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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

October 2, 2018

Ha'aretz

Iran Fires Missiles Into Syria Over Attack on Parade

Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard said Monday that it launched ballistic missiles into eastern Syria targeting militants it blamed for a recent attack on a military parade, the Islamic Republic's second such missile attack on Syria in over a year. State television and the state-run IRNA news agency said the attacks "killed and wounded" militants in Syria, without elaborating. Syrian state media did not immediately acknowledge the strike. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu responded to Iran's attack on Syria later on Monday, saying the strikes prove Israel was not involved in the shooting at the military parade. See also, ["Iran fires missiles at Syria 'terrorist' camp in response to army parade attack" \(i24 News\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Netanyahu: Iran's Attempt to Link Israel to Attack is Ridiculous

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu issued a statement Monday night saying that "Iran's attempt to tie Israel to the terrorist attack in southern Iran is ridiculous. The fact that 'Death to Israel' was written on the missiles launched at Syria proves everything." The strike targeted the last pocket of territory in southeastern Syria held by Islamic State, according to an official in the Iran-backed regional alliance fighting in support of Syrian President Bashar Assad. It is an area where the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces launched a new offensive last month against Islamic State. The US-led coalition confirmed Iranian forces had conducted "no-notice strikes last night." "At this time, the coalition is still assessing if coalition forces were in danger," said Col. Sean Ryan, spokesman for the coalition.

Times of Israel

Lebanon FM Gives Tours to Disprove Israel's Missile Claim

Lebanon's foreign minister gathered ambassadors Monday near Beirut international airport in a bid to disprove Israeli accusations that the Hezbollah terror group has secret missile facilities there. "Today Lebanon is raising [its] voice by addressing all countries of the world... to refute Israel's allegations," Gibran Bassil said. Bassil was speaking to 73 foreign envoys gathered for a televised briefing, in what he described as a "counter-diplomatic campaign." The most notable absentee was the ambassador of the United States, Israel's top ally. Bassil said the US envoy was traveling. See also, ["Lebanon puts on a tour of alleged Hezbollah missile sites to prove Israel wrong" \(Washington Post\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Israeli Official Addresses 'Challenge' of S-300 Missiles in Syria

The S-300 anti-aircraft missiles that Russia is transferring to Syria are "a complicated challenge" for Israel, an Israeli official said Friday. The official added: "We're dealing with it in different ways, not necessarily by preventing the delivery." According to the official, Russian President Vladimir Putin updated Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on the fact that he intends to send the missiles to Syria within two weeks, and then acted accordingly. Israel has meanwhile clarified to Putin that it will continue to act within Syrian territory and U.S. President Donald Trump has stated that his country fully supports Israel's actions as well as its right to defend itself. "Putin made a move, but it's a big playing field and he understands that," the official said. See also, ["Limiting Israel: Russia's Deploys the S-300 to Syria" \(Scoop World\)](#)

UNRWA Evacuates Officials from Gaza to Israel Due to Threats

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) had evacuated 10 of its international senior employees from Gaza to Israel on Monday, after they were threatened and harassed by UNRWA's disgruntled local Palestinian staff following the agency's announcement to cut more than 250 jobs. The agency's senior officials were rescued and transferred to Israeli territory via the Erez crossing—which remained closed throughout the Jewish holidays but was re-opened by the Israeli security officials following an official request from UNRWA. See also, [“Most of UNRWA's Foreign Staff in Gaza Evacuated to Israel After Death Threats” \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Report: 93 Gazans Injured During Seaside Protest

Some 7,000 Gazan protesters were confronted by the Israeli Navy when they gathered on the shores on the Northern Gaza Strip in protest of the Nation-State Law. The Navy fired live and rubber bullets and well as tear gas at the protesters injuring 93 people according to a report by the Gaza Health Ministry on Monday evening, with 37 injured by live bullets. Meanwhile, in the West Bank Palestinians and Arab-Israelis held a general strike on Monday in protest of Israel's contentious new law declaring it the nation state of the Jewish people. The action also came in protest of a host of measures taken by US President Donald Trump against the Palestinians, as well as amid marches commemorating the October 2000 riots during which 13 Arab-Israeli citizens were killed in clashes with police in the Galilee and Wadi Ara regions at the beginning of the second intifada (or "uprising") See also, [“Palestinians, Arab-Israelis hold protest strike against Jewish state law” \(i24 News\)](#)

Residents Prepare for West Bank Khan al-Ahmar Demolition

The residents of Khan al-Ahmar, a Bedouin village in the West Bank, prepared on Monday for an Israeli demolition of the hamlet as activists arrived to help them resist in case Israeli troops moved in to evict them. Many spent the night sleeping in a school courtyard or keeping vigil as the midnight deadline passed for Khan al-Ahmar's residents to evacuate on their own or face forced removal and the demolition of their homes. However, it was unlikely this would happen at least before the end of a Jewish holiday of Sukkot at sundown Monday. Israel has offered to resettle residents a few miles away in what it says are improved conditions—with connections to water, electricity and sewage treatment they currently lack. See also, [“Palestinians brace for Israeli bulldozers in the West Bank: 'If we lose Khan al-Ahmar we lose Jerusalem' \(The Independent\)](#)

Poll: Israelis Largely Isolated in Praise for Trump and US Policy

Israelis have an extremely positive view of US President Donald Trump and his administration, and are largely isolated in this outlook in the international community, a new survey by the Pew Research Center has shown. The poll of America's standing in 25 countries shows 82 percent of Jewish Israelis have confidence in Trump's handling of global affairs (69% among Israelis overall) while 94 of Jewish Israelis have a favorable view of the US in general (83% overall). But Israeli approval was not shared by many others, and ratings were generally at historic lows in many nations which are key allies of the US, including Germany (30% favorability), Canada (39%) and France (38%). The UK was evenly split at 50%. See also, [“Trump's International Ratings Remain Low, Especially Among Key Allies” \(Pew Research Center\)](#)

Is Trump Shifting Toward Abbas?

By Yossi Beilin, Former Israeli minister of justice.

- There were no apparent surprises at the United Nations General Assembly meeting on the Middle East this year. Not in speeches delivered there, not in press conferences and not in talks held on its sidelines. However, this year's session could actually point to a surprising shift in the relationship among the sides of the linchpin triangle consisting of the US administration, the government of Israel and the PLO leadership.
- Ostensibly, all the players adhered to the roles in which they were cast for this annual performance. US President Donald Trump spoke about resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in his nonbinding role as a sideline observer. He "likes" the two-state solution, he told reporters after his Sept. 26 meeting with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, only to revert to an even less binding commitment on the following day to support any solution the two sides favor. While Trump did not go back on his intention to present what he calls "the ultimate" Israeli-Palestinian peace deal, he is unwilling to commit to the timing of its unveiling — maybe in two months, maybe in three, maybe in four. In any case, according to Trump, Israel was dealt a better hand when he moved the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem this past May, and will have to compensate the Palestinians within the framework of this long-gestating deal.
- Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas reiterated his accusations that Israel was violating its agreements with the Palestinians. He claimed the United States had proven it could not be an honest broker between the sides and that the Palestinians could not accept its involvement unless it takes place within a broader framework of an international conference with the permanent members of the UN Security Council and with other participants. He repeated his opposition to any form of violence.
- As for Netanyahu, he once again presented the Iranian threat, complete with his usual show-and-tell presentation, and did not hesitate to share with those in the half-empty UNGA hall sensitive intelligence information about a secret Iranian warehouse containing nuclear development equipment. Ironically, a US intelligence source told Reuters after the speech that the Americans know all about the warehouse and it does not contain any such equipment. Netanyahu only referred to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute in an off-handed manner, saying the bad 2015 nuclear agreement between world powers and Iran led to closer Israeli cooperation with some Arab states, with which he hoped to achieve peace — as he hopes to do with the Palestinians. That was all.
- On the face of it, the events at the UNGA and on its sidelines were expected and obvious. In fact, what emerged was a far more complex picture. In many respects, it has been two against one in this triangle since Trump assumed office in January 2016: Trump and Netanyahu versus Abbas. Trump flatters Netanyahu, cites Russian President Vladimir Putin as saying he is "a fan" of Netanyahu's, the two see eye to eye on the Iranian threat and to a large extent Trump is Netanyahu's disciple when it comes to hating the Islamic Republic.
- On the other hand, Trump has not given up on the "ultimate deal" he promised to forge soon after taking office, and he knows that if the Republicans lose their majority in the Senate in the midterm elections next month, he will be far more constrained on domestic issues and will shift his game

to the international arena. He thinks he is capable of resolving our long-festering conflict with the Palestinians and he believes in himself and the team he set up to advance this move.

- In August, Trump told Jordan's King Abdullah II that in the event of a one-state solution, Israel could find itself with a prime minister named Mohammed. His comment reflected his understanding — like that of his hated predecessor Barack Obama — of the demographic threat to Israel's Jewish, democratic character unless it supports a two-state solution.
- Trump's chosen path toward a historic solution to the conflict is troubling, as it is based on an assumption that the Palestinians will only return to US-sponsored negotiations under financial duress. It tramples Palestinian dignity (just as does his attitude toward Iran), but his desire for renewed negotiations is unequivocal. The solution he envisions is also apparently much closer to the one promoted by Abbas than to Netanyahu's adamant embrace of the status quo.
- The expression on Netanyahu's face as he heard Trump speaking at their joint New York news conference Sept. 26 about favoring a two-state solution was reminiscent of the frozen expression on his face that the cameras caught when Obama spoke in a similar vein at the time. There is no way on earth that Trump's remark about two states was coordinated in advance with Netanyahu. Trump's seeming retraction of this scenario after their meeting the next day likely stemmed from his Israeli guest's request not to get him into hot water with his coalition partners, who were quick to slam the idea.
- The closeness between the two leaders on the Iranian issue is strategic in nature. On the Palestinian one, it is tactical, and it rests on very thin ice. The minute there is any talk of significant movement on this front, the ice will crack. This year's UNGA meeting could signal a shift in the tripartite power balance. If the Trump team convinces Abbas to accept US mediation with Israel in light of the president's comment favoring two states, a clearer picture will emerge. While Trump will not revoke his decision to move the US Embassy to Jerusalem, the Palestinians may be swayed by a US commitment in principle to recognize a Palestinian capital called Al-Quds (the Arabic name for Jerusalem) within the framework of a peace agreement, and by US willingness to rescind all the budgetary sanctions imposed on them in recent months.
- Two sides of the American-Israeli-Palestinian triangle are seeking a change in the status quo, while one (Netanyahu) strenuously objects. To the extent possible, Netanyahu will try to postpone the decisive moment and the unveiling of the Trump plan because he cannot agree to any blueprint involving the division of the land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River into two states. If the administration succeeds in bringing the Palestinians on board, Netanyahu will be the one who finds himself thrust into a corner by the two other sides of the triangle.

SUMMARY: The closeness between the two leaders on the Iranian issue is strategic in nature. On the Palestinian one, it is tactical, and it rests on very thin ice. The minute there is any talk of significant movement on this front, the ice will crack. This year's UNGA meeting could signal a shift in the tripartite power balance. If the Trump team convinces Abbas to accept US mediation with Israel in light of the president's comment favoring two states, a clearer picture will emerge. While Trump will not revoke his decision to move the US Embassy to Jerusalem, the Palestinians may be swayed by a US commitment in principle to recognize a Palestinian capital called Al-Quds (the Arabic name for Jerusalem) within the framework of a peace agreement, and by US willingness to rescind all the budgetary sanctions imposed on them in recent months.

The Russian Imbroglia

By Ben Caspit, commentator at Ma'ariv

- **Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot has been forced to put out a few fires that have broken out in the final stretch of his term, which is proving to be one of the most successful in memory. The only country in which American and Russian military forces are deployed simultaneously is Syria. The Americans control northeastern Syria and the Tanf enclave with some 2,000 special forces; the Russians are based in the areas of Latakia, Khmeimim and Tartus with several thousand troops as well.**
- **But it doesn't end there. Deployed in Syria are also some 3,000 Iranian military personnel and combat troops (mainly from the Revolutionary Guard), some 9,000 Shiite militiamen, 6,000 Hizbullah troops, tens of thousands of Syrian army troops who survived the war and several thousand Turkish troops (in the Idlib enclave). Israel has seasoned that salad from time to time with daring Air Force attacks. The fact that this is the first time that an uninvolved plane has been shot down due to that activity is a miracle in its own right.**
- **Until recently, those armed forces were united around a single interest: defeating ISIS. From an historical perspective, ISIS saved Bashar Assad. Only the appearance of a diabolical force on its scale could have allowed the world to stomach the atrocities that Assad committed, and only it could have allowed the Russians, the Iranians and Hizbullah to live with a regime that appeared to be heading towards the same fate as Gaddafi's regime. The moment that ISIS was defeated, the glue that bound all those forces operating in Syria together dissolved. The crescendo of the current affair arrived simultaneously: on the very day that Putin and Erdogan met in Sochi to decide the fate of the Idlib Province, the Russian Ilyushin plan was shot down. An incident that appeared to be tactical in nature suddenly became strategic. A Russian police officer showed up at the Israeli party in Syria's skies, stopped the DJ and sent the party-goers home.**
- **The IAF attack that day was approved using standard procedure. The target was machinery that was to be used in the project to turn Hizbullah's rockets into precision-guided missiles, and the IDF decided to attack them before they were shipped to Lebanon. The task was given to the IAF, which dispatched a squadron of four F-16 planes. The operation was planned and drilled, and all the preparatory war games and precautionary measures were used, and all necessary authorization was obtained. The planes were used intelligently and came in from the west at a high altitude. The first advance notice was given to the Russians 12 minutes before the targets were hit, and the second advance notice was given four minutes before the bombs were released. The Ilyushin plan was hit only 25 (!) minutes after the first advance notice was given (13 minutes after the bombs were released), while our planes were already about to land. The first advance notice that the Russians were given (12 minutes before the attack was, "We're attacking from the west targets in northern Syria." They said subsequently that we should have said "western Syria." Israeli officials say only one straight line can connect two points. If we were coming in from the direction of Cyprus, it was obvious that we were attacking in the west, and Latakia is in northwestern Syria. The Russians have clung to semantics, citing the difference between "west" and "north" (northwest) in order to try to establish new rules of the game. Israeli officials are now trying to minimize the damage.**

- There is no question that quite a few hands are going to shake before the next Israeli attack in Syria, and not only in the Kirya in Tel Aviv, but in Jerusalem as well. That said, the security cabinet authorized the IDF and instructed it to stop the Iranians' military entrenchment in Syria and to stop the supply of Iranian arms to Hizbullah. The IDF is supposed to persevere with that effort. The IDF's grades in that undertaking to date have been nearly perfect. Israeli intelligence identified the Iranians' intention to turn Syria into a second Lebanon two years ago. The chief of staff formulated the plan, the security cabinet approved it (and the prime minister, the defense minister and the other ministers deserve a lot of credit for that). Hundreds of sorties have been carried out in Syria in the context of that plan. The objectives were achieved.
- The Iranian plan was to have roughly 100,000 Shiite combat troops in Syria by the end of 2018. In practice, they currently have only about one-tenth that number. The network of Iranian bases and installations was destroyed. The Iranians never established maritime capabilities because the Russians stopped them. Their aerial capabilities were overwhelmingly neutralized, mainly in the course of the famous attack on the T4 airbase, which destroyed the Iranian infrastructure on the site. The use of Syria's military industries to build up Iranian capabilities was averted as well (in the attack on SARS). The project to turn inaccurate rockets into precision-guided missiles has overwhelmingly been stopped. Nasrallah's bragging about his precision-guided ballistic missile capability lacks any realistic foundation. He had hoped to have hundreds of precision-guided missiles. Apparently, he has only a handful, at most between ten and twenty. What a shame that the Ilyushin mishap transpired and is now putting that exceptional achievement in jeopardy.
- The question now is how do we extricate ourselves from this imbroglio, and what is going to happen the next time that Israeli intelligence delivers valuable information about a shipment of missiles or other equipment that is defined as crossing an Israeli red line. The IAF will be able to cope with the S-300 anti-aircraft batteries. The question is whether the decision-makers are going to be willing to take the risk. Incidentally, the assessment is that the Russians will deliver the S-300 batteries to the Syrians in the next few weeks. The IDF is treating that as a done deal. Netanyahu devoted a lot of time to that subject in his meeting with President Trump on Wednesday. It isn't clear whether Trump will be able to deliver the goods for us on that issue. When he was asked about it at the press conference, this strangest president in the history of the United States said that he hadn't even heard about the downing of the Russian plane.
- The Americans are now trying to form a Middle Eastern alliance modeled on NATO (while, in tandem, they are trying to destroy NATO), to which Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and other countries will be party. They have something to give the Russians (including in Syria). The question is whether they are willing to roll up their shirtsleeves and whether that is going to be enough to win over Putin.

SUMMARY: The question now is how do we extricate ourselves from this imbroglio, and what is going to happen the next time that Israeli intelligence delivers valuable information about a shipment of missiles or other equipment that is defined as crossing an Israeli red line. The IAF will be able to cope with the S-300 anti-aircraft batteries. The question is whether the decision-makers are going to be willing to take the risk. Incidentally, the assessment is that the Russians will deliver the S-300 batteries to the Syrians in the next few weeks. The IDF is treating that as a done deal. Netanyahu devoted a lot of time to that subject in his meeting with President Trump on Wednesday. It isn't clear whether Trump will be able to deliver the goods for us on that issue. When he was asked about it at the press conference, this strangest president in the history of the United States said that he hadn't even heard about the downing of the Russian plane.