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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

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Ynet News

US Drops Largest Non-Nuclear Bomb in Afghanistan

The Pentagon says US forces in Afghanistan dropped the military's largest non-nuclear bomb on an ISIS target in Afghanistan. According to Adam Stump, a Pentagon spokesman, it was the first-ever combat use of the bomb, known as the GBU-43, which he said contains 11 tons of explosives. The US Air Force calls it the Massive Ordnance Air Blast bomb. Based on the acronym, it has been nicknamed the "Mother Of All Bombs." Stump said the bomb was dropped on a cave complex believed to be used by ISIS fighters in the Achin district of Nangarhar province, very close to the border with Pakistan. See also, "[US drops largest non-nuclear bomb ever in Afghanistan](#)" (SNBC)

Washington post

U.S.-led Coalition Accidentally Bombs Allies, Killing 18

Aircraft from a U.S.-led coalition accidentally bombed friendly Syrian forces fighting the Islamic State in northern Syria on Tuesday, killing 18, the Pentagon said Thursday. The bombing marks the worst confirmed friendly-fire incident in the nearly three-year-old war against the terrorist group. The coalition said in a statement that the airstrike was requested by "partnered forces" near the town of Tabqa who accidentally targeted a group of Kurdish and Arab fighters known as SDF. The partnered forces believed that the SDF's position belonged to ISIS, the statement said. "The general leadership of SDF in coordination with international coalition will investigate the reasons behind the accident in order to prevent it happening again," the Syrian Democratic Forces General Command said.

Ha'aretz

Assad : Chemical Attack is '100 Percent Fabrication'

Syrian President Bashar Assad said an alleged chemical attack blamed on his regime last week in Idlib province was "100 percent fabrication" used to justify a U.S. airstrike, news agency AFP reported on Thursday. Assad said Syria's military had given up all its chemical weapons in 2013 after an agreement made at the time and that "even if we had them, we would not use them." He added that "we have never used our chemical arsenal in our history." The Syrian leader told AFP that while Al-Qaida had been behind the assault, the U.S. blamed the incident on the Syrian military "to have a pretext for the attack," referring to Washington's cruise missile strike on a Syrian regime air base. See also, "[Syria chemical attack 'fabricated' - Assad](#)" (BBC)

Jerusalem Post

Syria at the UN: Israel Has Directly Supported ISIS

Syria's Permanent Representative to the UN Bashar al-Jaafari accused Israel of providing support to the Islamic State group in Syria on Wednesday, claiming that the Jewish state has indirectly but significantly aided one of the most malicious terror groups in the region. Al-Jaafari stated that Israel had directly supported the terror group by bombing Syrian regime sites. The Syrian envoy made the controversial statement while participating in a UN Security Council session devoted to a debate about the situation in Syria and the process to halt the crisis in the conflict-worn country. See also, "[Israel backs Isis conspiracy parroted by Syria's UN envoy](#)" (International Business Times)

PA Suspends Ties with UNRWA over Curriculum Reform

The Palestinian Authority Education Ministry on Thursday announced it was suspending ties with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) over plans by the international agency to reform its curriculum. The Palestinian ministry, in a statement published on its official website, called the possible revisions to the curriculum an “affront to the Palestinian people, its history and struggles,” and said the suspension would continue until the UN agency’s “positions are corrected.” The changes, according to Arab media reports, include revisions to maps of Palestine to exclude references to cities inside Israel as Palestinian cities, a practice that numerous studies of Palestinian textbooks have labeled as “incitement.” Other changes were reportedly planned to tone down praise for Palestinian prisoners and improve Israel’s image.

China Says Lack of Palestinian State 'A Terrible Injustice'

China reaffirmed its support for the Palestinian government's claims for statehood on Thursday, during a visit by Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki. The fact that Palestinians still do not have a sovereign state is a "terrible injustice" that can't continue, said Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi. China supports Palestinians' efforts to create an independent state based on the borders of 1967 as well as the establishment of its future capital in East Jerusalem, Wang said in a joint press conference in Beijing with al-Maliki. Israel has called the pre-1967 borders "indefensible," though they were also endorsed by the US during the Obama administration. "Seventy years later, what we see is that our Palestinian brothers have yet to establish an independent state with full sovereignty," Wang said. "This is unfair, and this terrible injustice must be addressed, and it cannot continue." See also, "[China says Palestinian state needed to correct 'historical injustice'](#)" (*i24 News*)

Palestinians Demand UK Apologize for Balfour Declaration

More than 11,000 people have signed an online petition calling on the British government to formally apologize for the Balfour Declaration, a letter written by British Foreign Secretary Lord Balfour in 1917 expressing Britain’s support for the establishment of a Jewish national home in the Holy Land. The petition was recently launched by the Balfour Apology Campaign (BAC) and calls for the British government “to openly apologize to the Palestinian people for issuing the Balfour Declaration.”

Fury and Derision over Spicer's Hitler Comment

Sean Spicer, the White House press secretary, has spent the last two days issuing a series of apologies for comments he made comparing Syria’s president Bashar al-Assad to Hitler, claiming initially that “even Hitler didn’t sink to using chemical weapons”. When an appalled Washington press corps asked Mr Spicer to clarify his remarks, made at a Tuesday press conference at the White House, he made things worse. He said: “I think when you come to sarin gas, [Hitler] was not using the gas on his own people the same way that Assad is doing...He brought them into, um, the Holocaust centres — I understand that.” See also, "[Sadly, Sean Spicer's Hitler comments serve as a useful distraction for Trump](#)" (*Guardian*)

Spicer, Hitler and the Soup Nazi: Why can't this White House get the Holocaust right?

By Andrew Silow-Carroll, editor-in-chief of JTA

- **We interrupt this Passover to bring you two news bulletins:**
Bashar Assad is worse than Hitler.
The Soup Nazi was almost a real Nazi.
- **Let's start with the second revelation, since Sean Spicer's Hitler gaffe is probably better known. Entertainment Weekly reported that, according to a former writer-producer for the sitcom "Seinfeld," the dictatorial chef known as the Soup Nazi in a 1995 episode was almost given a much darker backstory.**
- **"We joked a whole bunch about an end scene that would take place in the jungles of Brazil, a la 'The Boys From Brazil,' where the Soup Nazi would return to the other Nazis — the actual former Nazi war criminals — with his soup recipes," David Mandel explained. "It was sort of half-serious, half 'Should we do this?,' half 'We're never going to do it.' But it was much discussed. Going down a river and seeing lots of young boys with blue eyes from experimentation with the soups — it was a full coming-together of soup and Nazi. Probably just as well that we didn't do that one."**
- **"Probably just as well that we didn't do that one" is probably a phrase the White House press secretary would love to be saying about now. Instead, he spent three days apologizing for having claimed that Adolf Hitler never used chemical weapons. Discussing the Syrian dictator Assad's sarin gas attack on the Syrian town of Khan Sheikhoun, Spicer asserted, "We had someone as despicable as Hitler who didn't even sink to using chemical weapons."**
- **The reaction, starting with gasps from the assembled press corps, was swift and withering. Yad Vashem said Wednesday that Spicer's "inaccurate and insensitive" comments "strengthen the hands of those whose goal is to distort history." The American Jewish Committee's CEO David Harris offered, "What did the Nazis use to exterminate millions of Jews if not chemicals in their death camps?"**
- **Spicer responded with a few stabs at clarification that can only be described with the Yiddishism "funfering." "He was not using the gas on his own people, the same way that Assad was doing," the press secretary said. "There was not — he brought them into the Holocaust centers, I understand that. But I'm saying, in the way that Assad used them, where he went into towns, dropped them down, to innocents — in the middle of town."**
- **Eventually, Spicer told CNN's Wolf Blitzer, the son of Holocaust survivor parents, that he was sorry for his "inappropriate and insensitive reference to the Holocaust, for which frankly there is no comparison. And for that I apologize. It was a mistake to do that." The next day Spicer said that he "let the president down."**

- Any phrase that includes some version of “even Hitler” is not going to end well. Either you will wind up diminishing the horrific acts carried out by the Nazis or will exaggerate the sins of your intended target. Spicer ended up doing both.
- If his point was that “even Hitler” didn’t use gas in the battlefield, his elision of what went on in the “Holocaust centers” — better known as the death camps — would seem to raise Hitler a notch on the morality scale. Maybe worse was his comment that Hitler “was not using the gas on his own people.” That is not only false but insidious — as if the 160,000 or more German Jews killed in the Holocaust were the alien “state subjects” that the Nuremberg laws said they were.
- Spicer’s comments also seem of a piece with the White House’s inexplicable omission of the word “Jews” from its statement on International Holocaust Remembrance Day. What the two missteps share is the effect of “normalizing” Hitler and the Holocaust. Intentionally or not, this is the message of both statements: “Yes, it is a horrible thing that people died at the hands of the Nazi regime, and in such numbers. But it wasn’t just Jews who were targeted and lost, and even Hitler had limits on the tactics he would use to vanquish his enemies.” In essence, Hitler was bad, but he was no Hitler.
- Someone at the White House either doesn’t understand the unique aspects of Hitler’s genocidal “Final Solution,” or finds it ideologically or politically convenient to ignore them.
- As for inflating Assad’s crimes, arguing that the Syrian’s use of sarin in the battlefield makes him worse than Hitler is not just a debating point for scholars and historians. Such a stark comparison demands an equally stark reaction. If the administration now regards Assad as worse than Hitler, is it prepared to carry out the kind of all-out war that defeated the Nazis? And if not, does that mean the United States is indifferent in the face of Nazi-like atrocity?
- Of course, Assad has carried out atrocity after atrocity, killing hundreds of thousands of men, women and “beautiful babies” with barrel bombs, cluster munitions and incendiary weapons. The West may yet be judged by its failure to intervene and put a stop to the slaughter, but the United States and its allies have neither the stomach nor popular support for the massive intervention that would entail. In this case, as in so many others, Nazi comparisons raise the stakes without clarifying a thing. Or as German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s spokesman put it, comparing Nazi crimes to current situations “leads to nothing good.”
- The Soup Nazi episode of “Seinfeld” was criticized at the time for trivializing the Holocaust. If a chef could be labeled a Nazi for demanding discipline from his would-be customers, the critics argued, then the word “Nazi” has been drained of all meaning.
- But “Seinfeld” was a satire, and the joke was on the shallow cast of characters — and viewers — who would blithely use the term “Nazi” to describe someone they found disagreeable. The show’s writers understood that it was a ridiculous conceit (and realized, too, we’re now told, that there were limits to how far they could push the joke). And in understanding the weight of the term, they reinforced the idea that “Nazi” describes the apotheosis of evil, not just another form of it.

It’s a lesson Spicer might want to take back to his colleagues on Pennsylvania Avenue.

What the Escalating U.S.-Russia Tension Over Syria Means for Israel

By Amos Harel military commentator at Ha'aretz

- The international arena is changing at a dizzying pace. A little more than a week ago, U.S. President Donald Trump was still hesitating about whether to respond to the Assad regime's chemical weapons attack in Idlib province in northern Syria. Administration spokespersons were initially equivocal, and most media assessments (including those in Haaretz) maintained that Trump's relations with Russia would make it difficult for him to authorize a punitive attack. But in a predawn action last Friday, the United States fired 59 cruise missiles at the airport in Homs from which the Syrian aircraft that bombed Idlib had taken off. Trump has threatened to attack Syria again, and Washington is demanding that Russia dissociate itself from President Bashar Assad. For his part, Russian President Vladimir Putin has directed the ultimate insult at Trump, by declaring that the relations with the United States under the new president are even worse than they had been under his predecessor, Barack Obama.
- These extreme developments give rise to a suspicion that the "Trump doctrine" in foreign policy, which American experts started to talk about in the wake of the Syrian operation, exists mainly on paper. In light of recent events, it seems more likely that the president is not particularly interested in showing consistency in his actions and messages, but is deliberately being vague, whether out of habit or in order to leave himself maximum flexibility to act.
- Throughout the presidential election campaign, Trump emphasized two messages that were to some degree mutually contradictory. His primary message was his ambition and promise "to make America great again": Here he was underlining the need to prioritize domestic issues, particularly the rehabilitation of American industry, over foreign policy. But alongside the internal focus and his declared opposition to allocating resources and troops to fighting far-flung wars, Trump constantly emphasized another message: the need to restore America's status as a great power in the eyes of the international community. At that time, and in the weeks after his election victory and then following his inauguration, two more sentiments came to the fore: Trump's need to prove that he's better than Obama, and the demonstrative – at times ludicrously so – wish to be liked by Putin.
- Senior U.S. officials who spoke to Israeli colleagues shortly after the inauguration said that the president and his aides were looking for a suitable arena in which to demonstrate a show of strength to the international community. In those conversations, North Korea was mentioned as the No. 1 target that was preoccupying the administration. The reasons: the concern Pyongyang was stirring up among American allies South Korea and Japan, the craziness of the regime there, and the fact that the North Koreans possess nuclear weapons. By comparison, the Americans portrayed Iran, Syria and Hezbollah as having a relatively low-priority status in the eyes of the new administration.
- Assad's decision to mount an attack with deadly sarin gas last week – due to growing self-confidence and his desire to force the rebels out of the Idlib enclave – decided the issue for Trump: Syria was chosen as the arena for the show of power. (Moreover, shortly after the

bombing raid, Trump began to issue explicit threats against Pyongyang, implying that what had been done in Syria could serve as a hint of what might happen in North Korea.)

- The punitive military strike by the United States took place less than 72 hours after the first reports came in about the chemical attack perpetrated by the Assad regime. Trump said he had been influenced by the images of the dead “beautiful babies” that he saw on television. The American media noted the emotional impact brought to bear on the decision-making process by Trump’s daughter and son-in-law, apparently over the objections of the president’s strategic adviser, Stephen Bannon – developments that for the first time set alt-right extremists against Trump, who until then had been their hero.
- Since the cruise-missile attack on the Syrian airfield, Trump has taken an increasingly belligerent tone toward Moscow, to which Putin has responded with criticism of his own, all of it swirling around this week’s visit to Russia by U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. Still, after Tillerson’s arrival, Moscow announced the renewal of the procedures intended to prevent aerial friction with the Americans, a protocol that it had suspended following the cruise-missile attack.
- Because Trump and Putin are both cynical leaders who attribute great importance to the element of surprise, and whose approach to the truth is highly flexible – it’s difficult to gauge whether the present clash is headed for further escalation. In any event, Trump reaped an immediate profit in the American political arena – not only from the embrace he suddenly received from conservatives and liberals who support military intervention, but also from the diversion of the discussion concerning the investigation into ties his campaign staff had with Putin, and the apparent disproof of the allegation that the new president is a type of Russian marionette.
- But the domestic honeymoon did not last long, not least because of the appallingly bizarre character of the administration itself. First came the horror show of White House spokesman Sean Spicer, who somehow managed to come to the defense of Adolf Hitler. That was followed by a sequence of associative declarations by Trump in a television interview, in which he recalled the wonderful chocolate cake he’d shared with Chinese President Xi Jinping at the time he authorized the missile attack – but without mentioning the country that was targeted (he mistakenly referred to Iraq instead of Syria).
- Even so, Trump did the right thing morally when he chose to respond to the recent resumption of chemical warfare by Assad. As such, he did more than his predecessor in the White House, who, in 2013, made a famous U-turn, when he reneged at the last minute on his commitment to attack if the Syrian regime were indeed to use chemical weapons, which he had defined as a red line for the United States. At the time Obama did score an important achievement – an agreement with Moscow for dismantlement of the bulk of Assad’s chemical weapons stockpiles – but his hesitation and the backtracking on his decision to take action were received very badly in most Middle Eastern capitals, from Cairo to Riyadh to Jerusalem. It also turned out, back in April 2016, as reported in Haaretz at the time, that Syria’s president was still using chemical weapons sporadically against the rebel forces.

- The latest such attack again raises the question of whether the Americans' optimistic assessments of the scope of the chemical weapons' dismantlement – said to range from 95 percent to 98 percent of the existing stock – were unwarranted.

Mistaken analysis

- The escalating tension between the United States, on the one hand, and Russia and Iran has potential consequences for Israel, too. On Sunday, an unusual statement issued by a media outlet identified with Hezbollah – on behalf of a joint command center including Russian and Iranian forces as well as the militias that support the regime in Syria – condemned America's retaliatory attack on April 7 and declared that the alliance that supports Assad will respond strongly to any new assault against the regime. "What America waged in an aggression on Syria is a crossing of red lines. From now on we will respond with force to any aggressor or any breach of red lines from whoever it is and America knows our ability to respond well," the statement said.
- The credibility of this communique is not clear. Separate official declarations, issued by both Moscow and Tehran, expressed similar support for Assad, but did not include an explicit threat of action.
- If the declaration is indeed credible, does it also apply to Israel? Only on March 17, in the wake of an unusual chain of events, did Israel for the first time make a direct reference to a bombing raid it had carried out in Syria. The Arab media have been reporting air raids on Hezbollah arms convoys and depots in Syria since January 2012, less than a year after the civil war broke out there – but Israel, though affirming that such attacks are indeed its policy, never directly admitted to any of them. In last month's incident, SA5 missiles were fired at Israel Air Force planes as they attacked southeast Syria. When one of the missiles entered Israeli airspace in the Jordan Valley it was intercepted by an Arrow missile, and this was followed by an official announcement by Jerusalem concerning the incident. At the same time, and not for the first time lately, Syria too threatened to exact revenge on Israel.
- These Syrian threats can be seen as meaningless. Undoubtedly, the last thing Bashar Assad wants now – in addition to the kind of entanglement with the United States he mistakenly got embroiled in last week – is a confrontation with Israel. But an indirect Russian-Iranian threat to Israel is a more serious affair. Heightened Russian involvement in favor of the Assad regime – first with the deployment of two combat squadrons in northwestern Syria, then with the installation of long-range anti-aircraft missile batteries – has affected Israel's room for maneuver, though according to Arab media reports it hasn't led to a halt of attacks on Hezbollah targets in Syria. Russia and Israel have worked out a mechanism to prevent aerial confrontations. (According to reports in the foreign media, in several cases, such collisions were avoided only at the last moment.)
- With regard to the March 17 attack, the Russians were reportedly angry at Israel, because its air force's attack took place close to a Russian airbase in Syria. Now there's more on the table, especially after the Americans took such an unusual step and no one knows what their next move will be.
- In the background is an Israeli concern, now being expressed publicly, that continued advances by the regime in southern Syria, or a long-term cease-fire in the country, will restore

Assad's rule on the border with Israel in the Golan Heights – and also bring about the return to that area of Shi'ite militias, Iranian Revolutionary Guards or Hezbollah fighters.

- **Such a front could also spread into Lebanon. The headline of an article by Nicholas Noe, a Beirut-based Western researcher, in The Independent newspaper this week, says it all: “Why Israel and Hezbollah are heading for a new, devastating war.” His far-reaching conclusion is based in part on what seems to me to be a partially mistaken analysis of Israel's intentions, against the background of the operational deployment of the David's Sling rocket-intercept system and the operational success of the Arrow.**
- **The way things look from here, Israel's leadership has nothing to gain now from a confrontation with Hezbollah, and is aware of the civilian front's vulnerability to massive volleys of rockets and missiles launched from Lebanon.**
- **What's interesting, though, is Noe's impression that Hezbollah secretary general Hassan Nasrallah and senior figures in the organization are “entranced by the idea that the Israelis have become a soft people protected by a soft army that will not be able to collectively bear the economic and security dislocation resulting from Hezbollah's land, sea and air strikes” on Israel. That's a totally mistaken analysis on the part of Nasrallah, as Noe himself acknowledges. Still, he adds, after 13 years of following the situation in this part of the world, he has never before seen this level of anxiety among the political leadership in Lebanon about the possibility of war breaking out in the near future.**