

The week ending January 31, 2014

IRAN

Report: Iran nuclear hurdles political, not technical

Iran's ability to make missiles loaded with nuclear warheads now rests primarily on the "political will" of its leaders, rather than any technical constraints, according to an annual U.S. intelligence assessment, [Politico](#) reported. "Tehran has made technical progress in a number of areas—including uranium enrichment, nuclear reactors, and ballistic missiles—from which it could draw if it decided to build missile-deliverable nuclear weapons," The director of National Intelligence said in written testimony submitted as he appeared before the Senate Intelligence Committee. "These technical advancements strengthen our assessment that Iran has the scientific, technical, and industrial capacity to eventually produce nuclear weapons. This makes the central issue its political will to do so." The U.S. intelligence report also says the Iranian nuclear program has progressed over the past year "by installing additional centrifuges at [its] Fuel Enrichment Plant, developing advanced centrifuge designs, and stockpiling more low-enriched uranium." This information is an update to the information contained in this week's [Sermon Tidbits](#). To subscribe to Sermon Tidbits, click [here](#).

THE U.S.-ISRAEL RELATIONSHIP

Israel as 'major strategic ally' bill passes key House panel

The House Foreign Affairs Committee [approved](#) a bill that would enhance the U.S.-Israel defense relationship. The bill initiated by U.S. Reps. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) and Ted Deutch (D-FL), the top two members on the committee's Middle East subcommittee, passed unanimously on Wednesday. The bill names Israel a "major strategic ally" of the United States—a classification no other nation has—and includes measures that would encourage enhanced cooperation such as missile development, energy and homeland security. The measure also calls for expanding the reserve of U.S. weapons stockpiled in Israel and recommends that Israel join the U.S. visa waiver program, allowing for unfettered travel between the countries. This bill would dramatically strengthen the relationship between the two allies as they work to confront new threats and challenges in the Middle East. Similar legislation is under consideration in the U.S. Senate.

THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST

Syria a haven for terrorists targeting the U.S., says spy chief

[The Financial Times](#) reported that Syria is becoming a haven for radical extremists with aspirations to launch terrorist attacks against the U.S., the leading American intelligence official said on Wednesday. James Clapper, the director of national intelligence, said that parts of Syria were becoming "in some respects a new FATA," a reference to the tribal area of northern Pakistan which has been the base for many al-Qaeda leaders over the

past decade. Syria was becoming “a center of radical extremism and a potential threat to the homeland”, Clapper said. In particular, Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda affiliated group in Syria, “does have aspirations for attacks on the homeland”, he said. Matthew Olsen, director of the National Counterterrorism Center, said that over the past six to eight months, there were signs of “increasing awareness by these groups of our ability to monitor them” and said there had been “specific instances where they have changed the way they communicate among each other without being subject to our surveillance.”

Path Cleared for Egypt's Military Chief to Run for President

A day after Egypt's military-backed government said it would hold presidential elections before a parliamentary vote, a reversal that stands to give the next leader considerable legislative authority, Egypt's top military leader, Abdel Fattah Al Sisi, moved closer to succeeding the Islamist president. According to [The Wall Street Journal](#), the election is set to occur by mid-April. It follows a crackdown on the main opposition group, the Muslim Brotherhood, and its ousted leader Mohammed Morsi, Egypt's first freely elected president, who is set to go on trial. White House press secretary Jay Carney sounded a note of caution over Sisi's possible candidacy. "If Egypt's leaders want to ensure a political transition to democracy that ultimately improves the stability and economic prospects of their country and is respected by the Egyptian people, they must unequivocally ensure an environment that is free of intimidation and retribution," he said.

ISRAEL IN THE NEWS

Johansson severs ties with Oxfam over Israeli advertising

Actress Scarlett Johansson is ending her relationship with the charity Oxfam after coming under intense criticism from pro-Palestinian activists for her sponsorship of an Israeli company that operates in the West Bank. A statement released by Johansson's spokesman [said](#) that the actress had a “fundamental difference of opinion” with Oxfam. SodaStream, an Israeli home drinks carbonation company that has a factory in the Maale Adumim settlement near Jerusalem, announced a multiyear sponsorship deal with the 29-year-old actress in January, prompting activists to petition the charity to drop her. Responding to the criticism, SodaStream said it was the largest employer of Palestinians in the region and paid wages based on Israeli law—higher than those paid by the Palestinian Authority. Johansson said that the company was “building a bridge to peace between Israel and Palestine”.

Despite Decades of Enmity, Israel Aids Syrian Civilians

After nearly three years of internal conflict that has killed an estimated 130,000 and displaced millions, this week opposing Syrian delegations convened face to face in Switzerland. At the same time, despite decades of enmity between Israel and Syria—two countries technically in a state of war—Israelis continue to transfer wounded patients and their relatives to the hospital while guarding their identities. The costs to treat these patients in Israel are high: a third of the cost is covered by Israel's Ministry of Defense, a third by the Ministry of Health and the rest by the hospitals. [The New York Times](#) reported, it is politically risky for Syrian civilian patients to travel to Israel for help; many of have said that in the past they had been afraid to go to Israel and now they fear going back to Syria. Additionally, this month, an Israeli aid drive led by volunteers from the Working and Studying Youth movement, Israeli Flying Aid and other local organizations collected about 20,000 items—mainly jackets, blankets and sleeping bags—to be transferred to Syrian refugees. Donors were asked to remove all Israeli labels.