



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Friday, April 7

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– By David E. Sanger, National Security Correspondent, New York Times

News Excerpts

April 7, 2017

New York Times

Trump Turns on Assad, Strikes Syrian Base w/Flurry of Missiles

President Donald Trump ordered a missile strike on a Syrian airbase late Thursday in reprisal for a deadly chemical weapons attack this week by the regime of Syrian strongman Bashar al-Assad. Two U.S. Navy warships launched over 50 Tomahawk cruise missiles at Al-Shayrat air base in Homs, home to both Syrian and Russian warplanes. Tuesday's sarin gas attack, which killed more than 70 and injured more than 300, was launched from there. One official said the base was struck in multiple locations, and U.S. military officials warned the Russian government of the impending attack, giving them time to move assets and troops away from the base.

See also, [*"Syria Allies Russia and Iran Denounce U.S. Missile Strike on Syrian Base" \(Ha'aretz\)*](#)

See also, [*"Sunni Arab States and Israel Welcome US Strike on Syrian Air Base" \(Financial Times\)*](#)

Ma'ariv

Trump Consulted w/ Abbas: "Is Netanyahu a Partner to Peace?"

President Donald Trump consulted with PA President Mahmoud Abbas and asked him: "Is Netanyahu a partner for peace with the Palestinians?" Arab and American diplomatic sources privy to a phone conversation between them on March 10 said Trump asked Abbas more than once: "Do you believe Bibi can provide the goods?" Trump's question was asked twice, with the wording, "do you believe Netanyahu is a partner to peace, do you think it is possible to reach the ultimate deal with him?" This conversation is apparently one of the reasons for the concern in Jerusalem about peace talks and the Trump administration's intentions regarding the "ultimate deal."

Arutz Sheva

Abbas to Discuss Peace Process with Trump in DC

Nabil Shaath, PA chairman Mahmoud Abbas's foreign policy advisor, said on Thursday Abbas will visit the US at the invitation of President Donald Trump. The meeting between the two is expected to deal with the role the US will play in establishing peace in the Middle East. The meeting between Abbas and Trump was first discussed during a telephone conversation they held earlier this month. Following that conversation, Abbas praised Trump and said he brings "hope" for peace, even though PA officials previously criticized Trump for failing to stop Israeli construction in the West Bank.

See also, [*"Abbas to Visit Russia on May 11" \(Arutz Sheva\)*](#)

Times of Israel

In Curious 1st, Russia Recognizes West J'lem as Israel's Capital

In an unexpected, unprecedented and curious move, Moscow on Thursday said it considers West Jerusalem to be Israel's capital, making Russia the first country in the world to extend such a recognition to any part of the city. "We reaffirm our commitment to the UN-approved principles for a Palestinian-Israeli settlement, which include the status of East Jerusalem as the capital of the future Palestinian state. At the same time, we must state that in this context we view West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel," the Foreign Ministry in Moscow said in a statement.

Ha'aretz

Bibi Seeks Buffer Zones on Syria's Borders w/ Israel and Jordan

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is urging that any agreement to end the Syrian civil war include the establishment of buffer zones on both the borders between Syria and Israel as well as Syria and Jordan, to prevent Iran and Hezbollah from establishing a presence. Netanyahu raised this idea in talks with the U.S. administration and other international actors. During these talks, Netanyahu argued if Iran and Hezbollah were to establish themselves along either the Syrian-Israeli or Syrian-Jordanian border, this would undermine the stability of the region and threaten the security of both Israel and Jordan. Thus, he wants buffer zones established on the Syrian side to prevent Iran and Hezbollah from approaching the border fence and make it harder for them to launch attacks.

The Guardian

Former Shin Bet Chiefs: Israel Sunk in Incremental Tyranny

Two former heads of Israel's Shin Bet, Ami Ayalon and Carmi Gillon, have made an impassioned and powerful intervention ahead of events to mark the 50th anniversary of the country's occupation of the Palestinian territories in June. One of the pair warned that the country's political system was sunk in the process of "incremental tyranny". "Incremental tyranny [is a process] which means you live in a democracy and suddenly you understand it is not a democracy any more," Ayalon explained. "This is what we are seeing in Israel. The tragedy of this process is that you only know it when it is too late."

See also, [*"Former Shin Bet Head Peri: Israel, PA Both Need to Be Pressured to Move Forward"* \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Times of Israel

Meeting Jewish Leaders, Sisi Is Optimistic on Israeli-Arab Peace

Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi expressed guarded optimism about peace between Arabs and Israel, but also warned of the threat posed by Islamists, in a meeting with US foreign policy experts that included Jewish organizational officials. Sisi met Wednesday morning at the Four Seasons hotel in Washington, DC, with an array of some 65 guests, attendees said, including representatives of think tanks that focus on the Middle East, informal advisers to US President Donald Trump and representatives of an array of Jewish groups. "He said the atmosphere is more primed now for peace than it was 40 years ago when Sadat made peace," said Ezra Friedlander, the CEO of a consulting firm.

Jerusalem Post

Heavy Security Measures in Jerusalem for Passover, Easter

More than 3,500 policemen will patrol Jerusalem during Passover and Easter with an emphasis on the Old City, where some 150,000 visitors from around the globe are expected to gather at the Western Wall and in the Christian Quarter. Following two recent stabbing attacks in the Muslim Quarter, police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld said security will be at its highest level to ensure the public's safety. "The Israel Police has made security assessments since the most recent knife attack last Saturday," said Rosenfeld on Thursday. "We are going to implement extra security, although there have been no concrete threats received by police."

Trump's Strike Says to Russia, Iran, Hezb., Assad: Party's Over

After years of inaction under Obama, the new president delivered the overdue message: There will be a price to be paid for massacres, for terror attacks, for the use of chemical weapons.

By Avi Issacharoff

- It would be wrong to get too carried away by the overnight US missile strike on the Syrian airbase, north of Damascus, from which it is believed the Assad regime launched Tuesday's despicable chemical weapons attack. This was, after all, just a single retaliatory strike on an air base, and not a 180-degree change in US military policy. We don't know what the Trump administration's ongoing policy will be, should President Bashar Assad carry out further chemical weapons attacks, and we certainly have no sense that President Donald Trump will now be seeking to oust the Assad regime.
- Nonetheless, the overnight US raid was dramatic and remarkable, especially when compared to the policy of Trump's predecessor, Barack Obama, which might best be summed up in the single word "inaction."
- In less than three months, the much-mocked President Trump has achieved in the Middle East what Obama never sought, or even wanted to do: He has gained the trust of Egypt's President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi, Jordan's King Abdullah II and Saudi Arabia's King Salman. Even the leadership of the Palestinian Authority is unstintingly in its praise of his Middle East policies and his efforts to revive the peace process with Israel.
- The pragmatic Sunni camp, which felt itself so at odds with Obama, finally senses that it is being heard and heeded in Washington. The US administration is building relations with the correct side in this region, rather than gambling, as Obama did, on the political Islam characterized by the Muslim Brotherhood.
- But more than this, the US retaliatory attack sends the clear message to the Shi'ite camp — Iran and Hizballah — and to its Moscow patron, that the party is over. Only this week, Abdullah was warning about the Iranian effort to forge an area of control extending from Tehran to Beirut and Latakia.
- Through a single, limited strike, Trump's overnight resort to force signaled to the Shi'ite actors, and to Russia, that the rules of the game have now changed: From now on, there will be a price to be paid for invading, massacring, carrying out terror attacks, using non-conventional weapons.
- Such a message ought to have been delivered long ago, years ago. But Barack Obama opted not to do so. And as a consequence, the United States became perceived as weak, as afraid, as a nation that abandoned its allies in the Middle East. The overnight attack sent a very different message, especially to Assad's opposition.
- Moscow's rapid, angry reaction, and the immediate messages of support from Saudi Arabia and from the Syrian opposition, underline how successful the single US strike has been in impacting all the necessary places.

- **Not just the physical impact, either. Russia will now have to reassess its handling of the Syrian crisis. And as for Iran, Assad and Hezbollah, they will all have to weigh their next moves in what was once greater Syria with a great deal more care than before Trump hit back.**

Avi Issacharoff, The Times of Israel's Middle East analyst, fills the same role for Walla, the leading portal in Israel. He is also a guest commentator on many different radio shows and current affairs programs on television.

Summary:

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Striking at Assad Carries Opportunities, and Risks, for Trump

By David E. Sanger

- **WASHINGTON** — In launching a military strike just 77 days into his administration, President Trump has the opportunity, but hardly a guarantee, to change the perception of disarray in his administration.
- The attack will also shape the meeting next week between Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson and President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia — the first face-to-face encounter between the Russian leader and a member of the Trump administration.
- Before the strike on a Syrian air base on Thursday night, the meeting had been expected to be dominated by the investigation into Russia’s cyberattacks and the interference in the presidential election on Mr. Trump’s behalf.
- But the Syria action gives the Trump administration an opportunity to demand that Mr. Putin either contain or remove Syria’s leader, Bashar al-Assad, or else Mr. Trump will expand the limited American military action — and quickly — if the Russian president fails to do so.
- The Syrian government’s chemical attack against rebel-held territory forced the administration’s hand, said Antony J. Blinken, the deputy secretary of state under President Barack Obama.
- “We do have to act,” Mr. Blinken said just hours before Mr. Trump launched the attack.
- “This goes beyond Syria,” he said. “Assad was going against a norm we have observed since World War I,” when chemical warfare was first used on a widespread basis.
- Many of Mr. Obama’s senior aides, Mr. Blinken among them, argued for similar action in the late summer of 2013, when Mr. Obama stepped up to the so-called red line he had created regarding Mr. Assad’s use of chemical weapons.
- Rather than taking the action he had threatened, Mr. Obama followed up — with Russia’s help — to force Mr. Assad into an agreement to ship much, but clearly not all, of Syria’s chemical stockpiles out of the country.
- Later, Mr. Obama said he was “very proud of that moment” because he had stepped back from the Washington establishment’s warnings. Few of his top foreign policy advisers agreed.
- During last year’s campaign, Mr. Trump argued strenuously that Mr. Obama’s decision at the time was a symbol of American weakness that should never be repeated. In that respect, the attack on Thursday night was almost preordained. But there are also considerable risks for Mr. Trump in the next few weeks, once the immediate satisfaction of making Mr. Assad pay a price for acts of barbarism wears off.
- The first risk is that his gambit with Mr. Putin fails. The Russian leader may have strongly preferred Mr. Trump to his rival, Hillary Clinton, in the election. But Mr. Putin is not likely to enter into an agreement that threatens his influence over Syria, and thus his main foothold in the Middle East. Syria is home to Russia’s main military base outside its own borders.

- A second risk is that Mr. Trump, in taking a shot at Mr. Assad, undercuts his own main goal in the region: defeating the Islamic State.
- If Syria collapses, it could become a haven for Islamic terrorists, the exact situation that Mr. Trump is trying to prevent.
- It is unclear whether Islamic State fighters, already put on the run months before Mr. Trump took office, are in any condition to exploit an even more splintered Syria. But as David H. Petraeus, the retired Army general who designed the Iraqi surge, often notes, one of the lessons of the past decade is that if a power vacuum is created in the region, some variety of Islamic extremists will exploit it.
- The third risk is that Mr. Trump has no real plan to bring peace to Syria. The American-led negotiations to create some kind of political accord — which was John Kerry’s mission for his final 18 months as secretary of state — collapsed.
- Mr. Tillerson has shown no desire to start a new one. And Mr. Trump’s proposed budget makes cuts to the very programs that would provide relief to the homeless, beleaguered Syrians who have survived six years of civil war.
- Clearly, the conflict that led Mr. Trump to take military action for the first time in his presidency is not the one he was looking for.
- During his campaign, he dismissed the notion of humanitarian interventions, and in an interview with The New York Times last year, he could not define the conditions that would even tempt him to use the American military to defend a foreign population from a vicious dictator. It simply did not fit his definition of defending “America first.”
- But like many of his predecessors, Mr. Trump did not get to choose the events that led to his first use of significant force. The question now is whether his new, untested team — divided in their own definitions of how and when to use American power — can turn the intervention in Syria into something more than a symbolic show of force.

David E. Sanger is a National Security correspondent for the New York Times and author of Confront and Conceal: Obama's Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power (2012).

Summary:

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