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Israel and the Middle East News Update

Thursday, April 20

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News Excerpts

April 20, 2017

Ha'aretz

Abbas: Ready to Meet Bibi Under Trump's Patronage in DC

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas says he is prepared to hold a trilateral meeting with U.S. President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. "I am ready to meet the prime minister of Israel any time in Washington under the patronage of President Trump," Abbas told reporters. The White House announced Trump will be meeting Abbas in Washington on May 3. At his daily briefing, Press Secretary Sean Spicer told reporters that in his meeting with Abbas, the two leaders would discuss ways to restart the peace process. A senior Palestinian delegation including senior Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat and Majid Faraj, the head of the Palestinian general intelligence service, will leave for Washington on Sunday to prepare for the Trump-Abbas summit.

See also, [*"Abbas Says Ready to Meet Netanyahu 'Anytime' in Washington" \(Times of Israel\)*](#)

Washington Post

Tensions Rise as Pal. Jailed in Israel Continue Hunger Strike

It has been three days since more than 1,000 Palestinian political prisoners detained in Israeli jails declared an open-ended hunger strike, turning tensions up a notch in the decades-old, intractable conflict. The protest is a peaceful one, say the prisoners, a fight to improve deteriorating living conditions imposed by the Israeli Prison Service. But Israelis say the strike is not about living standards. Conditions for jailed Palestinians, many of whom have killed Israelis, exceed international standards, they say. To Palestinians, the prisoners are political fighters tried by a foreign entity and held in foreign jails; to Israelis, they are terrorists with Israeli blood on their hands. As the hunger strike goes on, both sides fear an eruption of violence should one of the prisoners die.

Ynet News

Elderly Israeli Hurt in Terror Attack at Bus Stop, Terrorist Killed

A Palestinian driver rammed into a 70-year-old Israeli pedestrian at the Gush Etzion Junction on Wednesday afternoon, lightly-to-moderately wounding him. IDF troops who were at the scene shot and killed the terrorist. A bus had been letting off passengers at the northern hitchhiker post of the Gush Etzion junction when a vehicle hit one of the passengers who was getting off the bus. The terrorist was identified as Suheib Mashahra, 21, from the village of Sawahra, east of Jerusalem.

See also, [*"Israeli Wounded in West Bank Car Ramming Attack" \(Jerusalem Post\)*](#)

Jerusalem Post

UN Envoy Blames Both Pal., Israel for Gaza Energy Crisis

The United Nations on Wednesday blamed all parties for the escalating energy crisis in Gaza, as its power plant is expected to remain shut on Thursday for the fifth day in a row. "I am following with great concern the tense situation in Gaza, where a new energy crisis is now unfolding," said UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Nickolay Mladenov. He blamed the crisis on both Palestinian internal political divisions as well as Israeli restrictions on materials entering Gaza from the Kerem Shalom Crossing.

Ma'ariv

Top IDF Officer: Assad Only Has Few Tons of Chem. Weapons

A high-ranking IDF officer said it was his estimate, based on the intelligence in Israel's possession, that the army controlled by Syrian President Bashar Assad has only a few tons of chemical weapons left in its arsenal, which he described as the Syrian army's "vestige capability," and did not have tens or hundreds of tons, as was recently claimed in several reports in the media. The Syrian regime maintained that capability after successfully hiding those chemical weapons from international observers who were sent to Syria to remove its chemical weapons in 2013-2014. The Syrian army held at its peak 1,200 tons of chemical weapons of all kinds: sarin, nerve gas and other kinds.

Ynet News

Hezbollah Deputy Leader: Israel Deterred from War

Hezbollah's deputy leader Naim Qassem said Thursday morning that the terror movement had sufficiently deterred Israel, convincing its leaders not to launch a war on the northern border. Qassem added that Israel's fear of incurring high casualty tolls in any prospective war also accounts for its decision to avoid a renewal of hostilities. Speaking in an interview, Qassem was asked if the Hezbollah had any fears of a summer offensive. "All the indications point to the fact that Israel is deterred. It has not taken a decision to act in a renewed aggressive manner against Lebanon at this stage," he said. "It doesn't flow from its morals, but rather from its understanding that any war against Lebanon is a guaranteed loss for Israel," he confidently stated.

Ha'aretz

Tillerson Slams Nuclear Deal Says U.S. Iran Policy Under Review

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson devoted a rare press opportunity on Wednesday to an attack on Iran, calling the Islamic Republic "the world's leading sponsor of terrorism" and declaring that the Trump administration was "conducting across the entire government a review of our Iran policy." Tillerson also blasted the nuclear deal signed with Iran in 2015, warning the agreement doesn't achieve its' goal of stopping Iran from developing nuclear weapons. Tillerson said the deal signed by Iran, the Obama administration, and 5 other world powers "fails to achieve the objective of a non-nuclear Iran; it only delays their goal of becoming a nuclear state." He added that "this deal represents the same failed approach of the past that brought us to the current imminent threat we face from North Korea. The Trump administration has no intention of passing the buck to a future administration on Iran."

See also, [*"Trump Administration Just Quietly Admitted Iran Deal Is Working"* \(Vox\)](#)

See also, [*"Tillerson Toughens Tone on Iran After U.S. Confirms Nuclear Deal Compliance"* \(New York Times\)](#)

Times of Israel

U.S. Defense Chief Mattis Arrives in Cairo for Sissi Meeting

US Secretary of Defense James Mattis arrived in Cairo Thursday on the latest leg of a regional tour, as ties with Egypt continue to warm under US President Donald Trump. After touching down at Cairo airport, Mattis set off to meet President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi, who was hailed by Trump during a White House visit earlier this month. Sissi's visit marked a shift in relations after Trump's predecessor Barack Obama had given the Egyptian leader the cold shoulder for staging the military overthrow of Islamist president Mohamed Morsi in 2013.

See also, [*"Egypt: Air Strikes Kill ISIS Leaders in Sinai"* \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Kahlon's Sweet Revenge

Even without the IPBC affair, the finance minister's decision to hold a press conference on his new financial plan without informing the prime minister is understandable. The way Netanyahu rushes to take credit for his ministers' achievements has been getting on their nerves.

By Sima Kadmon

- Nothing should have surprised us in Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon's new plan, neither the issues he chose to deal with nor the timing or the way it was done. Saying that the writing was on the wall would be a serious downgrading of Kahlon's abilities. In other words, it could have been much worse.
- After the trick that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu played on Kahlon with the Israel Public Broadcasting Corporation (IPBC) affair, insisting on a compromise that sets up a new, separate news corporation without Geula Even—the wife of Netanyahu adversary Gideon Sa'ar—at its helm, it was only a matter of time before the finance minister had his revenge. Kahlon said it himself in different ways—The IPBC affair was the turning point for the finance minister. It's not that everything was perfect beforehand, but this time he felt exploited, deceived, betrayed, humiliated and mainly—as is always the case with Netanyahu—he felt as if he had been thrown along the side of the road. The thing that frustrated him the most was that although he was deeply familiar with the prime minister's conduct, although he had already left the Likud party for similar reasons—Netanyahu managed to do it to him again.
- The question was how would this revenge be served. So instead of matzah and bitter herbs, Netanyahu was served with a sweet revenge straight to his face.
- Kahlon's financial plan is only part of the revenge. It's a part that cannot be downplayed, as it strengthens his position as the social minister, the man who is touched by the distress of young Israeli families. The "Net Family Plan," as it is called, is an effective name for a program that may one day even be named after Kahlon.
- This takes us to the second part, if not the main part, of the revenge: The finance minister's press conference, which the prime minister was not informed of and not invited to.
- Even without the IPBC affair, the finance minister's decision to hold a press conference without Netanyahu sticking his head in the frame is understandable. The way Netanyahu appropriates his ministers' achievements and immediately turns them into his own success—or the success of his government or any other wording that immediately belittles the minister's achievement—has been getting on the ministers' nerves. Kahlon experienced it recently, when immediately after the IPBC affair, he was forced to visit the cities of Beit Shemesh and Or Yehuda with Netanyahu leading the way, once again taking credit for housing agreements that the finance minister had worked on for a year and a half, while Kahlon sat next to him, humiliated and angry, without his famous smile.

- Until now, ministers wouldn't dare do what Kahlon did Tuesday—hold independent press conferences in blatant defiance of the prime minister. This isn't the first time, however, that Kahlon acted as a pioneer vis-à-vis Netanyahu. This time, though, he did it with unusual elegance and effectiveness: It seems to be a good and important program. If there were elections on the horizon, we would call it an election strategy. And if the elections are indeed closer than they seem, Kahlon has succeeded in strengthening his public standing, and maybe even regaining a Knesset seat or two, which has slipped away from him over the past year.
- It is therefore unsurprising that the smile has returned to Kahlon's face. One can only imagine how satisfied he must have felt, standing there on his own, elaborating on his financial plan, enjoying all the attention, basking in all the compliments.
- The initial reaction from the prime minister's associates was a typical response from Coalition Chairman David Bitan: We won't let him hurt the disability pensions—as if the disability pensions were the apple of Netanyahu's eye. Moreover, as if the plan to raise the disability pensions was the flagship plan of the coalition chairman, who strongly opposed it only several months ago.
- The response that followed this response was much more moderate: "The proposals presented will be examined in a positive manner." Here's another attempt to humiliate the finance minister.
- But we can count on Netanyahu. He is too experienced to let this thing slip away from his hands. The initial reactions will soon disappear and will be replaced with generous credits to the prime minister and to the government he leads, for a plan that he identified first and that Kahlon only executed.

Sima Kadmon is a correspondent for Ynet News as well as other mainstream Israeli newspapers such as Times of Israel and Yedioth Ahronoth.

Summary:

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Why Palestinian Hunger Strike May Be Destined to Fail

By Shlomi Eldar

- **After three days of a hunger strike by Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails initiated and led by the most senior Fatah inmate, Marwan Barghouti, Israel and Palestinian Authority (PA) leaders are convinced it will all be much ado about nothing. They believe that as the days go by and Barghouti realizes that he does not enjoy sweeping support, the strike will fizzle.**
- **With the March 24 declaration of the planned strike, Israeli authorities feared that all 3,500 prisoners affiliated with Fatah, who constitute more than half the 6,000 Palestinians jailed in Israel for security-related offenses, might heed Barghouti's call. According to figures compiled by the Israel Prison Service (IPS), 1,187 inmates are refusing food. So it now appears that only some 800 Fatah prisoners have followed Barghouti's lead, and some 400 prisoners affiliated with Hamas and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine have joined them.**
- **According to an IPS source who spoke with AI-Monitor on condition of anonymity, many of the prisoners who joined the strike did so unwillingly and are therefore highly unlikely to persevere. He called their strike "light," meaning they had gone along with it, but the chances of their sustaining it are nil.**
- **"We're not talking here about prisoners with serious stamina and personal discipline, as we saw with the administrative prisoners [who are detained without trial] who persevered with a 2012 hunger strike for 100 days or more, jeopardizing their lives," said the source. Many of the current striking prisoners were dragged into the strike against their will, for fear that Barghouti and his people would see them as scabs, he asserted.**
- **In fact, the very prisoners who are considered the "strongest," those who have gained a status of respect during their years in detention, decided in advance that the strike was doomed to fail and opted not to take part. "At the end of the day, you can see that most of the Palestinian prisoners decided to remain out of the strikers' circle. They understood that those who initiated it had gone a few steps too far," said the IPS source.**
- **This is not the only reason the strike is destined to fail. The group of so-called Palestinian security prisoners is not unified or united around one leadership despite the image some try to convey. The political divisions that plague the Palestinian public, and the tensions among the various factions within Fatah, the largest of the movements, are mirrored in the Palestinian prison population. One group backs the leadership of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, and just as big a group prefers former Fatah leader Mohammed Dahlan as its leader. Barghouti's group of supporters is actually the smallest. Most of the Palestinian prisoners have never met Barghouti in jail and are unlikely to regard him as a leader who commands blind loyalty.**
- **In addition, a large group of prisoners suspects that the goals Barghouti established do not justify a mass hunger strike — it is unlikely to result in improved prison conditions — and believe that its main purpose is to fortify Barghouti's diminished powers and standing among the Palestinian public.**

- At a Fatah Executive Council meeting in Bethlehem in February, Barghouti, who envisions himself as Abbas' successor, was not elected Abbas' deputy, and other candidates identified as Barghouti supporters were sidelined, denied key positions in the movement.
- A senior Fatah source told Al-Monitor that the success of the prisoners' strike hinges on mass support on the outside. "Without giant rallies, the prisoners will lose heart and will fail to force the Israelis to accept their ultimatum," he said, speaking on condition of anonymity.
- The Palestinian source also said that Abbas and senior PA officials will not allow the hunger strike to affect public life or authorize mass rallies and demonstrations that will disrupt public order. Abbas allowed a large protest to mark Prisoners Day on April 17, which was also the day the hunger strike began. Still, as long as the strikers persist, they will not get the support and encouragement of the PA leadership. Steps will be taken to ensure only a "measured level of support," said the source.
- Abbas does not want the strike to get out of control, and more than that, he does not want Barghouti to emerge strengthened. According to the Fatah source, at this time Abbas is not interested in a "tense, violent" atmosphere, as he is focused on diplomatic issues, including a visit with US President Donald Trump at the beginning of May in Washington. That meeting requires optimal conditions. The Palestinian security forces have therefore been ordered to allow only modest demonstrations in support of the hunger strike in the West Bank and to prevent major ones that might get out of control. They are also to forcibly prevent clashes with Israeli troops, which could result in the kind of deteriorating situation that Abbas wants to avoid.
- Barghouti, said the source, climbed a very high tree and may well discover within a few days that he faces two obstacles that will prevent him from bending the Israelis to his will and achieving the glory he desires. One is the lack of enthusiasm among Fatah prisoners, who probably fear their conditions will actually deteriorate. The other, more significant hurdle is the lack of broad support among the Palestinian public for the hunger strike, even though the issue of Palestinians jailed by Israel is usually a unifying force within the society.
- It appears that Barghouti has not realized that times have changed during his 15 years in prison. In the days of the second intifada — between 2000 and 2005 — many young Palestinians looked up to him, when he was leader of the Tanzim — Fatah's paramilitary wing — and led large demonstrations that turned into violent clashes with Israeli troops. Now, however, Fatah leaders and grassroots activists are no longer idols. Many Palestinians doubt the intentions of their politicians. Young people who never knew Barghouti in his glory days do not believe him to be motivated by a desire to improve the conditions for his fellow inmates but more so by a desire to strengthen his standing ahead of the battle for Abbas' succession.

Shlomi Eldar is a columnist for Al-Monitor's Israel Pulse. For the past two decades, he has covered the Palestinian Authority and especially the Gaza Strip for Israel's Channels 1 and 10, reporting on the emergence of Hamas. In 2007, he was awarded the Sokolov Prize, Israel's most important media award, for this work.

Summary:

The group of so-called Palestinian security prisoners is not unified or united around one leadership despite the image some try to convey. The political divisions that plague the Palestinian public, and the tensions among the various factions within Fatah, the largest of the movements, are mirrored in the Palestinian prison population. One group backs the leadership of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, and just as big a group prefers former Fatah leader Mohammed Dahlan as its leader. Barghouti's group of supporters is actually the smallest. Most of the Palestinian prisoners have never met Barghouti in jail and are unlikely to regard him as a leader who commands blind loyalty. In addition, a large group of prisoners suspects that the goals Barghouti established do not justify a mass hunger strike — it is unlikely to result in improved prison conditions — and believe that its main purpose is to fortify Barghouti's diminished powers and standing among the Palestinian public.