



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Tuesday, July 10

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July 10, 2018

Ha'aretz

PM: Israel to Close Gaza Crossing Over Airborne Firebombs

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Monday that Israel will close the Kerem Shalom border crossing with Gaza over the airborne firebombs being sent into Israel in recent weeks. "In agreement with the defense minister, we will act with a heavy hand against the Hamas regime in the Gaza Strip," Netanyahu said. Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhoum called the step "a new crime against humanity" that are against international law and human rights. This was not the only step Israel is taking to counter the threat, Netanyahu said, but refused to elaborate. See also, ["Israel announces Gaza sanctions in response to cross-border blazes" \(Reuters\)](#)

I24 News

Syria Says Israel Struck Iran-Operated Airbase Near Homs

Syria on Sunday accused Israel of targeting an air base in the central Homs province known to be operated by Iranian forces, claiming that its air defenses were activated in response to the attack and hit an Israeli jet. Syrian state media said the country's air defense missiles were launched at Israeli warplanes entering its airspace from Jordan, thus foiling an attack on the T-4 air base, also known as Tayfur Military Airbase. "Our air defenses are responding to an Israeli aggression and intercepting a number of missiles targeting the airport, hitting one of the attacking planes and forcing the rest to leave the airspace," the official SANA news agency quoted a military source as saying. See also, ["Syria Says Israel Struck Iranian Airbase Near Homs" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Rivlin: Nation-State Bill 'Liable to Harm Jewish State'

President Reuven Rivlin wrote a letter addressed to the Knesset and members of the law-making committee criticizing a section of the nation-state bill on Tuesday morning. The Jewish nation-state bill is a draft Basic Law with constitutional heft that declares Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people. It would anchor in law the state's menorah emblem, Jerusalem as Israel's capital, national holidays and the right of all Israeli residents to preserve their heritage without consideration of religion and nationality. Future components of the bill, which are subject to omission and revision in future readings of the bill, include that Hebrew will be the official language of the state, with Arabic receiving a unique status. See also, ["Rivlin against nationality bill" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Times of Israel

High Court: State Can't Clear WB Bedouin Village before July 16

The High Court of Justice issued a temporary injunction on Monday evening, preventing the state from carrying out plans to evacuate a West Bank Bedouin village, days after halting the controversial plan. The ruling followed an urgent petition by a group of Palestinian lawyers representing the community of Khan al-Ahmar near the large West Bank settlement of Ma'ale Adumim. The appeal claims that no eviction orders were ever filed against the residents, as required before any village is cleared. Instead, the Palestinian attorneys claim that only demolition orders were submitted. See also, ["PA uses the Bedouin to fight Israel" \(Arutz 7\)](#)

Netanyahu to Face Fresh Interrogation Over Telecom Probe

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will be interrogated by police on Tuesday over his alleged involvement in a corruption scandal centered on telecommunications giant Bezeq. The case, dubbed "Case 4,000" to differentiate it from a slew of other investigations into the affairs of the premier and his inner circle, centers on allegations that Netanyahu made concessions benefiting Bezeq's controlling shareholder Shaul Elovitch in exchange for positive media coverage of him and his wife Sara on Elovitch's popular news website *Walla*. Elovitch is also expected to be questioned in the case on Tuesday. According to reports, Netanyahu will be questioned Tuesday over audio recordings handed over to police by [state's witness and former senior aide to the prime minister, Nir Hefetz](#).

UN Watch: the UN Ignores Antisemitism, De-Judaizes Holocaust

The United Nations has failed to seriously combat antisemitism and, in some cases, has de-Judaized the Holocaust, a Geneva watchdog group said on Monday. UN Watch made the accusation in a report it presented at a special event at the Knesset. Israel has long argued that the UN's treatment of it is tantamount to antisemitism because of the body's long record of excessively condemning Israeli actions above and beyond those of other nations. "When it comes to Jews, when it comes to Israelis, the UN has become a hostile and biased body," said MK Yair Lapid, who chaired the Knesset event. "The organization that is meant to fight antisemitism, which is sworn to fight antisemitism, is guilty of antisemitism itself." See also, ["UN failing to recognize, fight anti-Semitism, watchdog charges" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Jewish Groups 'Concerned' over Trump's Supreme Court Pick

Almost immediately after US President Donald Trump announced federal judge Brett Kavanaugh as his nominee to replace Anthony Kennedy on the Supreme Court Monday night, Jewish groups and leaders expressed concern for what his confirmation would mean for the future of the court and its impact on American life. "We are concerned that Judge Kavanaugh's judicial record does not reflect the demonstrated independence and commitment to fair treatment for all that is necessary to merit a seat on our nation's highest court," Anti-Defamation League chief Jonathan Greenblatt said in a statement. "Because he has written and spoken prolifically on many issues of deep concern, we believe his positions merit close scrutiny". See also, ["Trump picked the wrong judge" \(Washington Post\)](#)

Opening of Sara Netanyahu's Trial Postponed

The Jerusalem Magistrate's Court decided Monday to accept a request by Sara Netanyahu, the prime minister's wife, to postpone the opening of her trial in the so-called "residence affair" by two and a half months. Mrs. Netanyahu's attorney, Yossi Cohen, asked to postpone the July 19 hearing until the end of the courts' hiatus in September. Cohen explained that on the same day, he needed to be present in a hearing in different case, where a sick elderly man is due to give early testimony. Sara Netanyahu is suspected of ordering private meals worth some NIS 350,000 (roughly \$96,600) from high-end restaurants with the state footing the bill, although a cook had been hired to prepare the meals at the residence. She was charged with fraudulently obtaining benefits under aggravated circumstances, fraud and breach of trust.

We Already Gave Syria to Putin, so What's Left for Trump to Say?

By Dennis Ross, served in senior national security positions in 5 US administrations

- **Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result may not meet the clinical definition of insanity, but it's still a pretty good standard. It also happens to define both President Barack Obama's and President Trump's approaches to working with Russia on the Syrian civil war. Washington and Moscow have repeatedly issued joint statements outlining principles for addressing the conflict and reducing its horrific humanitarian consequences. Yet over and over again, the Russians have betrayed their commitments.**
- **Consider the record. In November 2015, Secretary of State John F. Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reached an agreement on the Vienna principles. They called for a cessation of hostilities; lifting the sieges on all cities; the unimpeded provision of food, medicine and other humanitarian materials; the drafting of a constitution in six months; and a political transition process of 18 months. In December 2015, these principles were enshrined in U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime blatantly violated all of the terms: It lifted no sieges and did not allow humanitarian relief to pass unimpeded.**
- **The Russians, too, did nothing. Although Assad and the Russians did finally implement a cease-fire two months later, it collapsed by April 2016 as the Assad regime resumed its onslaught against civilian targets, with a special emphasis on hospitals. Much as in his use of chemical weapons, Assad hit hospitals to show that he would respect no limits. Kerry was reduced to condemning Assad's attacks while plaintively appealing to Moscow to act on the responsibility enshrined in the December 2015 resolution. "We all signed the same agreement and we all supported the same UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which calls for a nationwide cessation of hostilities," he said, adding that "it calls for a nationwide, full delivery of humanitarian assistance within all of Syria."**
- **Clear words, but no consequences. Not surprisingly, Kerry's calls were in vain. By the fall of 2016 he tried again, reaching an agreement on a joint operations center with the Russians in the hopes of reducing the violence and making a political process possible. Once again he was frustrated, declaring that he had "profound doubt about whether Russia and the Assad regime can or will live up to the obligations that they agreed to in Geneva." The Russian response was to launch a scorched-earth attack on Aleppo, which reduced the eastern half of the city — then Syria's largest — to rubble. That ended Kerry's efforts.**
- **Trump has made his own attempts to get somewhere with the Russians. On the margins of the Group of 20 summit in Germany in July 2017, he and Putin finalized a cease-fire agreement for southwestern Syria. Trump met again with Putin in November at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Vietnam, where they issued another joint statement on Syria. It emphasized the "importance of de-escalation areas as an interim step to reduce violence in Syria, enforce cease-fire agreements, facilitate unhindered humanitarian access, and set the conditions for the ultimate political solution to the conflict" on the basis of U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254.**

- So how did the Russians act after that? Along with the Assad regime and the Iranians, they waged military campaigns that decimated and depopulated three of the four de-escalation areas. The fourth, the one Trump and Putin had agreed to in southwestern Syria, remained quiet — effectively freeing the Assad regime, with its Russian backers, to attack elsewhere.
- Lately Assad and the Russians have turned their attention to southwestern Syria, bombing relentlessly. On June 21, the State Department issued a blunt statement warning the Assad regime and the Russian government about “serious repercussions of these violations.” The Russians intensified their bombing, creating a new refugee flow with more than 270,000 people fleeing to the Jordanian and Israeli borders. Did Moscow face any “serious repercussions”? No — only Trump’s pursuit of a summit with Putin.
- Neither Obama nor Trump has been prepared to impose any consequences on the Russians. Both wanted out of Syria, not to be embroiled in it. And both permitted Putin to become the arbiter of events. So what should Trump do when he and Putin meet in Helsinki on July 16?
- He should make a virtue of necessity and convey the following points: that the United States will maintain our small presence in Syria until the Islamic State is gone; that unless Iran’s continuing entrenchment in Syria is contained, it will trigger a wider war between Israel and the Iranians; and that we will back the Israelis completely, making it in Putin’s interest to stop the expansion of the Iranians and their proxies in Syria and prevent a major regional escalation. Trump might even suggest that the Russians broker a set of red lines between the Israelis and Iranians in Syria.
- Indeed, Trump could also ask Putin to be his channel to the Iranians. Apart from limiting the potential for miscalculation with Tehran, it could give Putin a stake in coordinating with us on Iran. With the United States having already conceded Syria to Russia, history tells us we are unlikely to achieve more.

SUMMARY: Neither Obama nor Trump has been prepared to impose any consequences on the Russians. Both wanted out of Syria, not to be embroiled in it. And both permitted Putin to become the arbiter of events. So what should Trump do when he and Putin meet in Helsinki on July 16? He should make a virtue of necessity and convey the following points: that the United States will maintain our small presence in Syria until the Islamic State is gone; that unless Iran’s continuing entrenchment in Syria is contained, it will trigger a wider war between Israel and the Iranians; and that we will back the Israelis completely, making it in Putin’s interest to stop the expansion of the Iranians and their proxies in Syria and prevent a major regional escalation. Trump might even suggest that the Russians broker a set of red lines between the Israelis and Iranians in Syria.

Southern Syria: Familiar Story, Familiar Ending

By Udi Dekel, Managing Director of INSS

- **Over the past two weeks, with the assistance of Russia and other allies, the Assad regime has conducted a military campaign aimed at seizing control of the Daraa district in southern Syria, with its eyes toward the Syrian Golan Heights (the Quneitra district). Its modus operandi is similar to what it has employed in other parts of Syria: heavy artillery fire on rebel strongholds, airstrikes that include Russian fighter aircraft, and a Russian invitation to engage in negotiations leading to the rebels' handing over their weapons, or in other words, their unconditional surrender. As elsewhere in Syria, this military pressure has led to the collapse of rebel lines and the surrender of many localities without a fight. However, as long as the rebels refuse this offer, the attacks on their strongholds continue with mounting intensity, and Russia's terms for a cessation of hostilities are increasingly stringent.**
- **Southern Syria is one of the last rebel strongholds. This region has enjoyed relative stability since its inclusion in the "de-escalation zones" by means of an agreement between Russia and the United States formulated in July 2017 with Jordanian and Israeli involvement. However, there was no doubt that this de-escalation was only temporary. The campaign to seize control of Daraa is of symbolic importance for the Assad regime, as it is the region in which the uprising erupted initially in March 2011.**
- **The motivation to violate the ceasefire and launch an offensive aimed at seizing control of the region has a number of levels. The first justification of the Assad regime for the campaign is that the area constitutes a breach through which terrorist elements associated with the Islamic State enter Syria. Indeed, the southern Golan Heights and the Yarmuk basin are still controlled by an Islamic State proxy, the Khalid ibn al-Walid Army. Second, as argued by the Syrian opposition, the goal of the campaign is to change the balance of power by improving the regime's positions in the political contacts underway toward a settlement to stabilize Syria, and to establish the fact that Assad controls most of the country's populated regions. The Daraa district itself is the southernmost part of the "Syrian backbone" (from Aleppo in the north, through Homs and Damascus, to Daraa in the south), which is vital to the regime. Third, once the pro-Syrian coalition completed its conquest of the area surrounding Damascus, southern Syria is a relatively comfortable area to conquer in comparison to the two other regions that remain under rebel control: Idlib in northern Syria, which is a Salafist and Islamist Sunni stronghold, and northeastern Syria, which is controlled by the Kurds via the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which are supported by the United States.**
- **In addition to being an internal Syrian struggle and a struggle for Assad's interests, the conflict is also a power struggle among major powers. From a broader perspective, the campaign is cast as part of a "deal" that Russia is trying to promote vis-à-vis the United States and Israel, which includes the removal of Iranian forces from southern Syria in exchange for the two countries' acceptance of Assad's control over Syria in its entirety. In this framework, Israel's acquiescence to the deployment of Assad's forces in the south, including the Syrian Golan Heights, would mean de facto acceptance of Russia's demand that Israel refrain from attacking the Assad regime, in exchange for removing Iranian forces and its proxies from regions that are in close**

proximity to Israel and Jordan. According to this logic, Israel must refrain from intervening when Assad's forces bombard the rebel forces and take control of the area adjacent to its border in the Golan Heights.

- At the same time, Russia is engaged in contacts with the United States in advance of the presidential summit between Trump and Putin, scheduled for July 16 in Helsinki. At work is an attempt to take advantage of President Trump's desire to fulfill his commitment to withdraw US forces from Syria. Russia is eager for the United States to evacuate the base in al-Tanf in southeastern Syria, which is an area that is no longer central to the establishment and training of rebel groups but over time became an obstruction along the direct land route from Iran to Syria via Iraq. There is evidence that the United States is reconsidering the necessity of the base, particularly after sending the rebel forces a message that it would not intervene or provide them with support in the fighting in the south. In addition, Russia will find it convenient to make proposals to the United States regarding the removal of Iranian forces from Syria, with the Trump administration's acceptance of Assad's remaining in power after he reassumes control over Syria as a whole.
- As a result, the fighting area in southern Syria embodies a paradox. Russia is proposing to Iran the establishment of a land bridge, which it desires, but in exchange Tehran must agree to the removal of its forces and those of its proxies – Shiite militias and Hezbollah – from southern Syria. Russian-Iranian relations are by nature characterized by a dynamic of "respect and suspicion." Russia is trying to leverage recent developments, including Assad's fear that Iran will draw it into a military confrontation with Israel, in order to establish a reality in which it holds the reins of power in Syria. On the other hand, Iran has no intention of giving up its influence and the consolidation of its presence in Syria, and is incorporating Revolutionary Guard commanders and fighters of the Shiite militias that are under its control into the ranks of the Syrian army, which is fighting the rebels in the south (specifically, the Tiger Forces and the National Defense Forces, or NDF).
- President Trump has actually come to terms with the Russian dominance in Syria, as well as with Russian assistance that enables the Assad regime to establish control over the regions near the Jordanian and Israeli borders. He has done so in exchange for Russian guarantees that the Syrian regime will not slaughter the US-supported rebel forces, will allow them to leave the regions in southwestern Syria, and will stop forces supported by Iran from entering the region. With regard to the fighting in the region, a Pentagon spokesperson has emphasized that the United States remains focused on defeating the Islamic State, and that all the actors in the region are advised to not attack US forces and their partners in the coalition in the struggle against the Islamic State.
- Consequently, opposition elements and rebel forces in Syria are facing the familiar scenario of abandonment by the countries supporting them on doomsday. This time, the countries to do so are the United States, Jordan, and Israel, which supported the rebel forces, and primarily the Free Syrian Army, and are now standing on the sidelines and allowing the pro-Assad coalition to attack them and the Syrian civilians living in the areas under their control. Nasser al-Hariri, head of the Syrian opposition's High Negotiations Committee, has denounced what he refers to as "the American silence" in the face of the attack," and has argued that only a "malicious deal" could explain the US failure to respond in light of the events on the ground.

- According to information provided by the UN, the current fighting has resulted in the displacement of approximately 300,000 people from their homes. Most of the displaced persons are concentrated close to the border with Jordan, and thousands have settled close to the border with Israel, in the demilitarized area between the two countries that was established under the Agreement on Disengagement signed by Israel and Syria in 1974. Both Jordan and Israel are determined to prevent refugees from seeping into their territory. Israel is providing humanitarian aid to displaced persons who have settled close to its border and has announced that it will not allow the Syrian army to enter the demilitarized zone. To demonstrate its resolve, Israel has reinforced its troops in the Golan Heights.
- The developments in the Daraa region underscore that the opposition is gradually losing control over its primary stronghold in southern Syria, which was the symbol of the uprising, whereas the regime is reasserting its control and influence. Once again, the rebels' hopes for external aid to withstand the steamroller of the pro-Assad coalition have been dashed, and the rebels are faced with the reality that they are alone in the fight.
- It appears that for some reason Israel and the United States are relying on Russia, with the expectation that it will remove the Iranian forces and the Shiite militias to a distance of 60-70 kilometers from the border with Israel and Jordan. Indeed, they would like Russia to eject the Iranian forces and Shiite militias from Syrian territory altogether. In exchange, they are willing to come to terms with Bashar al-Assad retaining the post of President of Syria and with the continued rule of the man who is responsible for the murder of close to half a million Syrian citizens. In addition, it appears that the United States and Israel will not prevent the forces of the pro-Assad coalition from liberating the remaining territory that is still under rebel control (particularly in northern and northeastern Syria). Whereas the Trump administration seeks a settlement that will allow the quick withdrawal of US forces from Syria, Israel has chosen to accept that Assad is the winner of the civil war and hope that Russian influence in Syria will take precedence over that of Iran.
- Israel has chosen to turn a blind eye to the fact that the forces belonging to the Shiite militias have been absorbed into Assad's forces and are fighting in the Daraa area. It would thus be a mistake to assume that at the end of the fighting, the Assad regime will accede to Russia's demand to remove the forces of Iran and its proxies. The Assad regime's seizure of control of southern Syria and the Golan Heights will result in the perpetuation of a foreign Shiite presence in the south, whether camouflaged within the army and within Syrian militias, or as ostensibly local Shiite militias directed by Iran.
- Israel is risking one of its important achievements of the years of the war in Syria thus far: the establishment of a stable and quiet border in the Golan Heights based on understandings with the local communities on the Syrian side of the border, whereby they receive humanitarian and civil aid in exchange for preventing terrorist activity from being launched from their territory against the Golan Heights. Now, Israel is ready to accept the return of control along the border region to the Assad regime, while knowing that Assad's forces are supported by the Shiite militias and that his army is directed by Iranian commanders – all with the futile expectation that Russia will remove the Iranian forces and its proxies from Syria.
- Still, Israel has the positive experience of a quiet and stable border with Syria that existed prior to the civil war, when Assad controlled the Golan Heights and constituted a responsible address for what occurred on the other side of the border. Today, Israel appears to have assessed that

in the new situation, Assad will have an interest in maintaining calm along the border, as its interests are not identical with those of Iran and Hezbollah. If so, Israel should launch a dialogue with the Assad regime, apparently via Russia at this stage, in order to establish stability and calm in the Golan Heights, establish the rules of the game, and discuss the limitations (in terms of geography and weapons) on the presence of Iran and its proxies. At the same time, Israel must continue to demonstrate resolve in preventing the construction of an Iranian military infrastructure in Syria, with an emphasis on capabilities that threaten it, and retain its ability to harm the Assad regime if it deviates from the understandings and rules of the game that are established.

SUMMARY: Israel is risking one of its important achievements of the years of the war in Syria thus far: the establishment of a stable and quiet border in the Golan Heights based on understandings with the local communities on the Syrian side of the border, whereby they receive humanitarian and civil aid in exchange for preventing terrorist activity from being launched from their territory against the Golan Heights. Now, Israel is ready to accept the return of control along the border region to the Assad regime, while knowing that Assad's forces are supported by the Shiite militias and that his army is directed by Iranian commanders – all with the futile expectation that Russia will remove the Iranian forces and its proxies from Syria. Still, Israel has the positive experience of a quiet and stable border with Syria that existed prior to the civil war, when Assad controlled the Golan Heights and constituted a responsible address for what occurred on the other side of the border.