

Turkish PM says hopes will achieve migration goal with EU

Hurriyet Daily News, 18.03.2016



Turkish PM Davutoğlu said that he hoped to achieve an agreement with the EU leaders who are seeking to convince Ankara to help stem the influx of migrants into Europe.

“Of course the EU and Turkey have the same goal, the same objective to help Syrian refugees especially and also to have a new feature in our continents in a right manner. This is our purpose,” Davutoğlu was quoted as saying by. “I am sure, I hope, we will be achieving our goal.” Davutoğlu was arriving for talks with EU leaders who are hoping to convince Turkey to help end Europe’s migration crisis in return for financial and political concessions.

He also warned EU leaders that Ankara’s offer to curb the refugee flow to Europe is a humanitarian rather than a “bargaining” issue. “For Turkey, the refugee issue is not an issue of bargaining but an issue of values, humanitarian values as well as European values,” Davutoğlu said.

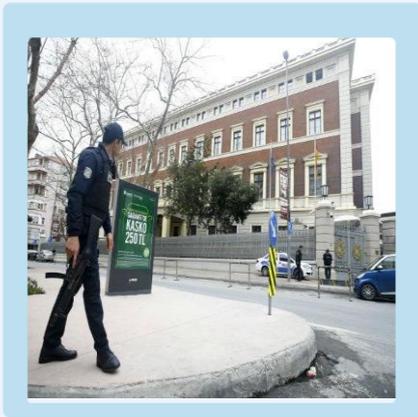
Apart from the 3 billion euros the EU had pledged October 2015 to give Turkey to help improve the living conditions of the Syrian refugees in the country, Turkey demanded an extra 3 billion euros in order to share the burden of the migrant crisis. Before departing for Brussels, Davutoğlu said that Turkey would not allow for any deal aiming to turn the country into an open prison for refugees. Speaking during a news conference before leaving for the summit, Davutoğlu said Turkey was exerting diplomatic efforts to stop human trafficking.

“We will not be deterred by any proposal that will turn Turkey into an open refugee prison,” said Davutoğlu. “We have submitted a clear and humanitarian offer to Europe [over the refugee deal], but Turkey will not be a transit country for human trafficking or a depot of refugees,” Davutoğlu said, state-run Anadolu Agency reported. Davutoğlu is due to meet EU Council President Tusk, European Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte for breakfast, before EU leaders meet again for final consultations expected around noon, EU officials told AFP.

Under Turkey’s proposal to the EU, the country wants the 28-nation bloc to “share the burden.” That means “for every Syrian readmitted by Turkey from the Greek islands, another Syrian will be resettled from Turkey to the EU member states.” Ankara also wants visa liberalization by June, the speeding up of Turkey’s accession talks and an additional three billion euros. Davutoğlu said that with the proposed plan, Turkey aims to help people who want to migrate to Europe through legal ways by instituting a method that would prevent illegal crossings from Turkey to the EU. He called the final aim of the method “humanitarian,” but added that the aim’s costs needed to be shared by the EU and Turkey.

German embassy, consulate in Turkey closed for second day over threat of possible attack

Hurriyet Daily News, 11.03.2016



The German Embassy in Ankara and the German Consulate in Istanbul have remained closed for a second day over the threat of a possible attack after German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said they had received very serious intelligence about a possible terror attack against German missions in Turkey.

Security measures are continuing in front of the German Consulate in Istanbul building with armored police vehicles. “We have received very concrete intelligences over the fact that there have been preparations for terror attacks at German representation offices in Turkey.

Therefore, I decided for the closure of Embassy in Ankara, Consulate in Istanbul and German schools in the two cities last night. This was a necessary precaution for the protection of German citizens and working people have priority,” German Foreign Minister Frank Walter Steinmeier said at an urgent press meeting in Berlin.

Steinmeier also advised German citizens to closely follow travel warnings in the upcoming days. Meanwhile, German embassy officials in Ankara told Hürriyet Daily News the move was a “one-day precaution taken due to [an] unconfirmed indication of an attack.” Accordingly, the German consulate in Istanbul and the Deutsche Schule Istanbul school have also been closed.

“The German Federal Republic Consulate is closed as precaution due to a serious warning,” a note at the entrance of the consulate building read. The Deutsche Schule Istanbul also announced the suspension of classes for one day due to security reasons.

The school management issued a message to parents and students saying the school would be closed for one day following a warning from the German consulate in Istanbul. In addition, Turkish police stood watch for about two hours in front of the German Consulate building in the Beyoğlu district of Istanbul as well as riot police and a riot control vehicle were deployed to the area. Police also towed a car parked on the consulate’s street that belonged to a Syrian living in Turkey.

US Embassy in Turkey warns its citizens on Nevruz, updates travel warning

Hurriyet Daily News, 18.03.2016



The U.S. Embassy in Ankara has warned its citizens over the upcoming Nevruz celebrations in the country, citing increasing terrorist attacks and threats in Turkey.

“[The] U.S. Embassy Ankara informs U.S. citizens that in light of recent events and the upcoming Nevruz holidays, citizens should be mindful of their security precautions. Nevruz celebrations are anticipated in various locations throughout Turkey. Local authorities have banned large gatherings during select dates over the Nevruz period citing security concerns. Celebrations in Ankara, Istanbul, İzmir, and Adana are expected to take place Sunday, March 20.

The celebration in [the southeastern province of] Diyarbakır, traditionally the site of the largest Nevruz festivities, is currently scheduled for March 21. The entire period is expected to see festivities that could be large and/or spontaneous,” the U.S. Embassy said in its security message for U.S. citizens which was posted on the official website of the embassy, days after a suicide car bomb ripped through Kızılay Square in central Ankara, killing at least 35 people and wounding 125, in the latest deadly attack to hit Turkey.

“Nevruz has political as well as social connotations, and in some recent years has been a flashpoint for spontaneous demonstrations. Demonstrations and large events intended to be peaceful can turn confrontational and escalate into violence.

We advise U.S. citizens to continue to avoid political gatherings, protests, and demonstrations and to exercise caution if you are in the vicinity. Review your personal security plans, remain aware of your surroundings and local events, monitor local news stations for updates, and follow local authority instructions,” the embassy said.

“The U.S. Embassy also reminds individuals that terrorist organizations have targeted transportation hubs, Turkish government facilities, and public spaces in the recent past,” it noted. The Diyarbakır Governor’s Office approved a Nevruz celebration in the city, while celebrations planned in other provinces in the country’s east and southeast were banned due to security reasons.

Nevruz celebrations have been banned in many provinces amid security forces’ operations against militants of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in the country’s eastern and southeastern region including Erzurum, Erzincan, Muş, Batman, Bingöl, Tunceli, Şırnak, Kars, Hakkari and Mardin. In the Turkish capital Ankara, Nevruz celebrations have been also banned between March 19 and March 21. The Istanbul Governor’s Office also did not approve the Kurdish problem-focused Peoples’ Democratic Party’s (HDP) event registration for Nevruz celebrations in Istanbul.

Nevruz marks the first day of spring and is celebrated across much of central Asia on March 21. The U.S. Embassy also updated its travel warning. “The U.S. Department of State warns U.S. citizens of increased threats from terrorist groups throughout Turkey and to avoid travel to southeastern Turkey. Due to threats from international and indigenous groups, U.S. citizens should exercise caution when traveling throughout the country,” the Embassy said.

“Travel restrictions remain in place for U.S. government employees to southeastern Turkey for the provinces of Hatay, Kilis, Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Şırnak, Diyarbakır, Van, Siirt, Muş, Mardin, Batman, Bingöl, Tunceli, Hakkari, Bitlis, and Elazığ. Additionally, the following neighborhoods in Adana: Şakirpaşa, Gülbahçesi, Dağlioğlu, Barbaros, Anadolu, Ondokuzmayıs,” it said.

The March 13 attack was the third to strike Ankara in five months, in an area close to the prime minister’s office, parliament and foreign embassies, as Turkey grapples with twin security threats from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the PKK.

‘Hard work’ needed to patch up Turkish refugee proposal, EU’s Tusk says

Hurriyet Daily News, 07.03.2016



There is still “hard work” to do to adjust a new refugee deal with Turkey so that it becomes “acceptable” to all members of the 28-member European Union, EU Council President Donald Tusk has underlined.

“My task for our summit is to put together the elements needed to make this proposal legally sound, in line with EU and international law, practically implementable, and of course acceptable to all 28 EU member states as well as to Turkey. That is why I am here in Ankara today,” Tusk said following talks with Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu in Ankara.

“This is not an easy task, and we have to get it right. It is clear that there is still hard work to be done. Today we established a catalogue of issues that we need to address together if we are to reach an agreement by Friday. I will bring this catalogue back to Brussels, along with the confidence I have in the goodwill of Prime Minister Davutoğlu,” Tusk said, without elaborating on “the catalogue of issues.”

For his part, Davutoğlu said the aim of the 6 billion-euro agreement with the EU on refugees was to reduce illegal migration and make passage to Europe safe. Turkey did not bargain over money and does not see the issue as a financial one but rather a humanitarian one, Davutoğlu said. Turkish and EU leaders will reconvene at a summit this week to finalize the agreement to reduce migrant flows to Europe after reaching a draft deal.

Turkey: Syrian Kurds' unilateral act for federal system to have no 'validity'

Hurriyet Daily News, 16.03.2016



The Turkish capital has ruled out a planned move by Syrian Kurds to declare a federal system in the northern Syria, arguing that such a move would not have “any validity.”

“Syria’s national unity and territorial integrity is the basis,” a Turkish official told, one of three autonomous areas set up by Kurdish groups two years ago, told that they would make the announcement. “Syrian people, with the participation of all segments, will collectively make their decision on the administration style and administrative structure of Syria with the new constitution, which will be drafted within the framework of ‘a political transition process,’” said the official.

“Apart from that, unilateral acts cannot have any validity,” the official added. NATO member Turkey is part of the U.S.-led coalition fighting Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) militants in Syria, but it sees advances by autonomy-seeking Kurds, led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), as a threat to its own national security, fearing their moves could stoke separatism among Turkish Kurds.

The announcement would mean “widening the framework of self-administration which the Kurds and others have formed,” Nassan said. He told Reuters the areas would be named the Federation of northern Syria, and represent all ethnic groups living there.

The PYD has been left out of peace talks underway in Geneva, in line with the wishes of Turkey, which sees it as an extension of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ party (PKK). The People’s Protection Units (YPG), the PYD’s militia force, has captured large areas of northeastern Syria from ISIL, and has been the most effective partner on the ground for a U.S.-led air campaign against the jihadists.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, meanwhile, said that U.S. and Russian weapons are ending up in the hands of the PKK. He also rejected the idea of any form of Kurdish self-rule in Turkey in an address in Ankara.

NATO begins periodic surveillance of Turkish airspace

Hurriyet Daily News, 13.03.2016



The Turkish General Staff has announced that a NATO Boeing E-3A Sentry Airborne Warning & Control System (AWACS) aircraft has begun surveillance in Turkish airspace as part of assurance measures for Turkey, while noting that NATO's mission would be conducted "periodically" in the coming months.

"In line with the Syria crisis and developments taking place in the region and within the content of reassurance measures for Turkey, a NATO AWACS plane has begun conducting [surveillance] duty in Turkish airspace from March 12 to March 15," the General Staff said in a written statement.

"These duties are planned to be conducted regularly and within certain periods in the coming months too," the General Staff added. In December, after tensions flared between Turkey and Russia, the U.S and other NATO allies decided on a package of assurance measures for NATO member Turkey in view of the volatile situation in the region. Alongside an increased AWACS presence, the package also included an increased naval presence in the eastern Mediterranean Sea.

"We agreed with Turkey on Feb. 11 to intensify [and] 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.

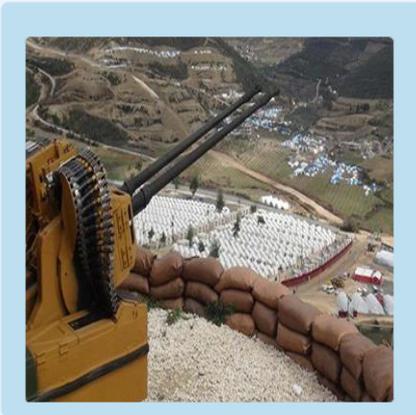
NATO's ongoing mission in Turkish airspace is being conducted within the framework of the alliance's main duty of collective defense and of the principle of indivisible security of the alliance, the Turkish General Staff said. The mission aimed at "displaying NATO'S support to Turkey and the alliance's unity and solidarity and providing deterrence vis-à-vis potential hostile threats against the alliance's territorial integrity," it said.

Two civilians, including one child, were killed in southern Turkey when several rockets from Syria hit the Turkish town of Kilis. 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.

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.

NATO's military presence not enough to protect Turkey from DAESH rockets

Daily Sabah, 15.03.2016



The southern border province of Kilis was hit twice by Katyusha rockets that were fired from a DAESH-controlled region in northern Syria, resulting in the death of two civilians and the injuries of several others.

As an active member of the anti-DAESH coalition, Turkey has always been a target. DAESH has perpetrated suicide attacks in Suruç and Ankara; however, its cross-border missile fire is a relatively new threat for Turkey. Responding to questions as to whether preparations are being launched by NATO to prevent the DAESH attacks a NATO official said “NATO’s commitment to the defense of all allies is steadfast.”

Recalling NATO’s decision to support Turkey after the downing of a Russian jet last year, a NATO official said that this package includes more AWACS presence, amped up aerial surveillance and an increased naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. “We continue to augment Turkey’s air defense with anti-missile systems.

We welcome Spain’s decision to extend its Patriot deployment to Turkey in 2016 and we expect other announcements shortly. In February, NATO also decided to intensify the intelligence, surveillance and monitoring along the Turkish-Syrian border.

This will complement the assurance measures we decided on late last year,” the official noted, adding: “all of this shows the strong commitment of our allies to defend of Turkey, and will contribute to increasing stability in the region.”

Defense industry expert Arda Mevlütoğlu acknowledges that NATO’s military presence; especially the Patriot deployments, certainly fills in a very large gap in Turkey’s air defense capabilities; however, he also asserted that the performance of current and future deployments are not enough to provide a solid air defense umbrella because the coverage area and strike range are limited. “The protection of all major cities and strategic installations and facilities requires significant amount of systems though,” Mevlütoğlu said.

In fact, the previous incidents revealed that the current NATO presence is unable to protect Turkish borders. In March 2015, the rocket that was fired by Syrian government forces across the Turkish border exploded in the Reyhanlı district of the southern province of Hatay.

Several Turkish media outlets reported that the Patriot radars did not intercept the Syrian missile, and some claimed that the Patriot system is only programmed to protect NATO at the İncirlik base. In response to Daily Sabah’s questions, a senior NATO official in Brussels admitted that “the missile landed outside the areas covered by the current Patriot configuration.”

Turkey is one of the important flank countries since the Cold War, and has been a member of the NATO alliance since 1952; however, NATO's weak reaction during the latest example of the spillover of violence from neighboring Syria has raised questions about NATO's capability and commitment to protecting Turkey.

"NATO's military support, so far, has not reflected a spirit of alliance; the borders of which are faced with serious security threats," defense industry expert Mevlütoğlu added. The recent DAESH missile attacks also raised questions regarding the availability of weapon systems within the Turkish Army, and if they would be adequate in protecting Turkish soil.

Regarding the issue, defense industry expert Oytun Kan said that the Turkish Armed Forces do not possess an air defense system capable of countering short-range rockets and artillery shells such as the Israeli Iron Dome system. "In which case, the best military option to counter such threats is to detect and eliminate the source of fire with aerial bombardment or counter-artillery fire.

The challenge there is the mobility capabilities of these type of weapon systems," he added. In line with this statement, Mevlütoğlu pointed out that weapon systems such as Katyusha are very cheap and easy to acquire, transport and use; thus, there are very few measures to counter them.

"Israel, for example, is pouring hundreds of millions of dollars into the development of an advanced sensor as well as weapon systems to detect and intercept such rockets," Mevlütoğlu said. "Developing intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities is a key aspect of defense against such a threat;an item NATO also failed to provide to Turkey," he concluded.

Pentagon chief praises Kurdish fighters in Syria

AFP, 10.03.2016



U.S. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter praised the fighting of Kurdish groups in Syria that have declared a federal region in areas of the country under their control. The Kurds "have proven to be excellent partners of ours on the ground in fighting ISIL," Carter said in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee.

"We are grateful for that, and we intend to continue to do that, recognizing the complexities of their regional role." He spoke the same day Syria's Kurds declared a de facto federal region in areas under their control in the north of the conflict-riven country, a move the United States opposes.

The three Kurdish-controlled regions agreed at a conference in Rmeilan in northeast Syria to establish the self-administered "federal democratic system of Rojava - Northern Syria," officials announced. Rojava is the Kurdish name for north Syria.



Officials said at a news conference they intended to begin preparations for a federal system, including electing a joint leadership and a 31-member organizing committee which would prepare a “legal and political vision” for the system within six months.

A document seen by Reuters, issued at the meeting, said the aim was to “establish democratic self-administered regions which run and organize themselves ... in the fields of economy, society, security, healthcare, education, defense and culture.”

The U.S. State Department said it did not recognize self-governed zones inside the war-torn country and was working for a unified, nonsectarian state under different leadership. “We don’t support self-ruled, semi-autonomous zones inside Syria. We just don’t,” said State Department spokesman John Kirby.

“What we want to see is a unified, whole Syria that has in place a government that is not led by [President] Bashar al-Assad that is responsive to the Syrian people. Whole, unified, nonsectarian Syria, that’s the goal,” Kirby said, adding that other countries supported that aim as well. Kurdish groups say declaring a federal region along Syria’s northern border with Turkey is aimed only at formalizing a semiautonomous zone they have already established during five years of war and create a model for decentralized government across Syria.

But Washington believes any Syrian federalism should develop from United Nations-sponsored talks over a political settlement of the conflict currently underway in Geneva. However, none of the groups representing the Kurdish minority are participating in the talks because of opposition from Turkey.

The Syrian government and the main Arab-led opposition group oppose federalism in Syria. So does Turkey, which fears Kurds’ ambitions in Syria are fuelling its Kurdish citizens at home. Kurds have played a crucial role in the U.S.-led fight against ISIL in Syria, providing the backbone of the forces that have pushed back the jihadist group in the country’s northeast.

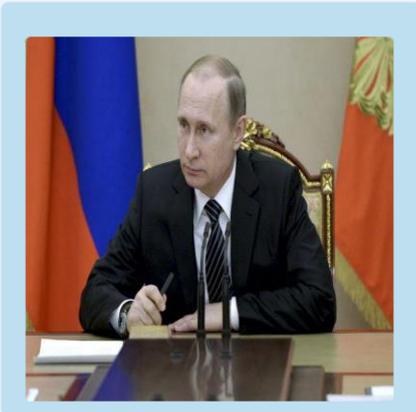
The Kurds play a dominant role in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDS), an Arab-Syrian coalition the United States supports. However, the Pentagon believes more Arab fighters will join the group.

“One month ago I would have said there are about 2,500 Arabs inside Syrian Democratic Forces,” said Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Gen. Joe Dunford, who spoke alongside Carter. “Today, I can tell you we have 5,000.” More coalition victories would have a “snowball effect,” he added.

“More people now are willing to join us because they see the level of support that we are providing and more importantly the level of success that these forces are having.” SDS fighters aided by U.S. special forces recently took control of Al-Shadadi, a town in northeastern Syria previously considered a strategic ISIL stronghold. The SDS has a total of 10,000 to 15,000 fighters, Dunford said, adding that they have an estimated reserve of 20,000 to 30,000 men.

Putin says Russia can make powerful Syria comeback within hours

Hurriyet Daily News, 17.03.2016



Russian President Putin declared his country's Syria mission a resounding success, but stressed Russia would continue to support the Syrian government and could build up its military presence in the region again within hours if necessary.

Speaking in the Kremlin at a medal ceremony for military personnel who served in Syria, Putin sought to dampen any talk of a rift with Damascus, saying Moscow's partial withdrawal from Syria had been agreed with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Although he stressed his preference for a negotiated diplomatic solution to the conflict, he made clear Russia could easily scale up its forces again.

"If necessary, literally within a few hours, Russia can build up its contingent in the region to a size proportionate to the situation developing there and use the entire arsenal of capabilities at our disposal," Reuters quoted Putin as saying.

The Russian leader ordered the bulk of the Russian military contingent in Syria to be pulled out after five months of air strikes, saying the Kremlin had achieved most of its objectives. Hours before Putin, Viktor Bondarev, the commander of the Russian Air Force, told Komsomolskaya Pravda newspaper that Russia would complete the withdrawal of the bulk of its forces from Syria before the end of the week.

"I think this will be over very quickly. Within the timeframe determined by [the president] and the defense minister. Today or tomorrow... within two-three days we will complete the task," Bondarev said. Meanwhile, the U.S. military said that it has seen no significant reduction in Russia's combat power in Syria despite Putin's surprise announcement. Colonel Steve Warren, a U.S. military spokesman in the region, said Russian intentions remain unclear.

"We have not seen a significant reduction, frankly, in their combat power. Particularly the ground combat power remains static, the air combat power has been slightly reduced, but that's it," he said. Warren said there were some indications of small units packing up, and eight to 10 Russian aircraft have left the country.

Russian withdrawal from Syria ‘very positive,’ says Saudi Arabia

Reuters, 16.03.2016



Russia’s partial withdrawal from Syria is “a very positive step,” Saudi Arabian FM Jubeir said, adding that he hoped it would compel Syrian President Assad to make concessions.

Saudi Arabia is a leading supporter of the rebels fighting Assad and was aghast at Russia’s intervention in support of the Syrian president last year that helped to turn the war in his favor. “It is our hope that it will contribute to an acceleration of the political process based on the Geneva 1 declaration and that it will compel the Assad regime to make the concessions necessary to bring about a political transition,” Jubeir said.

Jubeir’s comments, made to Reuters and local state television channels, were Saudi Arabia’s first official response to Russian President Vladimir Putin’s announcement of the partial withdrawal of forces.

Syria’s ambassador to U.N. Bashar Ja’afari said after a meeting with U.N. envoy for Syria that he rejected a suggestion by the opposition High Negotiations Committee (HNC) that the Geneva talks should move to a direct format, saying nobody should have a monopoly on representing the opposition.

Ja’afari described the HNC chief negotiator Mohammad Alloush as a terrorist, saying the rebel group he belongs to, and which controls large swathes of the besieged suburbs of Damascus, was responsible for the death of many innocent people. “We will not engage with this terrorist in direct talks, with this terrorist in particular, and so there won’t be any direct talks unless this terrorist apologizes and also shaves off his beard,” Ja’afari said.

Ja’afari also said he had “useful and promising” talks with the U.N. deputy Syria envoy Ramzy Ezzeldin, noting that procedural issues had to be thrashed out before moving to an agenda that tackled divisive issues. U.N. envoy Staffan de Mistura has been hosting separate meetings with government and opposition delegates - including Alloush - since the “proximity talks” resumed.

British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond told reporters in Baghdad that they were not sure that Russia’s announced pullout from Syria was genuine. “If it turns out to be a genuine pullout - and we don’t know that,” he said of Russia’s announcement, without finishing his sentence.

“We’ve seen before, in Ukraine, Russia talking about a withdrawal, and then it turned out to be merely a rotation of forces,” he said. Asked about oil market speculation of a “grand bargain” involving Saudi energy policy and Russian foreign policy, Jubeir said: “As far as I know, and I believe I am in a position to know, there is no such thing.”

Saudi Arabia, Russia and some other producers recently agreed to freeze oil production at current levels as a move towards halting the long slide in crude prices since summer 2014 that has greatly reduced energy exporters' income.

Iranian foreign minister defends ballistic missile test

AP, 14.03.2016



Iran's foreign minister defended the nation's right to use ballistic missiles following a test, but offered no explanation for anti-Israeli messages reportedly written on them. Speaking in Wellington, New Zealand, Mohammad Javad Zarif said Iran has always reserved the right to defend itself.

“Anybody who is crazy enough to attack us, we will attack back using conventional weapons,” he said. “We hope that these conventional weapons will never be used because we do believe that in a war, everybody loses.” Zarif was responding to questions following an address to the New Zealand Institute of International Affairs.

He had earlier met with New Zealand Prime Minister John Key to talk about trade, and was scheduled to travel to Australia. Iran's Fars news agency reported that the missiles had the phrase “Israel must be wiped out” written on them.

Zarif said he had not yet returned to Iran to check out those reports. When pressed about the issue, he said it was Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and U.S. President Barack Obama who were acting aggressively.

“I ask you to go ask Netanyahu why is he threatening to use force against Iran every day. Go ask Obama why he is threatening to use force against Iran every day,” Zarif said. “Why are they saying all options are on the table?”

EU risks defaulting on human rights in Turkey deal, says UN rights chief

Reuters, 16.03.2016



The EU risks compromising its human rights values if it fails to ensure Turkey offers proper protection to all refugees under a deal to curb migrant flows to Europe, the U.N. human rights chief said, adding that they need to feel assured that Turkey gives full protection to those who merit it.

The EU is pushing for an initial agreement this week with Turkey to start taking back refugees and migrants reaching Europe from its shores. The U.N. and rights groups have criticized the notion of mass returns to Turkey, which restricts Geneva Convention rights for refugees to Europeans.

“We believe that Turkey should lift all restrictions on Geneva,” U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, told Reuters. Some diplomats in Brussels suggested a declaration from Turkey that it would treat everyone in line with the standards of the Geneva Convention would be enough, but Zeid disagreed.

“We would rather see that full protections are provided,” he said. “There are many concerns we have about the human rights situation in [Turkey], we need to feel assured that the full protection is given to those who merit it.”

Zeid said for any deal to be in line with international law, it had to ensure each case was individually assessed, and he also warned that pushing asylum processing centers offshore could turn them into “centers of abuse.”

He said Turkey, which now houses some 2.5 million people fleeing the conflict in neighboring Syria, should also take proper care of people who do not satisfy the definition of a refugee but require protection, including children, the disabled and victims of trafficking or sexual abuse.

Zeid said he had received assurances from the EU’s executive arm deputy head, Frans Timmermans, and the bloc’s foreign policy chief, Federica Mogherini, that any final deal with Turkey would respect EU law.

“The risk is that if, for the sake of expediency, the EU defaults on its human rights obligations, then the reputation as being one of the principle standard-bearers upholding human rights around the world would be affected,” he said.

“If the EU is perceived to cut corners when it comes to international law and European standards, it can have a knock-on effect on other parts of the world.” The refugee crisis has opened deep rifts between the EU’s 28 member states and fuelled support for nationalists and populists.

Meanwhile, Macedonia trucked about 1,500 migrants and refugees back to Greece after they forced their way across the border. The police action was part of a drive by Western Balkans states to shut down a migration route from Greece to Germany. Nearly a million people fleeing war and poverty in the Middle East and beyond used that route over the last year, forming biggest influx of refugees since World War Two.

Nationalists strong, setback for Merkel party in German vote

AP, 14.03.2016



A nationalist, anti-migration party powered into three German state legislatures in elections held amid divisions over Chancellor Merkel's liberal approach to the refugee crisis. Merkel's conservatives lost to center-left rivals in two states they had hoped to win.

The elections in the prosperous southwestern state of Baden-Wuerttemberg, neighboring Rhineland-Palatinate and relatively poor Saxony-Anhalt in the ex-communist east were the first major political test since Germany registered nearly 1.1 million people as asylum-seekers. The three-year-old Alternative for Germany, easily entered all three legislatures.

AfD won 15.1 percent of the vote in Baden-Wuerttemberg, official results showed. It scored about 12.5 percent in Rhineland-Palatinate and 24 percent in Saxony-Anhalt, where it finished second, according to projections by ARD and ZDF television with most districts counted. "We are seeing above all in these elections that voters are turning away in large numbers from the big established parties and voting for our party," AfD leader Frauke Petry said.

They "expect us finally to be the opposition that there hasn't been in the German parliament and some state parliaments," she added. There were uncomfortable results both for Merkel's conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and their partners in the national government, the center-left Social Democrats (SPD). The traditional rivals are Germany's two biggest parties.

"The democratic center in our country has not become stronger, but smaller, and I think we must all take that seriously," said Vice Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel, the Social Democrats' leader. Merkel said after the difficult election that she remains convinced there has to be a European solution to the migration crisis, and it will take time. Merkel made clear she will not change course.

"I am firmly convinced, and that wasn't questioned today, that we need a European solution and that this solution needs time," Merkel said. She acknowledged that the refugee issue dominated three state elections and that many voters felt there is no satisfactory solution yet. Merkel's party kept its status as strongest party in Saxony-Anhalt.

It had hoped to beat Green governor Winfried Kretschmann, a traditional stronghold that the CDU ran for decades until 2011. It also hoped to oust Social Democrat governor Malu Dreyer from the governor's office in Rhineland-Palatinate.

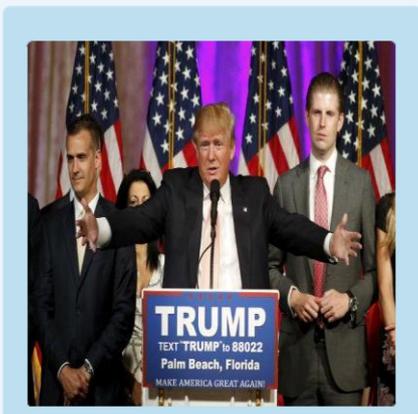
However, the CDU finished several percentage points behind the popular incumbents' parties in both states and dropped 12 percentage points to a record-low result in Baden-Wuerttemberg, with 27 percent support.

The Social Democrats suffered large losses in both Baden-Wuerttemberg and Saxony-Anhalt, where they were the junior partners in the outgoing governments, finishing behind AfD. Other parties will not share power with AfD, but its presence will complicate their coalition-building efforts.

In all three states, the results were set to leave the outgoing coalition governments without a majority - forcing regional leaders into what could be time-consuming negotiations with new, unusual partners. Merkel's CDU still has a long-shot chance of forming an untried three-way alliance to win the Baden-Wuerttemberg governor's office. Germany's next national election is due in late 2017.

Clinton, Trump move closer to White House nominations

AFP, 18.03.2016



Hillary Clinton took a monumental step toward clinching the Democratic party's White House nomination, while Trump's seemingly unstoppable rush to victory hit a bump in Ohio.

Trump won key Republican primaries in Illinois, North Carolina and Florida, who immediately announced he was suspending his presidential campaign. "This was an amazing evening," a buoyant Trump told supporters. "We're going to win, win, win and we're not stopping." Rubio's loss was a major setback for Republicans trying to stop the bellicose businessman, whose populist anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim stance they fear will split the party.

The 69-year-old Trump was clinging to a narrow lead in Missouri with nearly all of the votes counted, but was denied a clean sweep by Ohio Governor John Kasich, who carried his home state, a key general election battleground. Trump may now struggle to reach the 1,237 delegates necessary to avoid a challenge at the party's nominating convention in July in Cleveland.

"The bottom line after tonight: it looks like Trump will not have a majority of delegates in July," said Paul Beck, a professor of political science at Ohio State University. There were fewer problems for Clinton, who defeated her rival Bernie Sanders in Florida, North Carolina, Ohio and Illinois. She also had a slight edge in Missouri, according to vote tallies.



Sanders now faces an almost impossible task to catch up with Clinton's formidable delegate advantage. "We are moving closer to securing the Democratic party nomination and winning this election in November," said Clinton, casting one eye on the general election -- and at Trump.

"When we hear a candidate for president call for rounding up 12 million immigrants, banning all Muslims from entering the United States -- when he embraces torture, that doesn't make him strong. It makes him wrong." Republicans will now have to decide whether to rally behind one candidate or siphon votes away from Trump as a team.

The scope of Trump's victory against Rubio in Florida will shock the Republican establishment as much as it will raise hopes the party can challenge in the one-time swing state come November 8. President Barack Obama carried the state in both the 2008 and 2012 elections.

Rubio bowed out, saying: "While it is not God's plan that I be president in 2016 or maybe ever, and while today my campaign is suspended, the fact that I've even come this far is evidence of how special America truly is." Kasich meanwhile openly called for a contested convention and vowed to campaign on.

"I want to remind you, again tonight, that I will not take the low road to the highest office in the land," he said. Ted Cruz, an ultra-conservative senator from Texas, also remains in the Republican race. Projections by US media showed him just behind Trump in Missouri, and in second place in Illinois and North Carolina.

Cruz made a call for Republicans to unity against Trump behind him. "Donald may be the one person on the face of the earth that Hillary Clinton can beat in the general election," he said, telling Republicans they now face "a clear choice."

Trump's incendiary attacks on immigrants, threats of mass deportations and a proposal for a wall on the border with Mexico have ignited the campaign trail and drawn condemnation in some quarters -- the latest being from President Barack Obama.

Without pointing the finger directly at Trump, Obama professed to being "dismayed" at some of the comments during campaigning. "We have heard vulgar and divisive rhetoric aimed at women and minorities -- at Americans who don't look like 'us,' or pray like 'us,' or vote like we do," said the president, who along with his wife Michelle cast absentee ballots in their home state of Illinois.

But Trump's populist message has resonated -- even with some Democrats like 69-year-old Katharine Berry. "We don't need all these illegals," she told AFP outside a polling station at the Zion Lutheran Church in Canton. "They're taking our jobs, they've got all these rights, Americans don't have rights. "I voted Democrat today. But if Trump wins, then I'm going to vote for him in the general election."



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