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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Thursday, April 12*

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- US and Allies Weigh Options as Threat of Syria Strike Looms
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# News Excerpts

April 12, 2018

Times of Israel

## **Israel Remembers 6 Million Victims on Holocaust Day**

Israel came to a standstill at 10 a.m. Thursday as sirens wailed throughout the country in memory of the six million Jews murdered by the Nazis during World War II. Buses and cars halted on streets and highways as Israelis stepped out of their vehicles and stood with heads bowed. The sirens were followed by ceremonies marking Holocaust Remembrance Day in schools, public institutions and army bases. Later in the day the traditional “March of the Living” will be held in Poland. The traditional wreath-laying ceremony was held at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem, at the memorial to the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. It was to be followed by various events and activities, including the main memorial ceremony at 1 p.m. and a youth movements assembly at 5:30 p.m.

Reuters

## **US and Allies Weigh Options as Threat of Syria Strike Looms**

The prospect of an American-led strike in Syria seemed all but imminent on Wednesday, as US President Donald Trump warned Damascus and Moscow that “missiles will be coming” in response to an alleged chemical attack in the war-ravaged country. As Trump huddled with Defense Secretary Jim Mattis at the White House to discuss options and game out the situation, his British ally Prime Minister Theresa May reportedly indicated that she was prepared to take or join any action without first seeking parliamentary consent. French President Macron, meanwhile, is to decide on a response in the coming days having. See also, [“West weighs Syria attack that could lead to confrontation with Russia” \(Reuters\)](#)

Times of Israel

## **Assad Adviser: Syria Ready for War with West, Israel**

Claiming that “the rules of the games have changed,” a political and media adviser to President Bashar Assad claimed Thursday that Syria was ready for war with international forces if hostilities were to break out. “We are not afraid of war and we will be prepared for it if it happens,” Buthaina Shaaban told Lebanon’s Hezbollah-affiliated Al Mayadeen TV station. His statements came against a backdrop of heightened tensions between Syria and Russia on the one side and the US — and possible its European allies — on the other. Washington has threatened to punish Syria militarily for the chemical attack in Eastern Ghouta over the weekend in which some 40-people died. See also, [“Assad’s political adviser: ‘Rules of the games have changed, Israel will be biggest loser’” \(Ynet News\)](#)

Ha’aretz

## **Israeli Army Hits Hamas Targets in Gaza**

The Israeli air force hit a Hamas target in the Gaza Strip on Wednesday night, the IDF spokesman reported. One member of Hamas’ military wing was killed in the attack, according to the Palestinian Health Ministry. Following the IDF strike, Hamas militant shot machine guns towards the aircraft, triggering rocket alert sirens throughout southern Israel in the regional councils of Shaar Hanegev and Sdot Negev. Hamas’ machine gun fire hit a house in Shaar Hanegev. There were no casualties or wounded. The aircrafts were not hit. The IDF spokesman stressed that the Israeli army will not allow Hamas to turn the area along the Israel-Gaza fence into a conflict zone.

## **Liberman Bars 110 Palestinians from Memorial Ceremony**

Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman prevented the entrance of 110 Palestinians to Israel, who were planning to attend the joint Israeli-Palestinian memorial ceremony in Tel Aviv next week, on Remembrance Day for the Fallen of Israel's Wars. In a statement issued on Tuesday, Liberman said: "I will not allow the desecration of Remembrance Day. This ceremony is not a memorial event but a display of bad taste and insensitivity that harms our dear bereaved families." In response to the decision, Combatants for Peace and the Parents Circle-Families Forum – the organizations that organize the ceremony – said that the defense minister is the one who is desecrating the memorial with his actions. "He is harming Israeli and Palestinian bereaved families who seek to promote a discourse of reconciliation," a statement said. See also, ["Liberman goes to war against alternative Memorial Day ceremony" \(972\)](#)

## **Netanyahu, Bennett Butt Heads over Migrant Deadlock**

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Education Minister Naftali Bennett clashed Wednesday afternoon in a meeting of coalition heads convened to discuss the possibility of enacting a "notwithstanding clause" aimed at preventing the High Court of Justice (HCJ) from striking down legislation. The idea was floated recently in response to the thwarting of a plan to expel illegal African migrants. The clause was brought up as possible solution to amending a law preventing migrant infiltration into Israel that would allow for the detention and expulsion of illegal migrants. While Prime Minister Netanyahu announced his intentions to promote a far-reaching version of the move—contrary the stance of Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon, who was absent from the meeting—he was confronted by Bennett regarding the speed with which the notwithstanding clause was to be promoted.

## **A-G: Olmert Can Be Blocked from Politics Even if Pardoned**

Attorney-General Avichai Mandelblit has alluded to blocking former prime minister Ehud Olmert from returning to public service even if he gets a pardon from President Reuven Rivlin. "An ethical block from taking a public service position gets in the way even if the president of the state decides to grant a pardon," Mandelblit said Tuesday at an Israel Bar Association event in Tel Aviv – clearly hinting at Olmert though not mentioning him by name. Olmert served 16 months of a 27-month prison sentence for bribery, fraud and obstruction, leaving prison last July, but earlier this week filed a request with Rivlin to wipe his criminal record clean. See also, ["Olmert requests pardon – for political comeback?" \(JPost\)](#)

## **22% of Young Americans Have Never Heard of the Holocaust**

A fifth of young Americans have never heard of the Holocaust or are unsure as to what it entailed, according to a new survey published on Thursday, as Israel marks Holocaust Remembrance Day. Fifty-eight percent of the 1,350 people polled said that they believed that another Holocaust could take place again in the future. The poll, entitled "National Survey of Holocaust Awareness and Knowledge Among Adults in the United States", which was carried out by the Claims Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference), also examined the general knowledge of the participants on a variety of other issues about the Holocaust.

## **Suspected Chemical Attack in Syria: What We Know and Don't Know**

By Daniel Victor Reporter at the New York Times

- The latest salvo in the seven-year war in Syria, an apparent chemical attack in the suburb of Douma at dusk on Saturday, has presented a new challenge to a Trump administration that has vowed to strongly respond.
- But much is still unclear or unconfirmed about the attack, including what action the United States will take and what impact it will have on relationships with allies and adversaries. Syrian government forces prevent access to Douma for journalists, aid workers and investigators. Here's a brief look at what we know so far, and what remains to be seen as of Wednesday.

### **What we know**

- About 500 people in Douma, a suburb of Damascus, had symptoms consistent with a chemical attack: burning eyes, breathing problems and white foam coming from their mouths and nostrils, according to several independent medical and rescue groups.
- Residents said they heard objects falling from the sky, followed by a strange smell that witnesses said resembled chlorine.
- About 70 people died while sheltering in basements, the World Health Organization said. Of them, 43 had signs of being exposed to "highly toxic chemicals."
- Videos circulated by antigovernment activists showed graphic images of families sprawled out in their homes, dead from apparent suffocation. A stream of victims rushed into clinics on Saturday, according to medical and rescue groups.
- Thousands of rebel fighters in Douma agreed on Sunday to hand the area over to the government and be bused to an area outside the government's control in the country's north.

### **What we don't know**

- Whether the injuries were the result of a chemical weapon attack is not yet confirmed. The state news media in Syria denied that the government had used chemical weapons, and accused a rebel group of fabricating the videos to drum up international support. Russia and Iran, Syria's allies, have also denied that Mr. Assad used chemical weapons. The United States and its allies believe chemical weapons were used.
- The United Nations has not determined responsibility for the attack. Rival resolutions from the United States and Russia on how to investigate the attack were defeated on Tuesday.
- The United States was still assessing the evidence of the attack on Wednesday and did not know which chemical was used, or whether it was launched by the Syrian government or forces supporting the government.

- The United States has not settled on a military response. On Wednesday, President Trump threatened a missile strike, but has not yet followed through and the specific strategy is unknown.

#### What recent history has taught us

- The use of chemical weapons, including sarin, chlorine, mustard gas and poison gas, in Syria has shown no signs of abating since it began in August 2013.
- An April 2017 attack that killed dozens of people in Khan Sheikhoun, in northern Syria, offered the first look at how the Trump administration would respond. President Trump ordered a military strike against the airfield where the weapons were launched, an approach meant to send a message that policy had changed from the Obama administration and that attacks would not be tolerated.
- But the strike had little practical effect, with Syrians using the airfield again within 24 hours, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a monitoring group.
- The U.S. has declined to intervene otherwise, even after several attacks with higher death tolls. Days before the weekend attack, Mr. Trump said he wanted to pull the United States out of Syria, a prospect dreaded by America's regional allies and cheered by Russia.

#### What to watch for next

- The United States has three options for a military response, and none are particularly good. The approach of limited, punitive strikes, as the Trump administration opted for last year, has not changed Mr. Assad's calculus, but stronger responses carry significant risk of escalation.
- Escalation could create several new problems, including the collapse of the Syrian government, which could prolong the war and sow chaos for millions of Syrians. It could also invite a direct military confrontation with Russia, which warned that it would shoot down any missiles.

**SUMMARY:** The United States has three options for a military response, and none are particularly good. The approach of limited, punitive strikes, as the Trump administration opted for last year, has not changed Mr. Assad's calculus, but stronger responses carry significant risk of escalation. Escalation could create several new problems, including the collapse of the Syrian government, which could prolong the war and sow chaos for millions of Syrians. It could also invite a direct military confrontation with Russia, which warned that it would shoot down any missiles.

## **How Putin's Folly Could Lead to a Middle East War**

By Jonathan Schanzer, vice president at Foundation for Defense of Democracies

- **Donald Trump needs to stop prevaricating over Syria and take advantage of Russian President Vladimir Putin's Syria failures. Putin, who unexpectedly thrust Russia into the Syria civil war in September 2015, initially claimed he was there on a counterterrorism mission to fight the Islamic State. Fast-forward two and a half years, and Putin is now in the unlikely position of trying to contain the outbreak of what could be the ugliest Middle East war of the 21st century between Iran and Israel.**
- **It was all very predictable, the moment that Putin began to partner with Iran and its lethal proxy, Hezbollah. They shared intelligence, patrolled together and fought together against the Sunni jihadists and other rebels who were warring against the Assad regime.**
- **Iran's motivations for this unlikely marriage were crystal clear: the regime viewed Syria as a crucial territory to maintain a land bridge from their borders to the Mediterranean. For Iran, Syria was key to regional domination. It was also key to maintaining military supply routes to Hezbollah in Lebanon.**
- **Russia, by contrast, had more global ambitions. For one, Putin was putting a finger in the eye of the Obama administration. The message was that Russia could dominate territory once seen as under American influence. Putin also sought to convey to the rest of the Arab world that Russia was a strong and reliable ally for the region, and that Russia was willing to provide advanced weaponry at the right price—and without American-style red tape and oversight.**
- **Putin's assertion of power was quickly acknowledged by Israelis, who began to pay regular visits to Moscow, during which they raised their concerns about the growing Iranian presence in Syria as well as the military hardware and Shi'ite militias that Tehran deployed there to shore up a wobbly Assad regime. They warned that Iran was preparing new military infrastructure to target Israel.**
- **As Israeli officials explain, the visits did not include requests to strike at Iranian and Hezbollah targets. Rather, the Israelis simply declared their intent to strike these targets. A line of communication was opened, and has remained open as Israel has conducted more than 100 strikes on Iranian strikes in Syria. Israel never took responsibility for these attacks, and Russia never acknowledged them. The Kremlin seemed to think that it could play both sides against one another while it remained in Syria under the pretense of a counterterrorism mission.**
- **But that collapsed on February 9, when Iran dispatched a drone into Israeli airspace from the T4 air base west of Palmyra. The Israelis responded by sending eight F-16 fighter jets into Syria to destroy the base as well as a number of anti-aircraft batteries. The attack reportedly came without warning for Russia.**
- **From the Israeli perspective, the air strikes sent two important messages. First, it was a sharp warning to Iran for violating its airspace. And second, by striking deep inside Syria, the Israelis also conveyed that they could operate inside the country with relative impunity (they lost one fighter jet in the skirmish). Iran now understood that Russia could not necessarily protect their assets inside the country.**

- Over the ensuing two months, an uneasy quiet prevailed between Israel and Iran. Of course, the rest of Syria was not quiet. The Assad regime's savagery has continued unabated and the international community has done nothing in response, even as the U.S.-led international coalition hammers the ever-shrinking caliphate of the Islamic State. The mess in Syria has been punctuated by Trump's recent vow to withdraw entirely from Syria "very soon."
- For the Israelis, Trump's statement was both alarming and clarifying. Iran's military project was about to expand exponentially. And without the implied protection from its most powerful ally, Israel's war planners apparently felt empowered to take matters into their own hands.
- That's exactly what Israel did on Sunday night. The T4 air base was once again the target. Once again, Russia appears to have been left out of the loop. And it also appears that their air defenses were insufficient to prevent a strike on the Iranian air base.
- Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov criticized the Israelis on Monday, calling the strike "a dangerous development." Lavrov is right about that. The Israelis have shown that they can operate repeatedly inside of Syria, with or without Russian deconfliction. And with Trump signaling outrage over Sunday's chemical weapons attacks in Damascus, the United States is not likely to restrain the Israelis from protecting their interests.
- Putin is now sitting on a tinderbox. The ISIS threat may be contained. But a showdown is looming between Israel and Iran on Russia-controlled terrain. With Iran's long record of sponsoring terrorist groups that target Israel, coupled with regular calls for destruction of the state of Israel, this has been a long time coming. Iran's Syrian and Lebanese proxies, who are armed to the teeth with up to 250,000 rockets, are preparing to battle the most advanced military in the Middle East. It promises to be the worst war the region has seen in decades.
- Putin could certainly try to step in and referee this conflict. But that's not what he signed up for. Between this and the chemical weapons attacks, the Russian leader may finally come to understand that Iran's actions in Syria are not aligned with Russian interests.
- This is long-sought leverage for Trump, in a conflict that has afforded little. More importantly, it's a window of opportunity to finally craft a Syria policy that works to marginalize both Russia and Iran – the main drivers of a mass slaughter that stretches into its seventh year.

**SUMMARY:** Putin is now sitting on a tinderbox. The ISIS threat may be contained. But a showdown is looming between Israel and Iran on Russia-controlled terrain. With Iran's long record of sponsoring terrorist groups that target Israel, coupled with regular calls for destruction of the state of Israel, this has been a long time coming. Iran's Syrian and Lebanese proxies, who are armed to the teeth with up to 250,000 rockets, are preparing to battle the most advanced military in the Middle East. It promises to be the worst war the region has seen in decades. Putin could certainly try to step in and referee this conflict. But that's not what he signed up for. Between this and the chemical weapons attacks, the Russian leader may finally come to understand that Iran's actions in Syria are not aligned with Russian interests. This is long-sought leverage for Trump, in a conflict that has afforded little. More importantly, it's a window of opportunity to finally craft a Syria policy that works to marginalize both Russia and Iran – the main drivers of a mass slaughter that stretches into its seventh year.