that Trump ordered the strike while hosting the Chinese president in Florida speaks for itself. In fact, anyone who has been affected by the Iranian, North Korean and even Chinese violations of world order should now take into account that the Trump-led US has red lines which must not be crossed.
- Former US President Barack Obama is probably asking himself right now if he should have acted differently. Obama gave up on that red line, and Assad kept massacring Syrian civilians with Russian backing

Trump's Envoy Pushing Two-State Solution as Abbas' US Visit Nears

By Uri Savir, honorary president of the Peres Peace Center

- “Jason Greenblatt surprised us at the Arab League summit meetings in Amman,” a senior PLO official told AI-Monitor this week. According to the official, Greenblatt, who is President Donald Trump’s representative for international negotiations, expressed in his meeting with President Mahmoud Abbas and in other meetings at the March 30 summit that Trump is committed to reaching a deal on Israeli-Palestinian peace, and that the time has come to make such a deal. Still, the Palestinian leadership remains skeptical about the outcome of these efforts, mainly due to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s annexationist positions. Greenblatt argued that if a balanced initiative is presented at the opening of negotiations within a regional framework, Netanyahu might be convinced. The official said the envoy explained that in such a setup, Netanyahu would have a parliamentary majority, thus it could push such an initiative forward.
- Indeed, Greenblatt met in recent weeks with both leaders of the Zionist Camp — Isaac Herzog and Tzipi Livni. In these meetings, he laid out Trump’s view on the possible dealmaking, but doesn’t this sound like deja vu? The notion of dealmaking was present also last year, when former Secretary of State John Kerry coordinated a similar regional opening of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations on a two-state solution with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and King Abdullah II of Jordan. At the end, Netanyahu opted for peace with HaBayit HaYehudi leader Naftali Bennett and Yisrael Beiteinu leader Avigdor Liberman instead.
- The PLO official told AI-Monitor that Greenblatt explicitly spoke about the possibility of a two-state solution. What encouraged the Palestinians most was the time element that was emphasized by the envoy when he told his interlocutors that Trump believes the time is ripe for a “dealmaking” process.
- Apart from meeting Abbas, Greenblatt met in Amman with Abdullah, his foreign minister and the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates — a crash course in inter-Arab diplomacy. Apparently, the US envoy was so inspired by these meetings that on his way back to Washington he stopped in Tel Aviv to receive a blessing from Rabbi Gershon Edelstein of Ponevezh for his important task.
- In parallel, an informal deal is being worked out between the White House and Netanyahu’s envoys on curbing settlement construction. According to a senior Ministry of Foreign Affairs official who has the prime minister’s ear and spoke to AI-Monitor on condition of anonymity, Israel will constrain its construction to the built-up areas of the settlements, or when not possible to adjacent areas, in order not to hamper Trump’s regional peace efforts.
- The official told AI-Monitor that the prime minister’s office and the Foreign Ministry are supportive of Trump’s efforts, but do not believe that Greenblatt will succeed in his efforts in the reasonable future, due to the weak political position of Abbas within the Palestinian Authority. He said, “Israel will agree to a regional umbrella for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, only if these negotiations will be bilateral and unconditional. Furthermore, the United States is

aware of Netanyahu's demand that the Palestinians recognize Israel as the Jewish state and that — in any solution — Israel will maintain security control of the West Bank.”

- The senior PLO official had a different view of the American effort. “The Palestinian leadership was asked to be constructive when Abbas meets later this month with US President Trump in the White House. The main emphasis of the US move is to create a regional framework for dealmaking,” he said. He believes that such a framework would be conducive to strengthening the anti-Islamic State coalition as the war against it in Syria and Iraq advances.
- Based on his information concerning Greenblatt's discussions with Abbas and the other Arab leaders, the PLO official outlined what sort of an initiative the Palestinians, together with Egypt, Jordan and the Arab League, could live with. He argued that reopening negotiations requires recognition by Israel of the two-state solution principle. Also, the basis of negotiations must be the Arab Peace Initiative, i.e., the borders must be based on the 1967 lines with East Jerusalem as the Palestinian capital with mutually agreed upon and parallel land swaps. Finally, Israel would join a negotiation track on normalization of relations with the Arab countries.
- This is a paradoxical development. After the US elections, the Trump administration was viewed by the Israeli right as a redemption of all anti-settlement and pro-two-state positions of the Obama era. The Palestinians, for their part, saw Trump's victory as “the end of the world.” Today, positions have changed. The main sense one gets from talking with senior Israeli and Palestinian officials is one of confusion. Despite some similar positions, Trump is not Barack Obama, and he is therefore totally unpredictable. Initial signs indicate that a dealmaking attempt is not out of the question.