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## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Monday, April 16*

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# News Excerpts

April 16, 2018

Times of Israel

## **Coalition Chair: Gov Could Break Over High Court Bill**

Coalition Chief David Amsalem warned Monday that clashes over contentious efforts to limit the High Court's power could lead to the government's dissolution. Amsalem said he would not accept a Kulanu party veto — a right it was granted in the 2015 coalition agreement. Coalition officials are considering several options on limiting the High Court's ability to strike down laws. One recommendation by Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit would allow the Court to overrule Knesset laws with a majority of six/nine judges and Knesset members to pass replacement legislation with a majority of 70/120. Netanyahu reportedly rejected the proposal, saying a Knesset law should only be shot down by a unanimous decision by the judges.

Ynet

## **Israel Unveils Terror Tunnel Detection Lab**

Israel went public Sunday with a military laboratory it set up in 2016 to pool anti-tunnel expertise and spearhead efforts to foil the cross-border digs. The laboratory "uses innovative ground research, which includes scanning of cavities and their dynamics, (and) strives to develop new discovery and mapping techniques," a military statement said. The announcement followed the earlier neutralization of a guerrilla Hamas tunnel from the Gaza Strip. The IDF said the tunnel connected to a chain of other tunnels, and its destruction could therefore be considered a significant achievement.

Times of Israel

## **Barghouti Tells Abbas to Stand Firm**

Jailed Palestinian leader Marwan Barghouti on Sunday told Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to stand firm in his rejection of President Donald Trump's yet-to-be-announced peace plan, saying that Trump would be soon be gone. In a message released from his prison cell on the 16th anniversary of his arrest by the IDF, Barghouti voiced his full support for Abbas's rejection of the "conspiracy of the century." Barghouti, who is in prison serving five life sentences for his role in deadly terror attacks on Israelis, is hugely popular among the Palestinians and is seen as a possible successor to Abbas.

Times of Israel

## **Greenblatt Hits back at Erekat's 'Empty Remarks'**

Trump's special Middle East envoy Jason Greenblatt hit back at the "empty, self-indulgent" remarks by Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat who earlier this week accused the White House official of being a mouthpiece for the Israeli government. In a letter circulated to the diplomats, Erekat slammed Greenblatt for warning Gazans to keep away from the Israeli border fence during mass demonstrators launched late last month, and did not demand that Israel avoid civilian casualties.

## **Gazans Fly Firebomb-laden Kites Into Israel**

Gaza Palestinians have begun flying kites with Molotov cocktails attached to them over the border fence into Israeli territory. Officials from the Eshkol region adjacent to the border informed residents on Sunday that the firebombs had caused several fires but had not caused injuries. In the first incident last Wednesday, a blaze was put out in the vicinity of Kibbutz Be'eri, where fire investigators found a burnt kite.

Associated Press

## **Arab Leaders Meet to Unify on Iran, Jerusalem**

Saudi Arabia used its perch as host of an annual gathering of Arab leaders on Sunday to push for a unified stance against rival Iran as the regional powerhouses vie for the upper hand in wars in Syria and Yemen. Saudi King Salman told leaders from across the 22-member Arab League that Iran was to blame for instability and meddling in the region. Arab heads of state stressed unity and unwavering support for Palestinians. King Salman reiterated Saudi Arabia's rejection of the US decision to move its embassy in Israel to Jerusalem and to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

The New York Times

## **Hamas Sees Protests as Peaceful and as a 'Deadly Weapon'**

Mixed messages have abounded during the so-called Great Return March, the grass-roots campaign that is now in its third week and seeks to highlight hardship in Gaza and demand the right to return to lands in Israel. While organizers promised peaceful disobedience of Israel's orders to stay far from the fence, participants have thrown Molotov cocktails and other explosives, even attaching one to a kite. And while Hamas leader Ismail Haniya and other Gaza leaders espoused Palestinian unity, and flew only the national flag, he also, without naming them, accused the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority and its president, Mahmoud Abbas, leader of archrival Fatah, of presiding over a corrupt era of "humiliation, negotiations and security coordination" with Israel.

Times of Israel

## **Democrats to Ask PM Not to Raze Palestinian Villages**

With J Street's annual national conference taking place Sunday through Tuesday, Democratic legislators are organizing a letter urging Netanyahu to halt plans for the demolition of two Palestinian villages in the West Bank. The missive follows a November letter signed by 10 Democratic senators, including prominent figures like Bernie Sanders of Vermont, Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts and Dianne Feinstein of California, that had a similar message. Four of the 10 signatories were Jewish. The new letter is now circulating in the House of Representatives, where it is accumulating signatories.

## **The Real Next War in Syria: Iran vs. Israel**

By Thomas Friedman, Columnist, The New York Times

- Stop me if you've heard this one before: Syria is going to explode. I know, you have heard that one before, but this time I mean really explode. Because the U.S., British and French attack on Syria to punish its regime for its vile use of chemical weapons — and Russia's vow to respond — is actually just the second-most dangerous confrontation unfolding in that country. Even more dangerous is that Israel and Iran, at the exact same time, seem to be heading for a High Noon shootout in Syria over Iran's attempts to turn Syria into a forward air base against Israel, something Israel is vowing to never let happen. This is not mere speculation. In the past few weeks — for the first time ever — Israel and Iran have begun quietly trading blows directly, not through proxies, in Syria. And this quiet phase may be about to end. Israel and Iran are now a hair-trigger away from going to the next level — and if that happens, the U.S. and Russia may find it difficult to stay out.
- Let me try to explain what is unfolding from a lookout post on the Syrian-Israel border, where I stood a couple of days ago. To follow along at home, I highly recommend this website, which tracks the multiple interlocking Syrian conflicts in real time and is used by the U.N. observers here on the Golan Heights. Let's start with the fact that the latest U.S., British and French cruise missile punishment attack appears to be a one-off operation and the impact will be contained. Russia and Syria have little interest in courting another Western raid and raising the level of involvement in Syria by the three big Western powers. And the three Western powers do not want to get more deeply involved in Syria. It is the potentially uncontained direct shooting war brewing between Israel and Iran that is much more likely and worrisome, because it may be about to enter round two.
- Round one occurred on Feb. 10, when an Iranian drone launched by a Revolutionary Guards Quds Force unit operating out of Syria's T4 air base, east of Homs in central Syria, was shot down with a missile from an Israeli Apache helicopter that was following it after it penetrated Israeli airspace. Initial reports were that the Iranian drone was purely on a reconnaissance mission. But the official Israeli Army spokesman, Brig. Gen. Ronen Manelis, said Friday that the drone's flight path and Israel's "intelligence and operational analysis of the parts of the Iranian unmanned vehicle" indicated that "the aircraft was carrying explosives" and that its mission was "an act of sabotage in Israeli territory." I have no ability to independently verify that claim. But the fact that the Israelis are putting it out should raise alarm bells. If it is true, it suggests that the Quds Force — commanded by Iran's military mastermind Qassem Suleimani — may have been trying to launch an actual military strike on Israel from an air base in Syria, not just reconnaissance.
- "This is the first time we saw Iran do something against Israel — not by proxy," a senior Israeli military source told me. "This opened a new period." It certainly helps to explain why Israeli jets

launched a predawn missile raid on the Iranian drone's T4 home base last Monday. This would have been a huge story — Israel killed seven Iranian Quds Force members, including Col. Mehdi Dehghan, who led the drone unit — but it was largely lost in the global reaction to (and Trump tweets about) President Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons two days earlier. "It was the first time we attacked live Iranian targets — both facilities and people," said the Israeli military source. And the Iranians not only openly announced their embarrassing losses through the semiofficial Fars news agency — they have played down previous indirect casualties from Israeli strikes in Syria — but then publicly vowed to take revenge. "The crimes will not remain unanswered," Ali Akbar Velayati, a top adviser to Iran's supreme leader, said during a visit to Syria.

- Since then, senior Israeli defense officials have let it be known that if the Iranians were to strike back at Israeli targets, Israel may use the opportunity to make a massive counterstrike on Iran's entire military infrastructure in Syria, where Iran is attempting to establish both a forward air base, as well as a factory for GPS-guided missiles that could hit targets inside Israel with much greater accuracy — inside a 50-meter radius — and deploy them from Syria and with Hezbollah in Lebanon. These defense officials say there is zero chance Israel will make the mistake it made in Lebanon — of letting Hezbollah establish a massive missile threat there — by letting Iran do the same directly in Syria. Now you can understand why it is such a dangerous situation — even without the U.S., French and British punishment for Assad's use of chemical weapons.
- Iran claims it is setting up bases in Syria to protect it from Israel, but Israel has no designs on Syria; it actually prefers the devil it knows there — Assad — over chaos. And it has not intervened in the civil war there except to prevent the expansion of Iran's military infrastructure there or to retaliate for rebel or Syrian shells that fell on Israel's territory. I understand Iran's security concerns in the Gulf; it faces a number of hostile, pro-American Sunni Arab powers trying to contain its influence and undermine its Islamic regime. From Iran's perspective, these are a threat.
- But what is Iran doing in Syria? Tehran's attempt to build a network of bases and missile factories in Syria — now that it has helped Assad largely crush the uprising against him — appears to be an ego-power play by Iran's Quds Force leader Suleimani to extend Iran's grip on key parts of the Sunni Arab world and advance his power struggle with President Hassan Rouhani. Suleimani's Quds Force now more or less controls — through proxies — four Arab capitals: Damascus, Beirut, Baghdad and Sana. Iran has actually become the biggest "occupying power" in the Arab world today. But Suleimani may be overplaying his hand, especially if he finds himself in a direct confrontation with Israel in Syria, far from Iran, without air cover. After all, even before this, many average Iranians were publicly asking what in the world is Iran doing spending billions of dollars — which were supposed to go to Iranians as a result of the lifting of sanctions from the Iran nuclear deal — fighting wars in Syria, Lebanon and Yemen.

- That is surely one reason Iran has not retaliated — yet. Suleimani has to think twice about starting a full-scale, direct war with Israel, because of another big story many people have not noticed: Iran's currency is collapsing back home. Consider this April 12 story on CNBC.com: The Iranian rial "has plummeted to a record low amid growing economic and political uncertainty, causing a rush to the banks as Iranians desperately try to acquire U.S. dollars with exchanges forced to shut their doors to prevent long and chaotic lines." The rial has lost one-third of its value just this year, the story noted.
- Moreover, Israeli military officials believe Russian President Vladimir Putin and Suleimani are no longer natural allies. Putin wants and needs a stable Syria where his puppet Bashar Assad can be in control and Russia can maintain a forward naval and air presence and look like a superpower again — on the cheap. Iran's President Rouhani probably also prefers a stable Syria, where Assad has consolidated his power and that is not a drain on the Iranian budget. But Suleimani and the Quds Force seem to aspire to greater dominance of the Arab world and putting more pressure on Israel. Unless Suleimani backs down, you are about to see in Syria an unstoppable force — Iran's Quds Force — meet an immovable object: Israel. Fasten your seatbelt.

## An Inconvenient Truth for Israel

By Chemi Shalev, Columnist, Ha'aretz

- The weekend attack carried out by the United States, together with France and Great Britain, against Syrian President Bashar Assad's chemical weapon program supposedly contradicts U.S. President Donald Trump's declared intent of ending the American military presence in Syria. A briefing given by senior administration officials on Saturday indicated, however, that the rationale for the Tomahawk attack, as well as its chosen targets, only reinforce the assessment that the U.S. is on its way out. Then French President Emmanuel Macron announced on Sunday night that he had persuaded Trump not to remove U.S. forces. One way or another, the briefing provided a comprehensive rationale for the attack that complements Trump's mercurial and seemingly self-contradictory tweets, which may possibly be just an attempt to cover for them. Its most interesting insights are detailed below:
- While the United States vehemently condemns the murderous brutality of the Assad regime, it freely admits that this is not enough to warrant its military intervention. The same sentiment, in essence, found cynical expression in recent days in social media memes: As far as America is concerned, it goes, Assad can keep on massacring his people, as long as he sticks to using conventional weapons alone. The officials made clear that it is only Assad's use of chemical weapons, in "addition" to the Syrian leader's savagery, that prompted the intervention, not because of some altruistic opposition in principle to chemical weapons of mass destruction but because they constitute "an intolerable threat to the United States and our interests." For this reason, they repeated to the point of obsession, the attack should only be read as a focused response to the threat posed by Syria's poisonous gases on the United States - and not as an attempt to depose Assad or to protect Syrian lives.
- This is the logic that seems to have guided the choice of targets. American missiles did not go after Assad's stockpiles of chlorine gas, his usual weapon of choice against the rebels, but rather his ability to produce and store the kinds of chemical weapons that truly scare the U.S.: A storage facility for sarin gas near Homs, a chemical-weapons command and control center in the same area, and, the jewel in the crown, a research, development and production facility for all sorts of poisons and nerve agents in Damascus. The U.S. has all but guaranteed it won't attack Assad's remaining reserves of chemical weapons - unless he uses them.
- Since the April 7 attack on Douma, analysts have pondered Assad's motivation for using chemical weapons in the first place. Why risk his supposedly impending victory by challenging the world with chemical weapons of mass destruction? The American officials, at least, aren't willing to concede Assad's "strategic" triumph in the first place. The Syrian despot controls only half of Syria's populated areas, only half of its population and less than half of the pre-war Syrian GDP, they say. The chemical weapons that Assad uses are meant to compensate for the severe shortage of manpower among his forces. He isn't deploying chemical weapons despite

his victory, but to achieve it, the officials said: “They may be winning militarily in some places but they’re winning in those places operationally in part because they use chemical weapons.”

- U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley has stated that Assad’s forces have used chemical weapons on at least 50 occasions since the first Tomahawk attack ordered by Trump in April last year. The officials claim that throughout this time, Russia has obstructed and Syria has sabotaged U.S. efforts to exert diplomatic and economic pressure to induce Assad to stop. The difference in Douma, they freely admitted, were the photos and witness accounts that documented the attack, which allowed, among other things, an accurate medical assessment of the victims. These photos were supplied, they noted, by the media, nongovernment organizations and ordinary citizens through social media. Vast differences notwithstanding, these are the same kind of groups that Israel regularly torments for reporting on Gaza and the West Bank.
- The case against Assad is convincing almost beyond a reasonable doubt, despite the absence of an unequivocal smoking gun. The pictures, evidence and testimonies from Douma clearly point to a large-scale chemical attack, almost certainly carried out from the air. Assad is the only Syrian force with aircraft, his helicopters were seen hovering over Douma at the time of the attack and their delivery shells are identical to those used by Assad in previous attacks. The officials said they had “reliable information” - a phrase that begs speculation that it was supplied by Israel - “that indicates that Syrian military officials were coordinating what appears to be the use of chlorine on April 7.”
- The officials understandably tout the U.S. success in recruiting France and Great Britain to the campaign. They ascribe it, among other things, to Trump’s ability to “develop a very close strategic cooperation relationship” with Macron and “in particular” with British Prime Minister Theresa May. “There’s an increasing level of trust over time,” they asserted, believe it or not. No word, however, on what happened to the U.S. requests of its great Middle Eastern allies, particularly Saudi Arabia, to take part in the raid on Assad.
- Despite their efforts to ascribe the attack exclusively to Assad’s use of chemical weapons, the officials made clear that the administration is still wary of the Islamic State and certainly fearful that it or some other radical jihadi group will get its hands on Assad’s chemical arsenal. In what might be the only indication that a final decision on exiting Syria is still to be made, the officials said the U.S. is concerned by the Assad regime attacking Syrians but also that the “geographical space” of Syria will be used to threaten Europe and the world. Despite Trump’s declarations of victory, the officials steer clear of stating that the end of the campaign against ISIS is at hand. On the contrary, they warn that Assad’s brutality and repressive measures create the kind of “core grievances” that radicalized Muslims and created ISIS in the first place. Unlike many of their Israeli counterparts, Trump’s officials apparently do not subscribe to the “terror is terror is terror” paradigm that ignores the root causes of radicalization, such as repression and occupation.



- Iran is only mentioned in passing, and the officials went out of their way to emphasize that the American action was not aimed against Tehran. They cited Trump's criticism of Iran, but did not emphasize the Islamic republic's wish to forge a Shi'ite crescent from Tehran to Beirut nor the direct threats to Israel created by Iran's entrenchment in Syria. The main issue, as the officials present it, is that Iran's overseas adventures are draining its limited financial resources, at the expense of the Iranian people. The briefing indicates that Washington does not view the Iranian presence as a direct threat to its own security, a position that should worry Israel but might very well change in advance of the impending certification/abandonment of the Iran nuclear deal next month. Russia, on the other hand, is mentioned almost 50 times, both as Assad's sponsor and enabler and as a spoiler of efforts to deal with Syria's chemical arsenal by diplomatic means, including the supervising committee established through the much-maligned deal worked out in 2013 between Vladimir Putin and Barack Obama that purported to rid Syria of its chemical stockpiles.
- Israel's name doesn't come up at all in either the questions or the answers in the briefing: Everyone can reach their own conclusions from the omission. It's possible that despite its wonderful friendship with Israel, the Trump administration is carrying on the long-held U.S. tradition of studiously ignoring its best Middle East ally during conflicts with an Arab state. At the same time, however, there are also sufficient grounds to suspect a far greater inconvenient truth: That the administration couldn't care less about the threats and challenges facing Israel in the Syrian arena, certainly not to the extent that these could persuade Trump to keep U.S. troops in the service of what he has often described as a costly, thankless and ultimately futile battle. Perhaps Macron's French charm has succeeded where Netanyahu's chumminess failed.