



(From top, anti-clockwise) Buses are seen parked in Aleppo's government controlled area of Ramouseh bridge, as they wait to evacuate civilians and rebels from eastern Aleppo; young Bosnian women hold baby dolls as they protest against the killings there during a rally in Sarajevo, on Wednesday; lights of the Eiffel Tower are seen switched off in support of Aleppo people; and a woman being evacuated on Wednesday.

Trump meets tech execs to mend fences

Donald Trump met Wednesday with some of America's most powerful tech executives in a bid to mend fences with a largely pro-Hillary Clinton industry and promote job creation and trade.

Five weeks before the 70-year-old property tycoon is scheduled to take office as head of the world's most powerful democracy, the participants discussed improving America's cybersecurity, repatriating US profits stashed overseas and market access with China among other topics, according to the Trump transition team.

Trump and Vice President-elect Mike Pence sat side-by-side in the middle of the table surrounded by CEOs that included Tim Cook of Apple, Satya Nadella of Microsoft and Larry Page of Alphabet (Google).

The executives attending also included Amazon founder and CEO Jeff Bezos, Tesla and SpaceX founder and CEO Elon Musk, Facebook's chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg and Oracle CEO Safra Catz.

The most glaring absence was Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey.

Aleppo challenges Obama's legacy

At least 300,000 people have died in Syria as US tried diplomacy to end war

The months-long siege of Aleppo is almost over, but the political post-mortem is just beginning and Barack Obama's role is firmly on the slab.

"The United States did have countless opportunities to mitigate and prevent slaughter. But time and again, decent men and women chose to look away. We have all been bystanders to genocide. The crucial question is why."

Those were the words, a decade and a half ago, of author-academic Samantha Power in a seminal work exploring why "never again" -- a promise borne from the depravity of the Holocaust -- so often rings hollow.

This week Power -- now Obama's ambassador to the United Nations -- sat inside the Security Council chamber as world powers argued over this

generation's iteration of Rwanda, Srebrenica and Guernica.

At least 300,000 people have died -- no one really knows how many -- in Syria's six year war, which is reaching a horrifying coda in Aleppo.

Residents in the city's last rebel-held areas face death from the sky if they stay and likely torture or execution if they flee.

Power, like the White House, pointed the finger of blame directly at Damascus, Moscow and Tehran.

But the question is once again, how did it happen?

Syrian civilians may have been killed by Assad's loyalists, Russian warplanes and Iranian-backed militia. But for many, culpability lies at least in part at Obama's feet.

From the president on down, US officials acknowledge that the slaughter in Syria will forever be a challenge to their reputations and

their conscience.

"There hasn't been probably a week that's gone by in which I haven't reexamined some of the underlying premises around how we're dealing with the situation in Syria," Obama said in September.

But his administration bristles at the idea that they did nothing.

Throughout the slow motion destruction of Syria, Obama has believed that putting American boots on the ground would have been disastrous and establishing a no fly zone would have risked war with Russia.

Obama ignored his own "red line" on Assad's chemical weapons use, and faced down aides who warned that America's reputation would be severely damaged by inaction.

Faced with no substantial public pressure to act, the administra-

tion's mantra became: There is no military solution to the conflict in Syria.

For critics, that carries eerie echoes of Power's observations a decade and a half ago: faced with unspeakable violence, American officials often "spin themselves" to believe that US intervention would not work, or may even make things worse.

But events in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya -- even Vietnam -- are seared onto the American body politic.

Instead of force, Obama decided diplomacy was the only way forward.

"I think that we have done, frankly, as well as you can do under the circumstances," Secretary of State John Kerry told reporters during a recent trip to Europe.

His repeated and vexed efforts to coax Russia into a deal to end the fighting were often ridiculed as Quixotic. Russia, critics said, had no intention of making a deal.

Still, the White House knows that with power comes responsibility, and at the end of the day, Obama's even limited efforts failed.

"The United States has a special responsibility because we have the most influential, strongest country in the world," said Earnest. "We readily accept the responsibility."

Now, as Obama prepares to leave office, his opportunities to intervene in a meaningful way are dwindling to nothing.

All that is left is for the next generation's Samantha Power to adjudge whether and why "decent men and women" in Washington, once again, "chose to look away."

Israel 'won't exist in 25 yrs': Khamenei

Benjamin Netanyahu has warned Israel is a "tiger, not a rabbit" after Iran's Supreme Leader claimed the country would be destroyed within 25 years.

The comments came after Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader, called on Muslims to "resist and fight" to gain control of Jerusalem, which is claimed as a capital by both Israelis and Palestinians.

"Any other solution is fruitless and infertile," he wrote on Twitter, adding that Iran considers Palestinians a "priority of the Muslim world".

Repeating comments made in 2015, he wrote: "As I've said before, if Muslims & Palestinians unite & all fight, the Zionist regime will not be in existence in 25 years."

When asked whether he believed Iran's Shia Muslim government sincerely wanted to destroy Israel, Netanyahu said he did, accusing the state of supporting a terror posing a "formidable danger" around the world.

Donald Trump's election victory has shone the spotlight on hostile relations between Israel and Iran once more, following his opposition to the historic nuclear deal struck by Barack Obama.



'Putin himself involved'

US intelligence officials now believe that Russian President Vladimir Putin was personally involved in hacking during the American election campaign as part of a vendetta against Hillary Clinton, NBC News reported late Wednesday.

Putin personally instructed how material hacked from US Democrats was leaked and otherwise used, the US television network said, quoting two senior officials with access to this information.

The officials said they have a "high level of confidence" in this new assessment, NBC reported.

Asked if there was basis to the allegations, Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov told journalists: "Ridiculous, nonsense cannot have any basis."

Last weekend The Washington Post reported a CIA evaluation that Russia

had hacked the emails of US persons and institutions as a way to sway the election in favor of Republican Donald Trump, who eventually did beat Clinton on November 8.

Putin is said never to have forgiven

US ELECTION HACK

Clinton -- then secretary of state -- for publicly questioning the integrity of parliamentary elections in 2011 in Russia, and accused her of encouraging street protests.

The intelligence officials told

NBC that Putin's goals in the alleged hacking began as revenge against Clinton.

But they transformed into a broader effort to show that the world of US politics was corrupt and to, in the words of one official, "split off key American allies by creating the image that (other countries) couldn't depend on the US to be a credible global leader anymore."

In preparation for possible retaliation, US intelligence agencies have intensified probing of Putin's personal wealth, NBC said, citing US officials.

Trump, who has spoken warmly of Putin, has dismissed as "ridiculous" the allegation that Russia was behind the hacking of the Democratic National Committee and people close to Clinton.

Leading US lawmakers have called for a formal congressional investigation into the hacking.



Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel (L), European Parliament President Martin Schulz (C) and Britain's PM Theresa May attend a EU Summit at the European Council headquarters in Brussels, yesterday.

UK okays 3-person babies

Britain's fertility regulator yesterday gave the green light for the country to become the first in the world to legally offer "three-parent baby" fertility treatments.

The technique would allow women who carry disease-causing mutations in their mitochondrial genes to give birth to genetically-related children free of mitochondrial disease.

The treatment involves the embryo receiving the usual "nuclear" DNA from the mother and father, as well as a small amount of healthy mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) from a female donor.

British lawmakers had voted in February to allow the creation of in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) babies with DNA from three people, but clinics needed to obtain licences from the Human Fertilisation and Embryology

Authority (HFEA) before introducing the mitochondrial gene therapy.

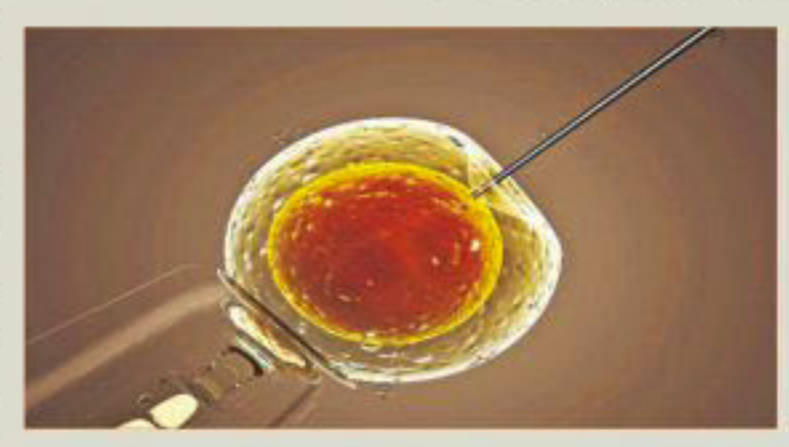
HFEA chair Sally Cheshire called the decision to license the treatment "historic and important" and "a world first".

"I'm sure patients who might be in line for this treatment will be really pleased by what we've decided today," she said, but added: "We will proceed with caution."

An independent panel of experts last month said the practice should be "cautiously adopted" to prevent certain genetic diseases from being passed on to future generations.

But opponents have warned that it paves the way for "designer babies".

The first women could receive the treatment as early as March or April, with a pioneering research centre in Newcastle, northeast England, expected to kickstart the programme.



EGYPTAIR PLANE CRASH

Traces of explosives found on remains

Traces of explosives have been found on victims' remains from an EgyptAir plane that crashed into the Mediterranean in May killing all 66 people on board, the aviation ministry announced yesterday.

An official investigative committee which made the discovery has referred the case to Egypt's state prosecution, it added in a statement.

Under Egyptian law, the prosecution takes over "if it becomes clear to the investigative committee that there is criminal suspicion behind the accident", the ministry said.

EgyptAir MS804 was en route from Paris to Cairo when it disappeared from radar over the Mediterranean.

Investigators determined that a fire broke out in or near the cockpit of the Airbus A320 before it crashed between Crete and the coast of northern Egypt.

There has been no claim of terror acts linked to the EgyptAir crash. However, Egypt's aviation minister, Sherif Fathy, had said a terrorist attack was the most likely cause of the EgyptAir crash.

Among the 66 people on board the EgyptAir plane were 40 Egyptians, including the 10-member crew, and 15 French nationals.

'Minefield' EU meet begins

European Union leaders grappled with Russia and Brexit at a "minefield" summit in Brussels yesterday at the end of one of the most turbulent years in the bloc's history.

The 28 leaders are dealing with the migration crisis, sanctions against Moscow over the wars in Ukraine and Syria, and a troublesome pact with Kiev that the Netherlands threatens to veto.

British Prime Minister Theresa May will later be left out in the cold while the other 27 have dinner without her in a bid to present a united front over how they handle Britain's departure.

May however dismissed any suggestion that it amounted to a snub and called for as "smooth and orderly a process as possible".

"It is right that the other leaders prepare for those negotiations as we have been preparing," said May, who has promised to trigger the two-year divorce process by the end of March.

The one-day summit, cut back from

the usual two days, wraps up an 'annus horribilis' for the bloc that has seen it face a wave of eurosceptic populism including the shock Brexit referendum vote in June.

"We are treading on a minefield, there are so many issues on the agenda that still can go wrong," warned a senior EU official.

The fate of civilians in Aleppo as Syrian and Russian forces drive out rebels is also on the agenda, although EU leaders will stop short of threatening any new sanctions against Moscow.

Meanwhile, Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras yesterday called for a "breakthrough without blackmail" in a row over the eurozone's decision to suspend debt relief over a pension spending hike by Athens.

The eurozone announced the surprise decision on Wednesday, in response to leftist premier Tsipras mooting plans to implement a one-off payout to 1.6 million low-income pensioners, along with a sales tax break for islands sheltering thousands of migrants.

DEVELOPMENTS

UK PM urges 'smooth and orderly' Brexit

Greece eyes 'breakthrough without blackmail' in debt row