

The week ending September 13, 2013

SYRIA

U.S. insists Syria take steps to abandon chemical weapons

The U.S. will insist that Syria take immediate steps to show it is serious about [abandoning its vast chemical arsenal](#), senior U.S. officials said, as Secretary of State John Kerry arrived in Geneva for talks with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. The first step is for Assad's government to make a public declaration of its chemical weapons stockpiles as a prelude to inspecting and neutralizing them. The aim, one U.S. official said, "is to see if there's reality here, or not" in a Russian proposal for Syria to give up its chemical weapons. According to officials, the hope is that Kerry and Lavrov can agree on a blueprint for Syrian disarmament whose main points would be adopted in a U.N. Security Council resolution. Kerry's delegation of nonproliferation experts will present the Russians with U.S. intelligence agencies' assessment of the scope of Syria's chemical weapons infrastructure, believed to be among the world's largest.

Netanyahu: Iran 'watching closely' to see if world dismantles Syrian chemical weapons

[The Jerusalem Post](#) reported that the Russian-brokered proposal to disarm Syria of its chemical weapons is an acceptable option if fully implemented, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu indicated on Wednesday. Netanyahu said that dozens and sometimes hundreds of innocent people were being killed on a daily basis just across Israel's border. "That is a horrible crime, a crime against humanity. Now what needs to be ensured is that the Syrian regime's chemical weapons will be dismantled and the world will ensure that anyone who uses weapons of mass destruction will pay a price. "The message Syria receives will resonate very strongly in Iran," he stressed. Netanyahu repeated what he had said on August 25, regarding Syria's use of chemical weapons, that he was being guided by the first half of the sage Hillel's ancient maxim: "If I am not for me, who will be?" Netanyahu said the practical translation of that adage these days is that Israel must always be able to defend itself, by itself, against any threat.

IRAN

U.S. and Iran are edging toward direct talks

Signaling a possible thaw in long-frozen relations, the Obama administration and the new leadership in Iran are communicating about Syria and are moving behind the scenes toward direct talks that both governments hope can ease the escalating confrontation over Tehran's nuclear program. According to [The Los Angeles Times](#), President Obama reportedly reached out to Iran's president, Hassan Rouhani, through an exchange of letters in recent weeks. U.S. and Iranian officials are tentatively laying the groundwork for potential face-to-face talks between the two governments, the first in

the rancorous 34 years since radical students seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran; relations have been broken ever since. Both governments have issued conciliatory public statements in recent days that suggest a new willingness to scale back the tension. Obama suggested in four TV interviews this week that Iran had played a constructive role in pushing Syrian President Bashar Assad to refrain from using chemical weapons. Iran is one of Syria's closest allies and supplies conventional arms to Assad's forces, so Rouhani may have considerable leverage in the Russian-led effort to disarm Syria of its toxic weapons. This information is an update to the information contained in this week's [Sermon Tidbits](#). To subscribe to Sermon Tidbits, click [here](#).

THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST

Egyptian Military Actively Securing Gaza Border

The Egyptian military has started to tear down buildings over the past two weeks along its border with the Gaza Strip. The operation is designed to create a buffer zone between Egypt and the Hamas-controlled Strip. Military forces have bulldozed 13 homes suspected of hiding militant activity, as well as caving in a number of tunnels beneath them, in an attempt to stymie weapons smuggling and illegal militant crossings. [The Times of Israel](#) reported that the military envisions clearing a building-free buffer with no trees 1,640 feet wide and six miles long. The zone would extend along nearly the entire Egyptian-Gaza border. The construction comes amid heightened efforts on the part of Egypt's government to assert greater state control over the northern Sinai Peninsula. The Sinai has become a lawless security vacuum since the fall of Mubarak, as Islamic extremists have turned large areas into strongholds from which they have waged numerous attacks on Egyptian security forces, tribal leaders and Christians. Motivated to seal off Hamas and its terrorist affiliates in Gaza, the military believes that tightening access to the Gaza border would significantly deter smugglers and militants from seeking influence in the Sinai.

ISRAEL AND THE PALESTINIANS

Aksa Martyrs Brigades call for terror attacks against Israel

A leaflet distributed on Tuesday by the Fatah-affiliated Al-Aksa Martyrs Brigades called for launching "[guerilla] operations" against Israel. The group called on all its units to start [launching attacks](#) against "the Zionist enemy." The leaflet said that the attacks would be launched in protest against Israel's alleged efforts to "Judaize and divide" the Aksa Mosque. The leaflet was apparently issued by Fatah activists in the Gaza Strip, a Fatah official in the West Bank said. He said he did not believe that the group's West Bank branch had been consulted about the call for resuming terror attacks against Israel. Declaring Friday as a day of "popular mobilization against the cowardly Zionist occupier," the group called for initiating confrontations with Israel at the border crossings between Palestinian territories and Israel. "We call upon our people to participate in a popular intifada on Friday in honor of the blood of the martyrs and to defend our land and Aksa Mosque, which is being subjected to Judaization and division," the leaflet read.