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Israel and the Middle East News Update

Thursday, April 13

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April 13, 2017

Jerusalem Post

Israeli Lawmakers: Spicer's Comments Ignorant, Unacceptable

Israeli lawmakers condemned remarks made by White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer on Tuesday, implying that Nazi dictator Adolf Hitler did not use chemical weapons during World War II. Transportation Minister Israel Katz (Likud) called Spicer's statement "grave" and "outrageous" adding there is a "moral obligation that precedes diplomatic policy." Israel "must demand that he apologize or resign," Katz said. The Knesset Israel-US Relations Caucus Chairman MK Nachman Shai (Zionist Union) labeled Spicer's statement as ignorant and outrageous and called on US President Donald Trump to renounce from them. "The White House urgently needs a history teacher," said Shai. "Ignorance is not acceptable."

See also, ["Spicer: 'I Let the President Down' Over Hitler Comments" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

France's Macron: It Is Not Time to Recognize a Palestinian State

French independent presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron said on Sunday that recognizing a Palestinian state at this stage would serve nothing. The important task now is to create an atmosphere that will enable a peace process to be launched, the 39-year-old said in an interview on the Jewish community Radio J station in Paris. Less than two weeks before the first round of elections, French voters seem increasingly indecisive about which candidate to choose. Macron was not considered early in the campaign, but has recently polled as the front-runner. His interview was an eye-opener – as far as his approach on Middle East issues in general – and on the Syrian War, Iran and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular.

See also, ["Macron: Unilaterally Recognizing State of Palestine 'Would Not Serve Anyone'" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Times of Israel

Russia Vetoes UN Draft Resolution on Syria Gas Attack Probe

Russia on Wednesday vetoed a UN draft resolution demanding the Syrian government cooperate with an investigation of a suspected chemical attack that the West blames on President Bashar Assad's forces. It was the eighth time that Russia has used its veto power at the UN Security Council to block action directed at its ally in Damascus. British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said he was "dismayed" by the Russian veto. "This puts Russia on the wrong side of the argument," Johnson said in a statement issued in London. Russia imposed its veto as US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said after talks in Moscow that there was a "low level of trust" between the United States and Russia.

See also, ["Putin After Syria Strike: US-Russia Ties Worse Since Trump Took Office" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

See also, ["Tillerson: Russia Must Choose Between US and West or Assad, Iran, and Hezbollah" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Ha'aretz Slammed for Op-Ed Saying Religious Worse than Hezb.

An opinion piece in the Haaretz newspaper which described Israel's national religious community as being "worse than Hezbollah" drew widespread condemnation Wednesday, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and politicians across the spectrum calling for an apology. The column by Haaretz writer Yossi Klein accused Israel's national religious community of deceitfully attempting to take over and subvert the country, while carrying out a campaign of ethnic cleansing. "The national religious are dangerous. More dangerous than Hezbollah, more than drivers in car-ramming attacks or kids with scissors. The Arabs can be neutralized, but they cannot," he wrote.

See also, [*"Netanyahu: Shameful and Contemptible Article" \(Arutz Sheva\)*](#)

See also, [*"Lieberman: Boycott Ha'aretz for Comparing Hezbollah with Jewish Religious Right" \(Times of Israel\)*](#)

Times of Israel

Israel Arrests Hamas Officials in West Bank Raid

Israeli security forces arrested a Palestinian parliamentarian and a spokesman from the Hamas terror group in the West Bank city of Ramallah early Wednesday morning. Ahmed Attoun, a Hamas lawmaker and member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, was picked up by Israel Defense Forces soldiers at his al-Bireh home during the arrest raid. An East Jerusalem native, Attoun was previously arrested by Israel for his involvement in Hamas politics, and was exiled to the West Bank after his release a year later from jail in 2011. He joins 13 other Palestinian lawmakers currently in Israeli custody, according to reports.

Ynet News

In State of Emergency, Egypt's Churches Won't Celebrate Easter

Egyptian churches, in the southern city of Minya, said on Tuesday that they will not hold Easter celebrations next Saturday in mourning for 45 Coptic Christians killed this week in twin bombings of churches in two cities during Palm Sunday ceremonies. The Minya Coptic Orthodox Diocese said that celebrations will only be limited to the liturgical prayers "without any festive manifestations." Minya province has the highest Coptic Christian population in the country. Parliament approved on Tuesday President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's decision to declare a three-month state of emergency following the attacks, an action seen as a foregone conclusion since the legislature is packed with el-Sisi supporters. The Cabinet declared it had gone into effect as of 1 pm on Monday.

ABC News

In Surprise Move, Iran's Ahmadinejad to Run for President

Iran's former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on Wednesday stunned the country by unexpectedly filing to run in the May presidential election, contradicting a recommendation from the supreme leader to stay out of the race. Ahmadinejad's decision could upend an election many believed would be won by moderate President Hassan Rouhani, who negotiated the nuclear deal with world powers. Though Rouhani has yet to formally register, many viewed him as a shoe-in following Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's recommendation in September for Ahmadinejad to stand down and conservatives' inability to coalesce around a single candidate.

Israel Isn't a Fan of the Trump Doctrine

For an Israeli government near Syria's front lines, not all U.S. military interventions are made the same.

By Amos Harel

- Israel's public response to the U.S. strike on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime last week was unambiguous. It praised President Donald Trump's decision to fire cruise missiles on a Syrian air base near the city of Homs in retaliation for the regime's use of chemical weapons to slaughter dozens of civilians in the town of Khan Sheikhoun. Israel had been critical of the Obama administration's performance in the Middle East, and the recent strike gives Israelis reason to hope that maybe, just maybe, the United States is ready to take a tougher stance against clear violations of international law.
- But Israeli officials' public praise for the attack contrasts sharply with their privately expressed skepticism that Washington has carefully thought through its next steps in Syria. They are perfectly aware that Trump's decision may have been driven by personal motives — notably his desire to prove that he is stronger than his predecessor, and his need to distance himself from allegations of Russian manipulation in the presidential election. From Israel's perspective, that's no replacement for a coherent strategy for the region.
- Israeli officials were out in front of the Trump administration in laying the blame for the Khan Sheikhoun attack at the feet of the Assad regime and demanding a forceful response. Hours after the attack, Israeli intelligence officers already [told me](#) that they were convinced that senior members of the regime were involved in the decision to strike. On Thursday, Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman [claimed](#) in an interview with the Ydiot Aharonot newspaper that Assad had personally approved the use of sarin gas in the attack, and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [called on](#) the international community to complete its effort to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons stockpile.
- The remarks by Lieberman, a former citizen of the Soviet Union — the defense minister emigrated from Moldova to Israel in the late 1970s — particularly irritated the Kremlin. According to Russian media, President Vladimir Putin [called](#) Netanyahu to complain. Israeli and Russian officials have gone to great lengths to avoid confrontation in Syria. Putin and Netanyahu met five times during the past 18 months, mainly to discuss the situation in Syria. But evidently the tone in the latest phone conversation wasn't so friendly. It is not difficult to understand why. During the first two days after the chemical attack, the Russians were busy spreading disinformation and blaming Syrian rebels for releasing the poisonous gas.
- Geography may have something to do with Israel's more aggressive posture toward the ongoing disaster in Syria. The events are happening in Israel's backyard and could have direct implications on its security. Israeli intelligence officers are obliged to remain on much higher alert about developments in Syria, and the Israeli cabinet is expected to meet this week to discuss a renewal of distribution of gas masks to the Israeli population, in light of last week's events.

- In the past six years, Israel's leadership has been generally wise enough to remain on the sidelines of the Syrian conflict, participating only to the extent it deemed absolutely necessary. Early in the war, Netanyahu defined Israel's red lines. There would be a military response for every attack into Israeli territory, even for unintentional spillover, and the Israel Defense Forces would act to prevent any transfer of chemical weapons or sophisticated weapons systems from Syria to Hezbollah. Unlike former President Barack Obama, Netanyahu stuck to his red lines.
- International media outlets have reported dozens of Israeli airstrikes against weapons depots and convoys during the past several years. When asked about this, however, Israeli officials usually shrug and say nothing. The idea behind such "constructive ambiguity" is that the Assad regime may not be motivated to escalate further if it isn't embarrassed publicly.
- Russia's intervention to save the Assad regime in the fall of 2015 complicated matters for the Israelis. Putin and Netanyahu decided to establish a de-conflicting mechanism in order to prevent air battles between the two sides. But the Russian deployment of anti-aircraft systems and long-range radars in the Hmeymim air base in northwestern Syria now means that it can spot any movement of Israeli planes beginning at the southern Israeli city of Beersheba. Most of Israel's air bases are in the north, giving Moscow unprecedented knowledge of Israeli air activity.
- Israeli officials are also worried that Assad's growing military strength could transform the balance of power in southern Syria. If the Syrian army tries to drive the Sunni rebels out of the Golan border area near Israel, its allies — Iranian-backed Shiite militias, Hezbollah, even the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) — may not be far behind. This would allow Iran to double the border area it could use as a base from which to hit Israel, in addition to southern Lebanon.
- Netanyahu has told both Putin and Trump that such a development would be dangerous to Israel's security interests. He also expressed concern about Iran's apparent attempt to lease a Syrian harbor on the Mediterranean coast, the same way Russia leases the port in the Syrian city of Tartous. This seems to be part of a larger Iranian strategy. According to a Kuwaiti newspaper, the IRGC [recently built](#) an underground production line for missiles and rockets in southern Lebanon and handed it to Hezbollah.
- Assad's regained confidence may have sparked a recent confrontation with Israel. On March 17, Israeli warplanes struck a weapons depot near Palmyra, and Syrian anti-aircraft systems shot back with SA-5 missiles. Although the missiles missed their targets, one entered Israeli airspace near the Jordanian border. Israel used its Arrow system to intercept the missile. When parts of the intercepting missile landed in the Jordanian town of Irbid, Israel embarrassed its closest ally in the region, King Abdullah. In order to prevent claims that Jordan was ignoring an Israeli attack, Jerusalem had to explain itself — and publicly admitted for the first time that it was bombing weapons convoys in Syria.
- If Israel hopes to constrain the potential threats it faces in Syria, it needs the help of the United States. Netanyahu understands that Trump is unpredictable and may be offended by the slightest insult. This is why the Israeli premier made such quickly accepted the president's demand over certain restraints on building West bank settlements.

- Netanyahu will now probably try to persuade Trump to stop leaving diplomatic negotiations on Syria entirely to the Russians. At the same time, he will emphasize Israeli priorities: blocking Iran's resurgence, weakening the Assad regime, and, most importantly, preventing Iranian proxy forces from entering the border area in the Golan Heights.
- On Sunday, Russia and Iran threatened to retaliate against any further strikes in Syria. The joint statement should also concern Israel: Does this include strikes against Hezbollah's weapons convoys?
- But don't expect Israel's suggestions to Trump about Syria to go beyond an insistence that Israeli interests, narrowly conceived, be taken into account. The Israeli government is well aware of the mess that Syria has become. As Amos Yadlin, a former head of Israel's military intelligence, put it: "[T]he Syrian cube is harder to solve than Rubik's. It seems no matter what you do at least one face would remain out of place."

Amos Harel is the senior military correspondent for the Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz.

Summary:

But Israeli officials' public praise for the attack contrasts sharply with their privately expressed skepticism that Washington has carefully thought through its next steps in Syria. They are perfectly aware that Trump's decision may have been driven by personal motives — notably his desire to prove that he is stronger than his predecessor, and his need to distance himself from allegations of Russian manipulation in the presidential election. From Israel's perspective, that's no replacement for a coherent strategy for the region.

Israel Minister's Grandiose Plans Signal Shifting Political Mood

Trump's election spurs ambitious rightwinger to propose rail links and artificial island.

By John Reed

- From the creation of an artificial island to ambitious plans for a regional rail project, Yisrael Katz, Israel's transport and intelligence minister, is not short on ideas that appear tailor-made for Israel's right wing.
- Seen as an aspiring successor to Benjamin Netanyahu, the prime minister, he last week unveiled a proposal for a pan-Middle Eastern rail network — dubbed Regional Tracks for Peace — which he says is aimed at reviving historic trade routes.
- He also talked up his vision of building an island with a seaport off Gaza that he believes would allow the hemmed-in Palestinian strip to open an economic link to the world without compromising Israeli security. Under his proposal, Israel would inspect goods and people arriving at the island, which would be attached to Gaza via a 3km bridge.
- Mr. Katz, a political hardliner and security hawk who opposes the creation of a Palestinian state, insists his plans are not pipe dreams. That is despite the fact that his rail scheme proposes linking Israel to Jordan and, indirectly, other Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, an enemy state with which Israel has no formal ties.
- “I am trying to be practical,” Mr. Katz says in an interview. “This is about regional economic peace.”
- Many observers believe his grandiose schemes match those of his political ambitions. And they come at a time when a scandal embroiling Mr. Netanyahu and the election of the Donald Trump as US president are shifting the political mood in Israel.
- Mr. Katz, 61, is one of the top power brokers in Mr. Netanyahu's rightwing Likud party and one of the prime minister's loyalists. Unlike other Likud members who openly say they want to challenge Mr. Netanyahu, Mr. Katz says he aspires only to lead Likud after the prime minister leaves the scene. But with Mr. Netanyahu at the center of two corruption investigations, speculation has swirled that he could be compelled to step down before 2019 elections. The prime minister has denied any wrongdoing.
- Mr. Trump's election has also emboldened ambitious rightwing politicians such as Mr. Katz to set out new ideas and plans. Mr. Trump has vowed to leave “no daylight” between Israel and the US, and expressed a willingness to consider options to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict other than the two-state solution, the core of US policy for more than two decades.
- Instead, Mr. Trump says he wants to pursue a regional peace deal that would bring in Sunni Arab states that are drawing closer to Israel because of shared concerns about the regional influence of Iran.

- It is a notion that resonates with Israeli rightwingers who are against the creation of a Palestinian state and tout the concept of “economic peace” with hostile Arab states. And it fits with Mr. Katz’s plans for a regional rail network.
- His proposal is to create a freight rail network between Israel and Jordan, with which it has a peace agreement, and then link it through Jordan to other Arab countries. To sell the idea, he invokes the Hejaz railway, an Ottoman-era line that connected Damascus, Syria’s capital, with the holy city of Medina in Saudi Arabia.
- Despite the huge hurdles that would have to be overcome to get the rail project off the ground, Mr. Katz insists it could benefit Palestinians living in the occupied West Bank.
- “I am really going to improve the conditions of the Palestinians — to connect them to Europe, to the rich Arab countries,” he says.
- Mr. Katz says he presented the rail proposal to Jason Greenblatt, Mr. Trump’s envoy on the peace process, when he visited Israel last month and received a positive response.
- But Palestinians are deeply sceptical.
- “The Israelis are trying to go from Z to A,” says Mohammad Shtayyeh, a Palestinian politician. “The Saudis and the Arabs in general are not going to normalise relations with Israel unless Israel pays the political price, which is ending the occupation of the Palestinians and then gaining recognition of Israel as part of the Arab peace initiative.”
- A Jordanian official said there was no plans to “build such a thing inside Jordan”.
- Dan Shapiro, a former US ambassador to Israel and senior visiting fellow at the Institute of National Security Studies, says there is potential for regional economic co-operation involving Israel.
- “But to really open up that aperture, it’s going to take a major breakthrough on the Palestinian issue, and that is something beyond the ability of the current Israeli coalition,” he says.
- Mr. Katz brushes aside such concerns. “It’s convenient to say, ‘Until we solve the problem with the Palestinians, don’t allow normalisation’,” he says. “But I don’t want it high level; what I want to do is change the lives of ordinary people.”
- Like other Israeli officials who are sceptical of reaching a negotiated settlement, he speaks of three layers of engagement with the Palestinians: co-operation on security and on economic affairs, and, only then, peace.
- “If we continue to do things the old way, we will achieve nothing,” he says.

John Reed is a correspondent for Financial Times.

Summary:

Seen as an aspiring successor to Benjamin Netanyahu, the prime minister, he last week unveiled a proposal for a pan-Middle Eastern rail network — dubbed Regional Tracks for Peace — which he says is aimed at reviving historic trade routes.... Mr. Katz, a political hardliner and security hawk who opposes the creation of a Palestinian state, insists his plans are not pipe dreams. That is despite the fact that his rail scheme proposes linking Israel to Jordan and, indirectly, other Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, an enemy state with which Israel has no formal ties.... Many observers believe his grandiose schemes match those of his political ambitions. And they come at a time when a scandal embroiling Mr. Netanyahu and the election of the Donald Trump as US president are shifting the political