

Turkish PM asks for opposition support for visa liberalization

Hurriyet Daily News, 10.03.2016



Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu has called on the country's opposition parties to help adopt the legal arrangements required for visa liberalization for Turkish citizens in the European Union.

“Inshallah [God willing], visa exemption will be provided in June. I want to make a call to the opposition leaders from here; we need to get legal arrangements adopted by parliament by May 1 so that processes within the European Union will also be completed by June. We need the opposition's support. We, at least, need them to not cut our water off,” Davutoğlu said late.

“We would pass these [arrangements] with 317 votes anyhow but let them not obstruct it,” he said, referring to the fact that his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) holds a majority of the 550-seated national assembly with 317 deputies.

“Let them not block parliament with an obstructive stance and let's pass these laws. This is a 50-60-year-old dream. We will make it real for our citizens,” he said, while delivering a speech at a reception hosted by the International Investors Association of Turkey (YASED). At a special summit on the migration crisis held in Brussels, the Turkish government and the EU agreed on a deal due to be finalized on March 17-18 which would see Turkey take back all illegal migrants landing in Greece.

Ankara proposed an arrangement under which the EU would legally resettle one Syrian refugee from camps in Turkey in exchange for every illegal Syrian that Turkey takes from Greece, in a bid to reduce the incentive for people to board boats for Europe. In return though, Turkey wants billions of euros in aid, visa-free access to Europe's passport-free Schengen zone and a speeding up of Ankara's efforts to join the EU.

Arab League postpones decision on closing office in Turkey

Hurriyet Daily News, 11.03.2016



In a bid to avert contested outcomes amid regional disputes, the Arab League has eventually decided to postpone its review of a sub-committee decision to close its office in the Turkish capital Ankara, along with seven other representative offices around the world.

The foreign ministers of Arab League states were originally set to review a committee-level decision made in Cairo to close the offices for “financial and administrative purposes” and make a final decision. The committee that made the decision is composed of the permanent ambassadors of the 22-member Arab League at the headquarters in Cairo.

The committee was designed by the Council of Foreign Ministers in September 2015 in order to review the performance of its missions abroad with a view to restructuring the Arab League.

However, the ministers delayed the review of the decision to March 11, citing the committee’s “hectic agenda.” During the session, the foreign ministers elected Ahmed Abul Gheit, who served as Egypt’s last foreign minister under Hosni Mubarak until the longtime autocrat’s overthrow in 2011, as the body’s incoming secretary-general.

Eventually the Council of Foreign Ministers decided to postpone the decision until their biannual meeting in September 2016, Ambassador Mohamed El Fatah Naciri, the head of the mission of the League of Arab States (AL) in Ankara, told the Hürriyet Daily News. Naciri also said a new committee had been formed by the Council “in order to study this question” until September 2016.

Speaking before the Council’s decision, Naciri said he did not expect the foreign ministers to approve the committee-level decision given the “huge political consequences” of such a decision. “The committee decision was made as they were trying to look at just financial and administrative purposes, so it is not decided yet.

Now if such a decision is approved, I think it will be a political decision because of its consequences. Such a decision would have a really huge impact,” Naciri said. “It is not only Turkey. We are also talking about other missions. If it was only about closing the Ankara office, it would be assumed that there is something wrong with Turkey. But it should not be explained politically.

This was financial and administrative,” he added, while admitting that a possible approval would have a “political meaning and consequences.” In addition to the office in Turkey, the committee also proposed closing down representative offices in Berlin, Brasilia, Buenos Aires, Pretoria, Madrid, New Delhi and Malta. The AL mission in Ankara was inaugurated in January 2010. In return, the Turkish Embassy in Cairo has been accredited to the AL since April 2010.

But since November 2013, when Egypt expelled Turkey's ambassador to Cairo amid tension between the two countries, Turkey has not appointed a new ambassador to Cairo. Relations between Ankara and the AL have been particularly tense since the foreign ministers of the AL condemned Turkey's military presence in Iraq and called on Turkey to withdraw its troops from the country in late December 2015.

In an interview with Al Jazeera late in February, Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu touched upon the controversy over Bashiqa, a camp in northern Iraq that recently became a source of tension between Ankara and Baghdad when the Iraqi government asked Turkey to withdraw 150 troops it had deployed in the region late last year in order to train an Iraqi militia to fight the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

"We sent military trainers and some troops to defend them in order to liberate Mosul. We sent them to Bashiqa and the Arab League has condemned Turkey," Davutoğlu said, referring to the Arab League decision to condemn Turkey's deployment of troops as an "assault" on Iraqi sovereignty on Dec. 24, 2015.

EU Minister: Turkey won't take back migrants already on Greek islands

Anadolu Agency, 10.03.2016



Turkish EU Minister Volkan Bozkır has stressed the readmission deal with the union will not apply to refugees who have already made their way to Greece's islands.

Turkey will only begin to readmit refugees from Greece once those who are already in EU territory are resettled among European countries, Bozkır told. "There is an odd perception regarding the readmission agreement as if they will send one million people back to Turkey. Something like this is out of question," he said. "Whoever is currently on the Greek islands through irregular migration, they are definitely not part of this deal," he added.

"It would be more accurate to say the number of migrants to be returned to Turkey in the event of a readmission agreement with the EU will be in the thousands or tens of thousands, not hundreds of thousands or millions." Officials from Turkey's Directorate General of Migration Management, their counterparts from Greece and authorities from the European Union's border agency, Frontex, will start discussions over the issue "from scratch," Bozkır said.

"Then, people who travel through irregular migration will be included in readmission," he said. He also stressed that EU countries would not be allowed to "cherry pick" during the resettlement process by preferring engineers or doctors over less qualified applicants, because the U.N. Refugee Agency will be overseeing the process.

Bozkır said Ankara would meet all its obligations under the deal by May 1 and called on all opposition parties to support this “historic” step. “We believe this to be a historic step, a gift to our nation. We will make this happen with or without the opposition’s support,” he added.

Turkey proposed a deal which would see the EU resettle one Syrian refugee from camps in Turkey in exchange for every Syrian that Turkey takes from Greece, in a bid to reduce the incentive for people to board boats for Europe. In return, Turkey wants financial aid, visa-free access to Europe’s passport-free Schengen zone and a speeding up of Ankara’s efforts to join the bloc. EU leaders hope to finalize the deal at a summit on March 17-18.

Ukraine: Erdoğan slams ‘unjust’ Russian interventions in Syria

Anadolu Agency, 10.03.2016



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has slammed Russia’s “unjust” interventions in Syria and Ukraine while reiterating Turkish support for the latter’s government during a joint press conference with his Ukrainian counterpart, Petro Poroshenko, in Ankara.

“Russia says it entered Syria upon a call from the Syrian administration. I wonder who asked them to enter Ukraine? How will this fall in line with international law?” Erdoğan asked following the March 8 meeting, suggesting that Russian actions in the region could be summarized as “might makes right.”

The Turkish president called for the removal of foreign troops from Ukrainian territory and the re-establishment of control over the country’s border with Russia. In return, Poroshenko expressed his appreciation for Turkish support in the face of the “brutal violation of Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity” by Russia. “Turkey is a friend and partner,” he said.

The leaders also expressed agreement over the “illegal annexation” of the autonomous region of Crimea in 2014. While Erdoğan told reporters that Russia had been “trampling over international law,” Poroshenko defined the “transformation of Crimea into a military base” as unacceptable. They pledged to act in cooperation in order to end the “temporary invasion” of Crime.

Meanwhile, the Turkish president also praised the reforms and the economic renewal process being led by Poroshenko in Ukraine. “A strong Ukraine, which has strengthened its political stability, is also a guarantee for regional peace and order,” he said. “On this point, all countries should support Ukraine and further increase their current contributions.”

Turkey's current account gap falls to \$2.2 billion amid oil plunge

Anadolu Agency, 10.03.2016



Turkey's current account deficit fell to \$2.22 billion in January, a drop of \$216 million compared to the same month last year, the Central Bank stated. The 12-month rolling deficit fell to \$31.9 billion in the month from \$42.9 billion in January of last year.

"This development in the current account is mainly attributable to a \$250 million decrease in the deficit in the goods item, at \$2.84 billion, and a \$25 million decrease in the primary income deficit, at \$434 million," the Bank said. Declining oil prices have had a very positive effect on Turkey's current account deficit and inflation rate.

Oil prices have fallen by 65 percent since mid-2014, from \$115 a barrel in June 2014 to below \$30 per barrel in 2016 (now \$40 per barrel) reaching their lowest level in seven years. This marked the most rapid decline in oil prices since 2008.

Turkey's energy imports declined by 31 percent in 2015 compared to previous year, according to statistical authority (TURKSTAT). Energy imports stood at \$37.8 billion last year, marking a drop of around \$17 billion compared to 2014. Overall, Turkey paid \$207 billion for its imports last year.

Meanwhile, Turkey's foreign trade deficit declined 13.4 percent year-on-year in January, in line with the oil plunge. In January, the deficit fell to \$3.76 billion, down from \$4.34 billion from same month last year, a decrease of 13.4 percent, according to data released by TURKSTAT. Exports amounted to \$9.6 billion, a 22 percent decrease from January 2015, and imports were \$13.4 billion, a 19.7 percent decline year-on-year.

PM: Turkey approves new defense projects worth \$5.9 billion

Hurriyet Daily News, 28.02.2016



Turkish PM Davutoğlu said the country's defense industry executive committee approved \$5.9 billion in defense projects, \$4.5 billion of which will consist of domestic production. "We today approved \$5.9 billion worth of new defense projects. Around \$4.5 billion worth of these projects will consist of local production," he told.

He noted Turkish defense industry exports rose 35 percent in the first two months of the year and that the country had made significant progress in developing weaponized drones, when elaborating on the latest developments in the country's defense industry.

"The mass production of our locally-developed infantry rifles will start by this year... We also assessed the latest developments regarding the production of the joint warplane... Our air defense system project will continue without any interruption... Plus, we have reached a great point in drone production as we do not need foreign technologies anymore," he said.

In 2013, Turkey selected, over European and U.S. rivals, a Chinese contender for the construction of its first long-range air and anti-missile defense system. Last November it scrapped that competition, saying two local companies would instead build the air defense system. A couple of months ago, it invited the same bidders to cooperate with the Turkish companies for the development of the system while unofficially courting for the purchase of a different system.

The Anka, a medium-altitude, long-endurance drone developed by Turkish Aerospace Industry (TAI), made its debut flight in February, according to officials. The Anka flew in the eastern province of Elazığ and reached an altitude of 19,000 feet while successfully carrying out a four-hour exploration and observation flight, as reported by Defense News.

TAI has also been working on another drone and there are other local companies which have reportedly focused on long-endurance drone production, including Baykar, Kale and Vestel, among others. Davutoğlu noted a total of 10 ATAK helicopters came online last year and 17 others would follow them this year.

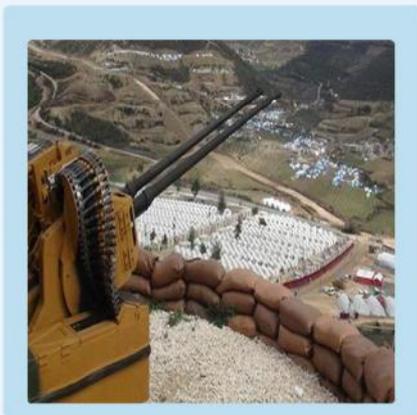
Turkey's first locally co-manufactured assault helicopter was delivered to the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) in June 2014, when three ATAK T-129 attack helicopters, which were co-produced by Italy's Agusta Westland and TAI, joined the army's inventory. The Turkish General Staff announced in May 2015 it had begun using the first domestically made Turkish attack helicopters in a counter-terrorism operation for the very first time. "The nationalization of the production of ATAK engines will also come online this year," said Davutoğlu.

He also noted they did not expect any delay in the production and delivery of armored vehicles as the fight with the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) continued. Turkey's counter-terrorism operations in southeastern Turkey have continued since Dec. 15, 2015. Davutoğlu said the regional jet project was also discussed in the meeting, adding that there was no problem with the project.

Turkey plans to develop two different regional jets in line with the project for around \$1.5 billion. Mass production of these jets is planned to start by 2019. The latest developments in the indigenous Altay main battle tank were also planned to be discussed in the meeting. The tank was developed by Koç Holding's Otokar and the company submitted its offer to produce 250 tanks in January. Upon a question by Reuters about the issue, Defense Industry (SSM) Undersecretary İsmail Demir said, "We got the offer for the Altay tank and we have been reviewing it."

NATO to boost surveillance on Turkey-Syria border

Anadolu Agency, 11.03.2016



NATO is set to boost border surveillance to protect its member Turkey from possible threats coming from neighboring war-torn Syria.

"We agreed with Turkey to intensify, to increase surveillance of [the] border between Turkey and Syria, we are in the process of establishing [this] with Turkey in the best possible way," NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg told a joint news conference with European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker in Brussels. Two civilians, including one child, were killed in southern Turkey when several rockets from Syria hit the Turkish town of Kilis.

Adding that Turkey was the NATO ally most affected by the crisis in Syria, Stoltenberg said NATO already had assurance measures in Turkey, including planes, naval presence and patriot batteries, which allowed the alliance to monitor the situation on the Turkish-Syrian border.

His comments came days after Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu said during a visit to NATO headquarters in Brussels 7 that his country was seeking increased NATO support on the border with Syria. "We want to see a more visible NATO presence on our border, which will create a deterrent for those who may have the intention to test the capacity of NATO," said Davutoğlu.

NATO had already agreed to send vessels to the Aegean Sea in an attempt to crack down on human smugglers and stem the flow of refugees seeking to enter Europe via Greece. This would allow NATO vessels to be present in both Greek and Turkish territorial waters. "We decided to increase the number of ships; there are now five ships, there will be more ships in the coming days, and we also have helicopters, so we are increasing [the] presence of NATO vessels," Stoltenberg said, without specifying how many more ships would be deployed in the Aegean.

“We have increased [the] area of operation; we have started to focus on the area around the Greek island of Lesbos and [are] planning to move further south in the coming days and weeks,” he added. Stoltenberg said on the weekend NATO had expanded into Turkish and Greek territorial waters, a move which was delayed because of disagreements with Ankara.

Britain announced, ahead of the EU summit with Turkey, that it was sending an amphibious landing ship and several other vessels to join ships from Canada, Germany, Greece and Turkey. NATO launched the deployment, the first civilian operation of its kind for the military alliance, after a request by Greece, Turkey and Germany to help tackle Europe’s biggest migration crisis since World War II. More than one million people have crossed the Mediterranean since the start of 2015, including many refugees fleeing the war in Syria.

Merkel: Greece cannot shoulder migrant weight if EU does not ink deal with Turkey

AFP, 10.03.2016



German Chancellor Angela Merkel warned that closing the route used by migrants through the western Balkans “does not resolve the problem” and that Greece cannot shoulder the weight of the refugee burden if the European Union and Turkey cannot strike a deal.

“That’s why I am seeking a real European solution, that is, a solution for all 28 [European Union members],” German Chancellor Angela Merkel said. A deal discussed with Turkey at an EU summit and due to be finalized on March 17-18 would see the country take back illegal migrants landing in Greece.

Ankara proposed an arrangement under which the EU would resettle one Syrian refugee from camps in Turkey in exchange for every Syrian that Turkey takes from Greece, in a bid to reduce the incentive for people to board boats for Europe. In return though, Turkey wants 6 billion euros (\$6.6 billion) in aid, visa-free access to Europe’s passport-free Schengen zone and an acceleration of Ankara’s efforts to join the EU.

“You don’t resolve the problem by taking a unilateral decision,” Merkel told public radio MDR, after western Balkan countries barred entry to transiting migrants. “This situation is neither sustainable nor lasting,” she said. “Personally I think that Austria’s unilateral decision, and then those made subsequently by Balkan countries, will obviously bring us fewer refugees, but they put Greece in a very difficult situation,” she said.

Greek PM Tsipras in İzmir for talks with Davutoğlu

Hurriyet Daily News, 08.03.2016



Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras arrived in the Aegean province of İzmir for talks with his Turkish counterpart Ahmet Davutoğlu, a day after the two leaders attended the key EU-Turkey summit in Brussels.

Tsipras was greeted by Economy Minister Mustafa Elitaş, İzmir Governor Mustafa Toprak and İzmir Municipality Mayor Aziz Kocaoğlu at the Adnan Menderes Airport, Anadolu Agency reported. Tsipras met Davutoğlu at the Prime Ministry's İzmir Office, where the two leaders distributed red roses to women reporters on the occasion of International Working Women's Day.

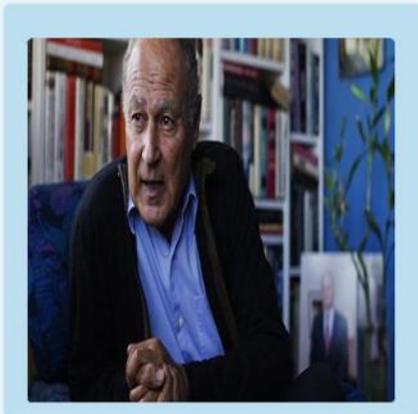
They were later set to host a Turkey-Greece High-Level Cooperation Council meeting, where they were expected to discuss joint measures to better handle the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis. The migrant influx, often described as the biggest refugee crisis since World War II, was also the main topic of the EU-Turkey summit in Brussels.

The leaders of the 28-nation union and Davutoğlu had met in an extended meeting to decide how the crisis can be resolved. Turkey demanded an additional 3 billion euros from the EU in order to provide better living conditions for the around 2.7 million Syrian migrants it currently hosts, while it agreed to take back from Greece all economic migrants who have arrived in the EU.

Davutoğlu also suggested a "one-for-one" deal, under which the EU would resettle one Syrian refugee from camps in Turkey in exchange for every Syrian that Turkey takes from Greece. A final decision on the agreement will be taken during an EU meeting on March 17-18.

Egypt diplomat Abul Gheit named Arab League head

AFP, 11.03.2016



Veteran Egyptian diplomat Ahmed Abul Gheit was named as the Arab League's new secretary general, at a time when the regional body faces multiple wars and a widening jihadist threat.

In a sign of divisions within the pan-Arab body, however, Qatar voiced reservations over Abul Gheit's candidacy due to his "hostile positions" towards Doha, Arab diplomats said. "The consultations resulted in the nomination of Ahmed Abul Gheit to the post of secretary general," Bahraini Foreign Minister Khaled bin Ahmed Al-Khalifa announced in televised remarks at the end of a ministerial meeting.

Abul Gheit, who served as foreign minister under Egypt's ousted president Hosni Mubarak, takes office at a time when the Cairo-based Arab League is facing several tests of its unity. At the top of the list is the war in Syria that has killed more than 270,000 people and displaced millions since it erupted in 2011.

The more than five-year-old conflict has seen regional heavyweights Saudi Arabia and Iran backing opposite sides. In addition, relations between Qatar and Egypt, which traditionally chooses candidates for the post of secretary general, have soured. Cairo accuses Doha of supporting its outlawed Muslim Brotherhood movement of former Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi, who was toppled by the army in 2013.

The Brotherhood has been the target of a brutal crackdown since then, and Doha has regularly denounced the operations that left hundreds dead and thousands in jail. Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani expressed Doha's "reservations" over Abul Gheit but voiced hope the next secretary general "will maintain contact between all Arab countries in the interest of joint Arab action."

Several diplomats told AFP that Qatar had accused Abul Gheit of pushing Egypt to boycott a Qatari-proposed Arab summit in 2009 to discuss an Israeli assault on Gaza. Unlike the charismatic ex-chief of the Arab League, fellow Egyptian Amr Mussa, who was known for taking a tough stand on Israel, Abul Gheit has often faced criticism for adopting a softer approach towards the Jewish state.

Abul Gheit had accused the Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas which rules Gaza of being responsible for the Israeli assault. Cairo proposed Abul Gheit, 73, for the post after the incumbent, Nabil al-Arabi, another Egyptian, declined a second five-year term as secretary general. His term ends in July. Traditionally, the secretary general has held the position for two terms and the post has gone to an Egyptian, with Tunisia's Chedli Klibi the sole exception.

Differences within the 22-member organisation, in which Syria's membership was suspended in 2011 because of its conflict, hint at a wider disunity between Arab states. While Iran has sent thousands of "military advisers" into Syria in support of the Damascus regime, Saudi Arabia supports Islamist rebels fighting President Bashar al-Assad's forces. Saudi Arabia and several Gulf states have since made diplomatic moves against Lebanon, whose Shiite Hezbollah movement is fighting in support of Assad.

Sectarian rivalry is also evident in Yemen, where Iran-backed Shiite rebels are fighting a Saudi-led military campaign. The United Nations says that more than 6,000 people have been killed in Yemen since the Saudi campaign against the rebels was launched a year ago. The rise of the jihadist Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which has swathes of territory in Iraq and Syria under its control and is rapidly expanding its foothold in Libya, has emerged as the biggest threat to the region's stability.

To combat ISIL, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi proposed setting up a joint Arab military force, but the plan has faced resistance from within the League after it was initially adopted. Abul Gheit will be the eighth secretary general of the League since it was founded in 1945.

US bids to revive plan to train Syrian rebels

AP, 10.03.2016



A revised effort to train and equip moderate Syrian rebels for the fight against the ISIL will not repeat the same mistakes that doomed a similar program last year, according to the prospective next U.S. commander for the Middle East, Army Gen. Joseph Votel.

Testifying before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, Votel described the new approach as opposed to the raising of a large, decisive force. "I do think it is helpful to have people who have been trained by us, who have the techniques, who have the communications capability and the resources to link back into our firepower," Votel said.

The trained fighters, Votel added, will present ISIL with added "dilemmas." If confirmed, Votel would take over leadership of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), which oversees U.S. military operations in Iraq, Syria and 18 other countries. He is set to succeed Army Gen. Lloyd Austin, who is retiring.

Austin told that he had already requested permission from the Barack Obama administration for the retooled Syrian train-and-equip effort. Austin emphasized that the new program would focus on training smaller numbers of fighters for shorter periods. During a wide-ranging confirmation hearing, Votel said he did not have all the people and equipment required to eliminate ISIL.



He said he anticipated needing “additional resources” to retake the group’s strongholds in Mosul and Raqqa, although he did not specify what he had in mind. The only U.S. ground forces in Syria are a contingent of roughly 50 special operations troops who deployed last year to work with local Syrian fighters trying to break the ISIL grip on Raqqa, the group’s self-declared capital.

A separate U.S. commando force is in Iraq dedicated to capturing and killing the group’s leaders and gathering intelligence that can be used to conduct follow-on raids and strikes. Votel pledged to push for the “right resources for our people to have to accomplish the missions that we are asking them to do.”

Skeptical lawmakers questioned Votel about how potential rebel recruits in Syria would be vetted and whether they would be constrained from attacking Syrian President Bashar al-Assad troops. The general said individual fighters would not be vetted prior to the training, but the leaders of those fighters would be. ISIL would be their target.

“We’re trying to avoid the problem that we had the last time, where we didn’t know what their allegiances are,” Votel said. “Certainly our mission is [ISIL] and so it is our intent that they help with the [ISIL] mission.” Votel acknowledged that approach might limit the pool of recruits.

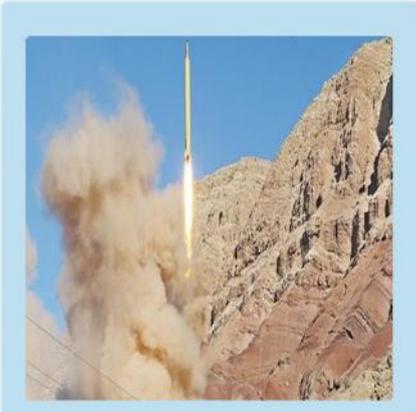
The committee’s Republican chairman, Sen. John McCain, said it was unrealistic to limit Syrian fighters after al-Assad’s forces have repeatedly attacked civilians with barrel bombs, a crude weapon used to inflict mass casualties. ISIL “isn’t barrel bombing the men, women and children,” McCain said. “Bashar al-Assad is.”

The Obama administration last year scrapped a beleaguered \$500 million train-and-equip program for Syria after Austin told U.S. Congress that only four or five trained fighters were battling the militants – significantly short of the U.S. goal to train 5,000. About 50 new fighters had been captured, wounded or fled in their first encounter with extremist militants.

Votel, 57, is a former commander of the 75th Ranger Regiment and a veteran of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. He headed the secretive Joint Special Operations Command before taking over U.S. Special Operations Command in 2014. Army Lt. Gen. Tony Thomas has been nominated to replace Votel at Special Operations Command.

Biden says US will 'act' if Iran missile tests confirmed

AFP, 28.02.2016



U.S. Vice President Joe Biden said that the United States would take action against Iran if long-range ballistic missile tests Tehran said it carried out were confirmed.

“I want to reiterate, as I know people still doubt, if in fact they break the [nuclear] deal, we will act,” Biden said during a visit to Israel and the Palestinian territories. “All their conventional activity outside the deal, which is still beyond the deal, we will and are attempting to act wherever we can find it.” Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) test-fired two ballistic missiles that it said were designed to be able to hit Israel.

Iranian state television showed footage of two Qadr missiles being launched from northern Iran which the IRGC said hit targets 1,400 kilometers away. Tests drew a threat of new sanctions from the United States. After tests, Washington warned it could raise the issue with the U.N. Security Council and take further action after U.S. sanctions were imposed in connection with Iran’s missile program in January.

“The reason we designed our missiles with a range of 2,000 km is to be able to hit our enemy the Zionist regime from a safe distance,” Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh was quoted as saying by the ISNA agency, Reuters reported. The nearest point in Iran is around 1,000 km from Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

Iranian agencies said the missiles tested were stamped with the words “Israel should be wiped from the pages of history” in Hebrew, though the inscription could not be seen on any photographs. Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon told Israel Radio the tests showed Iran’s hostility had not changed since implementing a nuclear deal with world powers in January, despite Iranian President Hassan Rouhani’s overtures to the West.

“To my regret there are some in the West who are misled by the honeyed words of part of the Iranian leadership while the other part continues to procure equipment and weaponry, to arm terrorist groups,” Yaalon said.

Ballistic missile tests have been seen as a way for Iran’s military to demonstrate that the nuclear deal will have no impact on its plans, which it says are for domestic defense only. The hard-fought deal, which saw international sanctions lifted in exchange for curbs on Iran’s nuclear ambitions, did not extend to its missile program. Biden spoke after meeting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who forcefully opposed the nuclear accord with Iran, his country’s arch-foe. General Ali Hajizadeh, who heads the Iranian Revolutionary Guards’ aerospace wing, said the longer-range missiles tested would be capable of hitting Israel, the region’s sole if undeclared nuclear power.

The IRGC maintains dozens of short and medium-range ballistic missiles, the largest stock in the Middle East. It says they are solely for defensive use with conventional, non-nuclear warheads. Tehran has denied U.S. accusations of acting “provocatively,” citing the long history of U.S. interventions in the Middle East and its own right to self-defense.

French FM: Kerry, European foreign ministers to meet on Syria

AP, 26.02.2016



US Secretary of State John Kerry and his French, German, British and Italian counterparts will meet in Paris to discuss the Syrian crisis ahead of planned peace talks in Geneva, France’s foreign minister said.

The five diplomats will examine the status of the ceasefire in effect since February 27 and “if everything is going forward as we hope... encourage the opposition to return to the negotiating table,” Jean-Marc Ayrault told. Ayrault said the European foreign ministers will also ask the United States, which with Russia brokered the truce, “to be closely involved in monitoring the effectiveness of the Syrian ceasefire”.

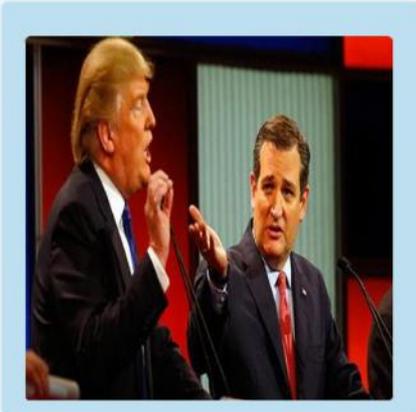
He said the European ministers intend to ensure that the Russian air strikes in Syria are aimed only at jihadist organisations the Islamic State group and Al-Nusra Front, and not against the more moderate opposition. “We must remain vigilant,” Ayrault said. The Syrian regime has announced it will attend the Geneva talks starting on March 14.

The opposition has said it was still considering whether to go despite a major lull in fighting since the ceasefire began. The truce between President Bashar al-Assad’s regime and non-jihadist rebels is part of the biggest diplomatic effort yet to curb Syria’s conflict, which has killed more than 270,000 people and displaced millions.

The Paris meeting, which will be attended by European Union foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini, will also be used to discuss strife-torn Libya, Yemen and Ukraine, Ayrault said. The Europeans are pushing for a national unity government in Libya that is recognised by all, and have threatened sanctions against anyone “spoiling” the peace process. “We have identified a number of spoilers... and we want to send a very clear signal as soon as possible,” a French diplomatic source said.

Cruz, Trump split four states in setback for Republican establishment

Reuters, 06.03.2016



Republican presidential hopeful Ted Cruz split victories in four nominating contests with front-runner Donald Trump, bolstering Cruz's argument that he represents the party's best chance to stop the brash New York billionaire.

The results were a repudiation of a Republican establishment that has bristled at the prospect of either Cruz or Trump winning the party's nomination and has largely lined up behind U.S. Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, who was shut out in all four contests. "I think it's time that he dropped out of the race," Trump said of Rubio after the contests. "I want Ted one on one."

Cruz won Kansas and Maine, while Trump won the bigger states of Louisiana and Kentucky, holding onto his lead in the race for the Republican nomination for the Nov. 8 presidential election, even though Cruz captured more delegates.

The next big contest, and a crucial one, will be the primary in the industrial state of Michigan. Republicans in three other states, Mississippi, Idaho and Hawaii, also will vote. In the Democratic race, front-runner Hillary Clinton won in Louisiana, and her rival Bernie Sanders, a U.S. senator from Vermont, won in Kansas and Nebraska, in results that did not substantially change Clinton's big delegate lead.

Clinton has opened up a big delegate lead and Sanders might have a tough time making up the difference. All states in the Democratic race award their delegates proportionally, meaning Clinton can keep piling up delegates even in states she loses. The three states holding Democratic contests had a total of 109 delegates at stake.

The four Republican contests together accounted for just 155 delegates. Cruz won 64 delegates, while Trump took 49. On March 15, the delegate-rich states of Florida, Illinois, Ohio, Missouri and North Carolina will vote.

Both Florida and Ohio use the winner-take-all method to allocate Republican delegates, making the stakes in those states particularly high. All of the Republican contests, and through March 14, award delegates proportionate to the popular vote, although some states set minimum thresholds to qualify for any delegates.

Bloomberg decides against third-party bid for White House

Reuters, 06.03.2016



Former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg said that he will not run for president, citing a concern that his independent bid would hand the White House to Donald Trump or Ted Cruz.

The billionaire, who has spent months mulling a third-party run that would have roiled this year's already extraordinarily unpredictable presidential campaign, made his decision official. Bloomberg wrote a three-way race could lead to no one winning a majority of electoral votes, which would send the race to the Republican-controlled House of Representatives, therefore, to one of the GOP front-runners.

"That is not a risk I can take in good conscience," Bloomberg wrote. Bloomberg was blistering in his critique of Trump, currently the GOP front-runner, saying the real estate mogul has run "the most divisive and demagogic presidential campaign I can remember, preying on people's prejudices and fears."

He was similarly critical of Cruz, saying the Texas senator's "pandering on immigration may lack Trump's rhetorical excess, but it is no less extreme." Bloomberg acknowledged that he and Trump had been on "friendly terms" and that he had twice agreed to be on Trump's reality TV show "The Apprentice." But the former mayor said Trump's campaign "appeals to our worst impulses."

"We cannot 'make America great again' by turning our backs on the values that made us the world's greatest nation in the first place," Bloomberg wrote. "I love our country too much to play a role in electing a candidate who would weaken our unity and darken our future - and so I will not enter the race for president of the United States."

Bloomberg made only an oblique reference to Democrats Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders and did not endorse a candidate. His aides indicated that Bloomberg may at some point offer an endorsement and use his wealth to try to influence the race, but cautioned that no decisions had been made.



Announcements & Reports

► *Saudi Arabia and the United States: Common Interests and Continuing Sources of Tension*

Source : CSIS
Weblink : <http://csis.org/publication/turkish-economy-2015>

► *Analysis of Developments in EU Capital Flows in the Global Context*

Source : Bruegel
Weblink : <http://bruegel.org/2016/01/analysis-of-developments-in-eu-capital-flows-in-the-global-context-2/>

► *The United States Dominates Global Investment Banking: Does It Matter for Europe?*

Source : Bruegel
Weblink : <http://bruegel.org/2016/03/the-united-states-dominates-global-investment-banking-does-it-matter-for-europe/>

Upcoming Events

► *Governing for Infrastructure Delivery in Sub-Saharan Africa*

Date : 14 March 2015
Place : London - UK
Website : <https://www.chathamhouse.org/event/governing-infrastructure-delivery-sub-saharan-africa>

► *The UK and the EU: Managing the Euro and the Single Market*

Date : 15 March 2015
Place : London - UK
Website : <https://www.chathamhouse.org/event/uk-and-eu-managing-euro-and-single-market>

► *Competitive Gains in the Economic and Monetary Union*

Date : 17 March 2015
Place : Brussels - Belgium
Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/534-competitive-gains-in-the-economic-and-monetary-union/>



► *The Future of Capitalist Democracy: UK-Japan Perspectives*

Date : 18 March 2015
Place : London - UK
Website : <http://www.chathamhouse.org/event/future-capitalist-democracy-uk-japan-perspectives>

► *Emerging Markets and Europe: Time for Different Relationships?*

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Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/524-emerging-markets-and-europe-time-for-different-relationships/>

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► *Global Governance of Public Goods: Asian and European Perspectives*

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