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## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Wednesday, April 11*

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- Israeli Labor Party Breaks off Relations with UK's Corbyn
- Corbyn Vows to Battle Antisemitism After Gabbay's Move
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# News Excerpts

April 11, 2018

## Ha'aretz

### **Israel on High Alert, Prepares for Possible Iranian Retaliation**

Iran directly threatened Israel on Tuesday following an airstrike on a Syrian air force Monday that killed at least seven Iranian advisers. Israel is taking the Iranian threats very seriously: The northern border is on high alert amid concerns of a possible revenge attack by Iran or Hezbollah, as well as a possible U.S. strike against the Assad regime in retaliation to the chemical attack at Douma. The airstrike, which Iran, Syria and Russia all blame on Israel, targeted Syria's T-4 airbase near Homs. According to foreign media reports, the strike damaged various capabilities that the Iranians had begun to deploy at the base. Israel has not claimed responsibility for the strike. See also, ["TEHRAN, JERUSALEM TRADE THREATS OVER ATTACK IN SYRIA" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

## Reuters

### **Russia Vetoes U.S. Bid for Syria Chemical Weapons Inquiry**

Russia on Tuesday vetoed a U.S.-drafted U.N. Security Council resolution that would have created a new inquiry to ascertain blame for chemical weapons attacks in Syria. Twelve council members voted in favor, while Bolivia joined Russia in voting no, and China abstained. A resolution needs nine votes in favor and no vetoes by Russia, China, France, Britain or the United States to pass. "This resolution is the bare minimum that the council can do to respond to the attack," U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley told the council before the vote, referring to reports of a deadly poison gas attack in Syria's Douma. The United States and other Western powers consider taking military action over the attack. See also, ["Russia Vetoes U.S. Bid for Probe That Would Lay Blame for Syria Chemical Attacks" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

## Times of Israel

### **Liberman: Journalist killed in Gaza Was a Hamas Terrorist**

Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman on Tuesday said a Gaza journalist who was reportedly killed by Israeli gunfire over the weekend was a member of Hamas. The claim was immediately rejected by one of Yasser Murtaja's colleagues, who called the statement "ridiculous." Palestinians say Yasser Murtaja was shot Friday while covering violent mass demonstrations near the Israeli border. He was reportedly shot in the torso while wearing a vest emblazoned with the word "press" and filming in an area engulfed in thick black smoke caused by protesters setting tires on fire. See also, ["Israel says slain Gaza journalist was Hamas militant" \(AP\)](#)

## Ynet News

### **Israeli Labor Party Breaks off Relations with UK's Corbyn**

Israel's Labor party said on Tuesday it had suspended relations with British Labour party leader Jeremy Corbyn, accusing him of sanctioning anti-Semitism and showing hatred towards Israeli policies. "It is my responsibility to acknowledge the hostility you have shown to the Jewish community and the anti-Semitic statements and actions you have allowed as leader of the Labour party UK," Israeli Labor Party leader Avi Gabbay wrote in a letter to Corbyn, distributed to the media. Corbyn is a supporter of Palestinian rights and a vocal critic of Israel, has repeatedly faced accusations of turning a blind eye to anti-Semitic comments in the party and among groups he supports.

Jerusalem Post

## **Corbyn Vows to Battle Antisemitism After Gabbay's Move**

Gabbay, chairman of Israel's Labor Party, sent a letter to Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the UK's Labour Party, announcing a suspension of ties between the Israeli party and Corbyn's office amid allegations he allowed for antisemitism in his party. The move came following several steps taken by Corbyn that were interpreted by British Jewish leadership as antisemitic. In a statement sent to The Jerusalem Post, a spokesperson for Corbyn said in response, "Jeremy is utterly committed to driving antisemitism out of the Labour Party. "As Jeremy has said, he and the Labour Party are proud of our deep historical links with Jewish communities, and stand in solidarity with our Jewish brothers and sisters, who play a vital role in our movement."

Ha'aretz

## **Israel Said It Barred Entry to Dublin's Mayor – But He Got in**

Israel announced on Tuesday that it had barred Dublin Lord Mayor Mícheál Mac Donncha from entering the country - while he was already in the West Bank city of Ramallah and had flown to Tel Aviv. The announcement, by both the Interior and the Strategic Affairs Ministries, said that Mac Donncha would be denied entry to Israel over his ties to the BDS movement. Minutes after Haaretz reported about the announcement, Mac Donncha tweeted that he was already in the West Bank city of Ramallah. The Interior Ministry confirmed to Haaretz that Mac Donncha had entered the country, initially saying that he must have arrived before the ministry's instruction was delivered. Later the Interior Ministry admitted that Mac Donncha was able to enter Israel due to the fact that his name was misspelled. A spokesman for Interior Ministry Arye Dery admitted that "we made a mistake at the border crossing."

Times of Israel

## **Dershowitz Says he Gave Trump Advice on Mideast Policy**

Alan Dershowitz met with US President Donald Trump for dinner Tuesday night to give him advice on Middle East policy, the Harvard Law School professor told The Washington Post. In recent months, rumors have swirled that Trump either has sought or would seek to employ the former trial lawyer on his legal team. As a columnist and frequent guest on CNN and Fox News, Dershowitz has been one of the US president's most high-profile defenders as Special Counsel Robert Mueller ramps up his probe into possible collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia. See also, "[Trump set to dine with law professor Alan Dershowitz](#)" (CNN)

Ynet News

## **Ending Spat, PM to Light Torch at Israel's 70th Celebration**

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein have agreed that the Israeli premier will both participate in the torch-lighting ceremony marking Israel's 70th Independence Day, and will light a torch on behalf of all past and current Israeli governments, the Prime Minister's Office said Tuesday. As part of the compromise that put an end to a political spat between the two, with Edelstein threatening to boycott the ceremony if Netanyahu delivers a speech, it was also agreed that the latter would not address those in attendance. Furthermore, Netanyahu ordered Culture and Sport Minister Miri Regev to convene the Knesset Symbols and Ceremonies Committee before the Independence Day ceremony to cement an agreement between him and Edelstein, whereby an incumbent prime minister will attend the ceremony once a decade.

## **Gaza's Immense Potential**

By Yossi Beilin

- It looks like everyone wants to do away with Gaza. In Israel, saying “Go to Gaza!” is the equivalent of “Go to hell!” The late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who was known for his off-the-cuff “witticisms,” once declared that he would like to see Gaza drown in the sea. Just like that, nothing more, nothing less. I also remember a conversation that then-opposition leader Shimon Peres and I had with Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in Vienna in July 1978. At that meeting, Sadat told us that Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin had offered to give Gaza to Egypt in exchange for the right to annex the town of Yamit in the Sinai. Sadat responded with his rolling, baritone laugh, “Begin thought I was stupid. I immediately told him, ‘You can keep that damned place for yourself.’”
- It was inevitable that the violent incidents along the border between Gaza and Israel over the last two weekends did nothing to improve Gaza’s terrible image. Anyone who follows the most recent news from the Middle East might reach the mistaken conclusion that Gaza is nothing more than the source of black smoke billowing from burning tires and of wanton bloodshed. Anyone who has followed the news over the past few years will recall violent military confrontations, rocket fire and a humanitarian crisis. Even the Palestinian leadership treats Gaza as disposable, or as a liability much more than an asset. Anyone who really knows Gaza, however, would be hard-pressed to see it as such a wretched place. There are several reasons for this:
  - It is a tiny territory of just 139 square miles with a moderate climate, wonderful beaches and tourist potential that has yet to be exploited.
  - In 1999, the Gaza marine field, a natural gas reserve with an estimated value of more than \$7 billion, was first discovered.
  - Gaza residents are highly educated, and Gaza’s proximity to Tel Aviv — just under an hour’s drive — means that many of them could find employment in Israel and earn relatively high wages.
  - The miserable state of the Gaza Strip is a consequence of extreme overcrowding, mainly because Palestinian refugees fled there from Israel in 1948. On the other hand, Gaza’s enormous potential has proven itself in the past. From 1994, right after the signing of the 1993 Oslo Accord, to 2000, Gaza’s skyline changed overnight. Skyscrapers were built, and lavish hotels, shopping malls, country clubs, entertainment centers and restaurants popped up. It seemed, if only for a moment, that the situation had taken a turn for the better. There is no reason that the window of opportunity that opened back then cannot be reopened, this time with financing provided by Gaza’s natural gas reserves.
  - The Oslo Accord, which provides an outline for a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, determined that the West Bank and Gaza would constitute a single political entity and that whatever solution is found would apply to both. Upon being elected in 2001, however, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon showed no intention of fulfilling the agreements. He did not trust any Arabs, whether they were from the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) or Hamas. This he told me during a lengthy conversation in 2005, when I led Meretz.

- Instead, Sharon decided to disengage from Gaza unilaterally and evacuate Israeli settlements there. No one had promised Sharon that by doing this, Israel would be released from its international obligations to deal with the issue of Gaza as part of a comprehensive agreement, which even the most right-wing governments in Jerusalem, including the current one, have never renounced.
- The Palestinians and the rest of the world considered the 2005 disengagement from Gaza to be part of the implementation of the Oslo Accord's agreement on an Israeli withdrawal in stages from the occupied territories. On the other hand, the Palestinians never considered the possibility of establishing a Palestinian state in Gaza or declaring Gaza to be sovereign Palestinian territory that would be integrated at some point in the future, with other territories that Israeli would withdraw from in the West Bank, even though Israel's right-wing government would not prevent them from doing so.
- Former US President George W. Bush, who saw himself as being committed to spreading democracy around the world, forced Sharon to allow Hamas to participate in the 2006 elections for the Palestinian Authority's legislative assembly, in violation of the Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement signed in 1995. Accordingly, "The nomination of any candidates, parties, or coalitions ... will be cancelled, if such candidates, parties or coalitions 1. Commit or advocate racism; or 2. Pursue the implementation of their aims by unlawful or non-democratic means."
- Hamas continued to support the use of violence and to call for the destruction of Israel. When Hamas surprised everyone by winning the elections, Israel and the international community had no idea how to handle this turn of events. Having failed to set preconditions for Hamas to participate in the elections, the international community instead ended up setting terms for Hamas to win recognition (renouncing terrorism, accepting international agreements signed by the PLO and recognizing Israel) after it had already won the election. Since Hamas never considered accepting those terms, the world (particularly the West) refused to recognize the movement, preferring instead to treat Mahmoud Abbas, elected Palestinian president a year earlier, as the sole legitimate Palestinian address.
- From Hamas' perspective, the emergent situation was little more than a case of hypocrisy by the international community, which refused to accept the democratic choice of the Palestinian people. In June 2007, the organization used brute force to seize control of Gaza and ousted the Palestinian Authority. Ever since then, all efforts to reconcile the Palestinian establishment in Ramallah and the Hamas leadership in Gaza have come to naught. Since Egypt rightfully regards Hamas as an extension of the Muslim Brotherhood, and since Gaza is squeezed between Israel and Egypt and receives a cold shoulder from both countries, the Hamas leadership has been seeking ways to do away with the status quo and have the siege of Gaza lifted, without changing its policy toward Israel or agreements between Israel and the PLO.
- The recent events along the Gaza border fence stem from the desire of Gaza's residents to extricate themselves from the corner in which they are trapped. The problem will not be solved through violent encounters between Israeli snipers and young Palestinians willing to sacrifice their lives in vain. An iron fist might well be a temporary solution, but what is really needed is a solution for the long haul. There are two possible options.
- The first option is a shift in attitude among Hamas' leadership regarding the use of violence. Such a shift could transform Hamas into a party to discussions on reaching peace with Israel,

once Israel itself is willing to negotiate peace. The second option is immediate talks about arranging a “hudna,” a total cease-fire, for a specified number of years while finding a solution to the missiles in Hamas’ hands, but without the movement being forced to recognize Israel or past agreements.

- A modest step such as these could be achieved with the help of an external player — for instance, Egypt or Russia. Several attempts at a hudna have been made in the past, so there is no reason not to renew them as soon as possible.

**SUMMARY:** From Hamas' perspective, the emergent situation was little more than a case of hypocrisy by the international community, which refused to accept the democratic choice of the Palestinian people. In June 2007, the organization used brute force to seize control of Gaza and ousted the Palestinian Authority. Ever since then, all efforts to reconcile the Palestinian establishment in Ramallah and the Hamas leadership in Gaza have come to naught. Since Egypt rightfully regards Hamas as an extension of the Muslim Brotherhood, and since Gaza is squeezed between Israel and Egypt and receives a cold shoulder from both countries, the Hamas leadership has been seeking ways to do away with the status quo and have the siege of Gaza lifted, without changing its policy toward Israel or agreements between Israel and the PLO.

## Target Identified: Strike on Syria Was Aimed at Iranian Air Force Compound

By Amos Harel, columnist at Ha'aretz

- The Syrian airbase near Homs that sustained an airstrike Monday night is where Iran is trying to set up a large air force compound under its exclusive control. Syria, Iran and Russia all blamed Israel for the strike, which killed at least four advisors from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' Quds force. Arab media reports said one was a colonel with a senior position in the Revolutionary Guards' drone operation in Syria. The Lebanese television station Al-Manar, which is affiliated with Hezbollah, reported seven Iranians killed, and the true number could be even greater.
- In addition to the Revolutionary Guards, the large base, known as T4, hosts contingents of the Syrian and Russian air forces. The Iranians, who operate independently, are relatively far away from the Russians; they control the base's western and northern sides. That's apparently why Russia's statements specified that the airstrike hit the western side of the base.
- On February 10, after an Iranian drone was downed inside Israeli territory, the Israeli air force bombed the drone's command post, located at T4. According to foreign media reports, that strike also killed some Iranians, though that time, Iran itself didn't announce the deaths.
- Both strikes, coupled with a series of international media reports quoting "Western intelligence officials," reveal that Iran is trying to establish a large-scale drone program in Syria as part of its effort to expand its military presence there.
- But alongside Russia's protests to Israel over the fact that it views both strikes as endangering its personnel, there is also apparently some tension between Russia and Iran. American intelligence sources say that Iran even moved its people from T4 to a Syrian airbase near Palmyra, far away from the area where Russia operates, for several weeks. It's possible that the Russians threatened to stop arms shipments from Iran to Damascus if Iran didn't do so.
- Nevertheless, Iran recently returned to T4 and continues to deploy its Revolutionary Guards elsewhere in central Syria, including near the Damascus international airport. Israel believes all this has been done with Syrian President Bashar Assad's knowledge, and that he hasn't tried to dissuade the Iranians from such activities, even though they put his own forces at risk.
- Israel doesn't yet have concrete evidence that Assad's forces used chemical weapons to slaughter civilians in rebel-held Douma, near Damascus, last weekend, but it assigns high credibility to the claims that there was a chemical attack and that Assad's forces were responsible for it. There were reportedly two attacks at the site, one using chlorine and one using a nerve gas, possibly sarin.
- An analysis of footage of the dead and wounded shows clearly that some were hit by nerve gas. Israel doesn't believe the Syrian, Russian and Iranian claim that the rebels forged evidence of the attack, while the chance that the rebels themselves accidentally used chemical weapons against civilians in an area under their control seems very slim. Maintaining and using such weapons is relatively difficult, and the rebels in that area – the northern and eastern suburbs of

Damascus – aren't known to have such capabilities. In contrast, an Israeli Foreign Ministry statement denouncing the use of chemical weapons said the Assad regime recently resumed making such weapons.

- The Syrian army has almost finished conquering the rebel enclaves in this area. The Syrians, backed by heavy Russian aerial bombardments, have mounted massive assaults on rebel-held neighborhoods to pressure them into signing surrender agreements.
- But for the first time in years, the Syrians aren't noticeably relying on Shi'ite militias affiliated with Iran. Some of those militias have been assigned other tasks, including maintaining control of areas that have already been captured, like the northern city of Aleppo.
- In contrast, Hezbollah's elite units, including its Radwan commando force, are sent into battle whenever the Syrian effort runs into trouble. They are also assigned to protect assets vital to the regime in Damascus and the Alawite region in northwestern Syria. Hezbollah has a limited presence in southern Syria as well, and Israel suspects this is part of Iran's future plans to create military friction with Israel along the border in the Golan Heights.
- After they finish the fight in northern and eastern Damascus, Assad's forces are expected to turn on the last major pocket of resistance near the capital: the Palestinian refugee camp Yarmouk in southern Damascus. The Islamic State still maintains an active presence in this area. Later, regime forces are expected to mount a major offensive in southern Syria – in Daraa, near the Jordanian border, and probably also in the Syrian part of the Golan, near Israel's border. Israel's assumption is that the regime will make every effort to regain effective control of most of the Syrian Golan, and that its offensive, backed by Russia and Iran, will continue.

**SUMMARY:** The Syrian airbase near Homs that sustained an airstrike Monday night is where Iran is trying to set up a large air force compound under its exclusive control. Syria, Iran and Russia all blamed Israel for the strike, which killed at least four advisors from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' Quds force. Arab media reports said one was a colonel with a senior position in the Revolutionary Guards' drone operation in Syria. The Lebanese television station Al-Manar, which is affiliated with Hezbollah, reported seven Iranians killed, and the true number could be even greater. In addition to the Revolutionary Guards, the large base, known as T4, hosts contingents of the Syrian and Russian air forces. The Iranians, who operate independently, are relatively far away from the Russians; they control the base's western and northern sides. That's apparently why Russia's statements specified that the airstrike hit the western side of the base.