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Israel and the Middle East News Update

Thursday, April 6

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News Excerpts

April 6, 2017

Jerusalem Post

Israel Not Considering Any Military Action in Syria

Tuesday's chemical attack in Syria increased demands in Israel to extend more humanitarian aid to those suffering in that conflict, but has not led to more calls among policy-makers for Israel to take any military action. Former Military Intelligence head Maj.-Gen. (res.) Amos Yadlin said Israel should destroy the Syrian planes that dropped the chemical bombs in Idlib, but Intelligence Minister Israel Katz said on Wednesday that Yadlin would not have been so quick to make that suggestion had he still been in his IDF role. Katz is one of the 10 members of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's security cabinet. Despite a call from Education Minister Naftali Bennett on Tuesday for Netanyahu to convene a special session of the body to rethink Israel's Syria policies, no such meeting was held.

See also, [*"Assad Accuses Israel of Waging War Against Syria via Rebels"* \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Trump Alongside Abdullah: Working Very Hard to End Conflict

U.S. President Donald Trump reiterated on Wednesday his desire to bring about a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. Speaking at a press conference with Jordan's King Abdullah II, Trump said he was "working very, very hard" on the issue and hopes to "be successful in finally finding peace between the Palestinian people and Israel." The Jordanian king complimented Trump on his efforts on that front. He added that Jordan and the rest of the Arab world remain committed to the Arab Peace Initiative from 2002, in which the entire Arab world offered Israel a peace agreement in return for the creation of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Ha'aretz

To Reach Ultimate Deal, WH Eyes Preventing Gaza's Next Crisis

U.S. President Donald Trump's special envoy to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, Jason Greenblatt, asked Israeli officials and Arab foreign ministers in recent weeks to promote substantial steps for improving the severe economic and humanitarian situation in Gaza, as part of his efforts to renew peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. Israeli and American sources who have spoken to Greenblatt told Ha'aretz this issue is a top priority for him, but that he also made it clear to all sides that it is not a substitute for diplomatic negotiations, but a supporting element.

Times of Israel

Soldier Killed as Palestinian Rams Car into WB Bus Stop

An Israeli soldier was killed and another lightly wounded in an car-ramming attack in the central West Bank on Thursday morning. The Palestinian driver of the car was captured by the IDF. The victim was named as Sgt. Elhai Teharlev, 20, from the settlement of Talmon. The other victim was also a soldier, also listed as in his 20s. The two victims were standing on the sidewalk near a bus stop when the silver Audi struck them at the Ofra junction on the Route 60 highway, northeast of Ramallah, according to the Magen David Adom ambulance service.

See also, [*"Israeli Killed and Another Wounded in WB Car-Ramming Attack"* \(The Guardian\)](#)

'Historic' Plan Unveiled to Link Arab States to Israeli Ports

Transportation and Intelligence Minister Israel Katz unveiled an ambitious plan to give Jordan, Saudi Arabia and even Iraq access to the Mediterranean through Israel's ports in Haifa and Ashdod. Under the plan, a Haifa train would be extended eastward to the border crossing with Jordan and southward to the Jenin area where the Palestinians could connect to it. Rail lines would be laid in Jordan to Irbid, and then link with existing and planned lines extending north-south through Jordan, into Saudi Arabia and further east to the Persian Gulf.

See also, [*"No Plans Whatsoever to Build Railway with Israel" \(Jordan Times\)*](#)

Israel Radio News

Knesset Okays 3rd Reading of Law to Expand Building Violations

The Knesset approved in a second and third reading the law stipulating expanded enforcement of building violations, which is a measure that is considered by the Joint List to be a deliberate attack on the Arab sector. The penalties already legislated for people violating building laws were made stricter, and supervision and enforcement authority was given to the Finance Ministry's unit for the enforcement of planning and construction. Prime Minister Netanyahu said that the government was interested in the integration of Arab Israelis in the country, but their integration also necessitates their accepting the laws of the country. Joint List Chairman Ayman Odeh said that the Arab public would not obey this law. He said that the state has expropriated about five million dunams of land from the Arab population and that it approves almost no building plans for Arab villages.

See also, [*"New Law Stiffens Punishment for Construction Violations" \(Jerusalem Post\)*](#)

Ma'ariv

MK Odeh: "Children are Being Murdered in Syria—Like in Gaza"

Joint List Chairman Ayman Odeh aroused a furor in the Knesset yesterday when he drew a comparison between the children who were murdered in a gas attack in Syria and the children who were murdered, as he termed it, in Gaza. MK Odeh said in a Knesset session dealing with the bill intensifying enforcement in the sphere of planning and construction: "I am in agony over the children murdered in Syria in the same way I am ashamed to see children being murdered both in Yemen and in Gaza." Deputy Defense Minister Eli Ben-Dahan (Jewish Home) responded to his remarks: "The MKs of the Joint List have attained an all-time low." Ben-Dahan said "anyone who makes a comparison between the deliberate murder of children by the Syrian government and children who were killed because heartless terrorists hid behind them has no place in the Israel Knesset."

USA Today

Hamas Executes 3 Palestinians Over Israel Ties

Hamas on Thursday morning executed three Palestinians it had accused of 'collaborating' with Israel, a development that was likely spurred by the killing of a senior Hamas commander last month. Hamas said the men were hanged at a police compound as dozens of Hamas leaders and officials watched the killing. The three were sentenced months ago for relaying information on attack tunnels and other military details to Israel and were not directly connected to the killing of the senior commander but his death prompted their execution now.

See also, [*"Hamas-Appointed AG: Collaborators Will Be Executed in the Coming Days" \(Jerusalem Post\)*](#)

Netanyahu's New Trump-Appeasing Bluff

Netanyahu promised the White House 'restrained construction' that wouldn't stray outside the 'built-up area' of settlements. That's an endlessly elastic term.

By Hagit Ofran

- During last week's cabinet meeting, Prime Minister Netanyahu attempted, with considerable success, to satisfy everybody. On the one hand, the government approved the establishment of a new settlement deep in the West Bank and was updated on the promotion of 5,700 housing units in the settlements. On the other hand it announced a policy of "restrained construction" – which does not surpass the footprint of existing settlements – in order not to upset the White House.
- The truth is that Netanyahu is bluffing; the new policy does not represent restraint, but rather it gives a green light to a construction surge that will severely hinder the possibility of a two state solution.
- First, there is no restraint at all in the new policy guidelines. According to reports from the cabinet meeting, the policy is to build within the existing built-up area where possible; where this is not permissible, to build in areas adjacent to them; and in cases where different constraints make the scenarios above impossible, new construction is allowed on lands "as close as possible" to the existing built-up areas.
- If it's permissible to build in the built-up area, adjacent to it and close to it – then, in practice, it's possible to build everywhere.
- Secondly, even if we assume that the government truly intends to build only in the built-up area, it could still dramatically expand the footprint of settlements, as there is no clear definition to the term "built-up area."
- To explain what could be considered as a "built-up area," imagine the area of a settlement as the area of your hand:
- Place your hand on a hard surface, splay your fingers wide apart, and take a pen and trace your handprint. Your handprint represents the built-up area of a settlement.
- Draw another line connecting your fingers to your thumb. This line could also represent the built-up area of a settlement.
- Draw a circle around the handprint, leaving a few inches of empty space between this new line and the handprint inside. This line represents the fence or the security road surrounding the settlement. It, too, could represent a settlement's footprint, or its built-up area, as it signifies the land taken by the settlement de facto, even if it is not entirely built on.
- Now add another much larger circle around the previous circle. This is the municipal area of the settlement. The settlers might argue that construction within this line also does not represent an expansion of settlements beyond its existing boundaries.

- To make things clear, the built-up area of settlements, based on the first and second definitions above, ranges between 10,000 to 20,000 acres (between 0.7% and 1.4% of the West Bank). The fenced area of settlements makes up about 42,000 acres (approximately 3%), and the jurisdiction of settlements amounts to 135,000 acres (approximately 10% of the West Bank's territory).
- The debate around these lines has led previous American administrations into the trap of endless and pointless negotiations over how to decide what it means to build "inside" settlements. Former U.S. Ambassador Dan Kurtzer recently attested to the long hours he spent with Brig. Gen. Baruch Spiegel, representing Ariel Sharon's government, in an effort to determine what the area of settlements really was.
- Finally, the question of settlement construction is not just a question of territory. Israel already controls 60% of the West Bank, known as area C, and the Palestinians have no permission to build in this area without Israeli approvals. About half of the land in area C is considered "state land" or "survey land", which Palestinians cannot use for any purpose, let alone construction. Add to that military zones, nature reserves and lands expropriated for public use or seized for security needs, and we get a map of Israeli control over the majority of the West Bank. Building additional homes in one settlement or another has almost no effect on this wider issue of power and territory.
- Looking at the possibility of a two state solution, the greatest damage that settlement construction causes is to the level of complication and difficulty involved in undoing it. Most significantly, the number of settlers Israel will need to evacuate within the framework of an agreement. Any construction in the settlements – even if built only on top of existing construction and without taking an additional inch of land – will add new settlers that Israel will eventually have to evacuate. The deciding factor in the question of the two state solution will be how many settlers Israel will need to evacuate, not how many acres will be evacuated.
- Let us not be misled by Netanyahu: He and his government continue to oppose the two state solution and are acting in order to make it impossible. Settlement construction has never stopped. The talk about "settlement restraint" is aimed at taming criticism - and leading us astray.

Hagit Ofran directs Peace Now's Settlement Watch project.

Summary:

During last week's cabinet meeting, Prime Minister Netanyahu attempted, with considerable success, to satisfy everybody. On the one hand, the government approved the establishment of a new settlement deep in the West Bank and was updated on the promotion of 5,700 housing units in the settlements. On the other hand it announced a policy of "restrained construction" – which does not surpass the footprint of existing settlements – in order not to upset the White House. The truth is that Netanyahu is bluffing; the new policy does not represent restraint, but rather it gives a green light to a construction surge that will severely hinder the possibility of a two state solution.

Following Gas Attack, Israel Reassesses Syrian Threat

By Ben Caspit

- The horrifying images of the gas attack in Idlib on April 4 shocked many in Israel and led to a wide range of responses in the country, including a call for an emergency Cabinet session by Minister Naftali Bennett.
- The Israel Defense Forces' (IDF) Intelligence Division and the Mossad seem to have suffered the greatest shock, however, since they are responsible for assessing the chemical weapons capabilities of the Syrian regime. The fact that the regime is suspected of using sarin nerve gas against the population casts their current assessments into doubt and challenges Israel's working assumption about when Syrian President Bashar al-Assad might use any chemical weapons still in his possession. Just two weeks ago, two senior intelligence sources told AI-Monitor that Assad has very limited chemical weapons capacities, mainly chlorine gas. These weapons were described as "neutralizing," i.e., they can kill their targets but not on a wide scale. Photos from Idlib contradict this statement.
- Before Syria reached a chemical weapons disarmament agreement with the world powers in September 2013, the IDF assessed that Assad would only use his chemical weapons against Israel if his regime found itself "with its back against the wall." The disarmament agreement, which was only signed after US President Barack Obama deliberated over whether he should embark on military action against Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles, was received with optimism in Israel.
- Both the IDF's Intelligence Division and the Mossad concluded that the agreement had been fulfilled in its entirety, and that Assad did, in fact, forgo this strategic asset. According to intelligence sources, Assad was concerned that an American cruise missile and aerial assault would lead to the final collapse of his regime. In other words, he did have "his back against the wall," and decided to give up his chemical weapons arsenal to survive. Israel believed that the Syrian regime kept only "residual" chemical capabilities, i.e., something symbolic, or an "emergency supply" of chemical weapons, to be used only if Assad is forced to flee for his life. The same Israeli assessment also claimed that some 98% of Assad's arsenal of sarin or VX nerve gas (about 1,300 tons) no longer existed.
- If it was, in fact, Assad, who used nerve gas in Idlib on April 4 (no one else is capable of launching such an attack), these assessments by Israeli and other sources have been invalidated.
- This has long-term implications. After reaching an agreement that Syria would rid itself of its chemical weapons stockpiles, it seemed obvious to Jerusalem that Israel was out of danger when it came to the use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) against its population. This assessment of the situation led Israel to abandon existing procedures to defend civilians from chemical weapons. Until then, every Israeli citizen received a chemical weapons defense kit from the government, which included a gas mask and other equipment. It was a convoluted and expensive setup, which was difficult to maintain (every newborn needs new equipment, mask filters must be replaced, etc.), but it remained in force as long as Israel felt threatened.

- And so, ever since 2013, this defense procedure was abandoned, and the manufacture of gas masks in Israel came to a halt. The April 4 incident in Idlib raises questions about that decision.
- A senior Israeli source told Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity, "Assad is well-aware that if he dares use chemical weapons against Israel in his current state, he will be wiped off the map by morning." Yet even this statement sounds problematic now. Assad is backed by Russian President Vladimir Putin, and it looks like the April 4 massacre in Idlib will pass without Assad suffering as much as a scratch. The Syrians deny that they used gas, the Russians claim that the Syrian regime bombed a rebel gas factory and the Americans blame Trump. That's it.
- The shock in Israel on April 4 was resounding. As a people, Jews are especially sensitive to the use of gas, even if it happens beyond their borders in a hostile nation. Images of children suffocating from nerve gas sent shockwaves through the media and led to responses by everyone from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to opposition leader Isaac Herzog. Former head of Military Intelligence Maj. Gen. (Res.) Amos Yadlin even called for Israeli military intervention. Yadlin, who heads the Institute for National Security Studies and maintains close ties with the military establishment, later explained that he meant an aerial response, not necessarily overt, which would target Syria's chemical weapons division and even attack the aircraft allegedly responsible for the gas assault.
- Within a day, the mood started to calm down. One senior Israeli military source told Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity, "Ultimately the basic situation hasn't changed. So it is possible that Assad does have a small supply of nerve gas, amounting to a few dozen or perhaps a few hundred kilograms. And it is possible that his recovering self-confidence allowed him to use the weapons locally, in Idlib. That still doesn't change the basic situation in the region."
- Not everyone agrees with this assessment. It is safe to assume that quite a few meetings about the situation took place in Israel's various intelligence agencies and divisions the night of April 4. If Assad really is capable of using nerve gas during a local incident in Idlib, it indicates that this is a different, new and more dangerous Assad, as one senior Israeli source told Al-Monitor.
- And there is another issue. Who can now assure Israel that Assad has not managed to transfer some of that residual nerve gas to Hezbollah? A transfer of chemical weapons can be very low key, without any long convoys or heavy trucks. Hezbollah could then use Iranian technology to install the gas on its missiles. The result would be a very different Hezbollah than what Israel has been used to until now.
- These horrific scenarios still sound unfounded, but in the Middle East, unfounded scenarios sometimes turn into reality. At this stage, there can be almost no doubt that Israel will need to reassess its intelligence and working assumptions and reconsider what steps to take in response to the WMD held by Assad, and especially by Israel's most imposing enemy today: Hezbollah.

Ben Caspit is a columnist for Al-Monitor's Israel Pulse. He is also a senior columnist and political analyst for Israeli newspapers and has a daily radio show and regular TV shows on politics and Israel.

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