

Turkish FM: Anti-ISIL coalition devoid of robust strategy to destroy group

Hurriyet Daily News, 11.05.2016



The coalition against the ISIL has not succeeded in creating a solid and functioning strategy to destroy the terror organization, Turkish FM Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said.

“There are 65 countries in the anti-ISIL coalition, a majority of which are NATO members. We have some fragmented strategies, most of which have unfortunately not worked. We do not have a robust and functioning strategy to destroy and to defeat the terror organization. I hope this will change,” he said in a speech in the Mediterranean resort of Antalya. Çavuşoğlu said it was not possible to defeat terror organizations, without resolving the problems in Syria.

“People from more than 120 countries come to join terror organizations in Syria. Even if we defeat these organizations, new ones will erupt. There was no ISIL or Boko Haram some four years ago, but there was al-Qaeda,” he said.

“Almost all terror organizations are connected to each other, representing the parts of a huge network...If we cannot resolve the terror issue, it will find us one way or another in the end. The terror problem in our region first hit Turkey and then Europe,” he said. The minister also said Turkey was not uncomfortable with hosting over 3 million Iraqis and Syrians, but noted that it was necessary to create joint solutions.

“We have spent some \$10 billion on them so far. We do not see them as a burden. The international community has given just \$472 million until now. This is also not a problem for us. When people, however, lose their hopes about their future, they start to seek new destinations. If they had been happy with their hometowns, they would not have moved somewhere else in masses,” he said, adding that Turkey and the European Union had worked together to resolve the refugee crisis as the huge influx had mainly affected the two entities.

Erdoğan vows visa deal would boost Turkey-EU ties

Hurriyet Daily News, 09.05.2016



The prospective deal to liberalize visa requirements for Turks visiting EU member countries should accelerate Turkey's accession process and full EU membership remains Ankara's strategic goal, President Erdoğan has said, vowing Ankara's commitment to resume cooperation with the 28-member bloc.

“Displaying a determined and principled stance in the face of the migration crisis stemming from Syria, Iraq and other conflict zones is of immense importance. On behalf of the international community, Turkey has undertaken responsibility in the face of these challenges and fulfilled its humanitarian duties from the very beginning,” Erdoğan said.

“We believe that accession to the EU, which is a strategic goal for Turkey, will help in the successful struggle against these challenges and also be a source of stability and inspiration for the region,” he added.

“I hope visa liberalization, which has been agreed upon, will help relieve some of the weariness in Turkey caused by being kept waiting at the EU's door for over 50 years and accelerate Turkey's accession process,” Erdoğan said.

The message marked an apparent attempt to clarify Ankara's position on the deal, days after the president vowed that it would not make any changes to its terrorism laws as part of the deal with the EU to curb migration. “The EU says, ‘you will change the anti-terror law in return for visas’ ... Pardon me, but we are going our way and you can go yours,” Erdoğan had said in a blunt message to the EU.

The EU has asked member states to grant visa-free travel to Turks in return for Ankara stopping migrants from reaching Europe, but said Turkey still had to change some legislation, including bringing its terrorism laws in line with EU standards.

In his message, Erdoğan criticized this position, saying he believes “the EU should take a more determined stance in the fight against terrorism.” Hours before Erdoğan's Europe Day message was released, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Tanu Bilgiç was asked whether the deal with the EU on readmission and visa liberalization was still on the table and whether it could be suspended if the EU side insists on fulfillment of amendments to the anti-terror law, which is one of the final five criteria that Ankara needs to fulfill in order to obtain the visa waiver.

“Our president has used very clear expressions on visa liberalization with the EU,” Bilgiç said. “The required policies, within the framework of statements by our president, as the head of the state, will be developed and implemented,” he added.

Meanwhile, Deputy Prime Minister Mehmet Şimşek marked Europe Day with a message posted to his official Twitter account. “Happy #EuropeDay2016. Thank you EU for being the engine of change for a more peaceful, democratic, stable, & prosperous world,” Şimşek said.

Turkey’s EU Minister Volkan Bozkır also underlined the importance of the EU accession process for the country. “As expressed by our President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the EU accession process is the most significant modernization project after the proclamation of the Republic,” Bozkır said.

“A new paradigm in Turkey-EU relations, along with the fact that common challenges such as terrorism and irregular migration cannot be overcome without Turkey, has been further consolidated by a series of initiatives, launched by President Erdoğan’s visit to Brussels on Oct. 5-6 2015, and has continued with the Turkey-EU Summits of Nov. 29 2015, March 7 and March 18, 2016 and finally, the European Commission’s proposal to lift the Schengen visa applied to our citizens,” he added.

‘Impossible’ for Turkey to make changes to anti-terror law, says EU minister

Anadolu Agency, 11.05.2016



Turkey will not make any amendments to its law on combatting terror, the country’s EU minister said amid a disagreement between Ankara and the bloc, which has demanded changes to the law as a prerequisite for granting visa-free travel to Turkish citizens.

“It is not possible to accept any changes in the anti-terror law in Turkey,” said Turkish EU Minister and Chief Negotiator Volkan Bozkır during a televised interview in Strasbourg, where he went to hold meetings with top EU officials before the European Parliament starts to debate the visa liberalization agreement between Turkey and the EU.

“In an environment when we have more than 450 martyred [security officials], when there are very serious terror operations being conducted, it is impossible to politically discuss the anti-terror law in Turkey,” Bozkır added.

Clashes between the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and Turkey restarted in July 2015, after a more than two-year-old cease-fire and resolution process came to an end. Since then, the Turkish armed forces and police have been engaged in fierce clashes with PKK militants mostly in the southern and southeastern parts of the country, during which hundreds of people have been killed on both sides. “Turkey’s anti-terror law is actually at the level of European standards,” said Bozkır. The European Commission released a recommendation to the EP and European Council for Turkey to be added to the list of countries whose nationals can travel inside the EU’s Schengen Zone without a visa, subject to the fulfillment of conditions to realize this aim.

While declaring the commission's decision, European Commission Vice-President Frans Timmermans said that there were still five benchmarks that needed to be met by Turkey, including amendments to the anti-terror law.

Bozkır said making changes to the anti-terror law was not part of the visa liberalization agreement reached with the EU in mid-March. Under the Turkey-EU agreement, which aims to curb the flow of migrants to the bloc, Turkey agreed to take back all refugees who reached Greece as of March 20, in exchange for the EU taking the same number of Syrian migrants from Turkey as Turkey took from the EU. The agreement also covered the issues of visa liberalization for Turkish citizens, granting a total of 6 million euros to Turkey to be used for Syrian refugees in the country and the acceleration of Turkey's EU negotiation process.

If there is no progress on the visa liberalization process, then the elements of the Turkey-EU deal would be reconsidered, the minister said. While in Strasbourg, Bozkır will hold a bilateral meeting with EU foreign affairs chief Federica Mogherini.

Bozkır is to hold separate meetings with EP President Martin Schulz, European People's Party (EPP) Group Chair Manfred Weber, Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) Group Chair Gianni Pittella, European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) Group Chair Syed Kamall and EPP member MEP Anna Maria-Corazza Bildt, the EU Ministry said in a statement released.

Turkey-Israel should enhance intelligence sharing against terrorism, says Israeli envoy

Hurriyet Daily News, 05.05.2016



Turkey and Israel must begin to share intelligence to defeat terrorism in the region, Israel's envoy in Istanbul has said. "Ultimately, we cannot escape enhancing intelligence sharing, sharing information and even cooperating on an operational basis to eliminate this threat [jihadist terror organizations]," Shai Cohen, Israel's consul general to Istanbul, said.

"Yes, we see eye to eye with Turkey [only] on eliminating jihadist extremist organizations particularly in Syria, but in the region in general. There is a lot to cooperate on that," the consul general added.



Responding to a question as to whether launching a joint operation was on the table, Cohen said it was not being discussed at present. "But it's very well understood by all authorities that this is a main issue we should discuss with Turkey and see how we can cooperate in the future," he said, adding that it might not happen immediately. "It's a very delicate issue. But it's something very important for both countries," he said.

Commenting on whether cooperation would occur on Turkey's fight against the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Cohen said the PKK "is a Turkish confrontation, a Turkish issue." "We don't intervene in Turkish decisions or policy vis-à-vis the Kurdish problem. It's a Turkish thing to be concluded by Turkey," Cohen said.

Stating that normalizing the difficult relations between Turkey and Israel would need to wait until after the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) extraordinary convention, when a new head of the party will be elected after Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu formally abandons his post.

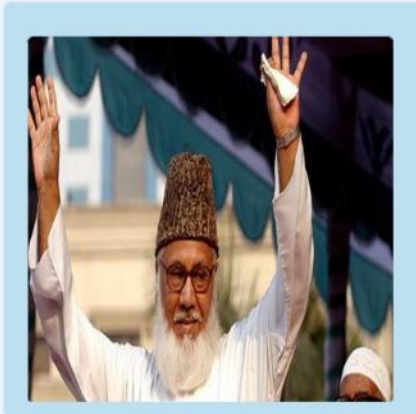
"The negotiations will go on. We will also see from May 22 as to which prime minister and which foreign minister there will be in the new Turkish government and who will keep on managing these negotiations," said Cohen.

Turkish and Israeli officials initiated diplomatic talks to mend the strained ties between the two countries in 2015. NATO member Turkey was a key regional ally of Israel until the two cut ties in 2010 after Israeli commandos staged a deadly operation on a Turkish aid ship bound for Gaza, killing 10 Turkish activists.

"First of all, we are very close [to reaching a final deal]. There has been an important advancement in the last few months through different rounds of negotiations between representatives of both governments in different places in the region and the world," Cohen said. "It's a question of another round or two to conclude." Cohen also said Turkey should reconsider its relations with Hamas, which Israel sees as its worst enemy. "Hamas is a terrorist organization. It's our worst enemy and you have to reconsider your relations with Hamas," he said.

Turkey's ambassador to Bangladesh recalled after hanging of Islamist leader

Hurriyet Daily News, 12.05.2016



Turkish Foreign Ministry has summoned Turkey's ambassador to Bangladesh to report to Ankara for consultations in the aftermath of the hanging of a senior Jamaat-e-Islami party leader in Dhaka, an unnamed diplomatic source said.

According to the diplomatic source, who spoke on condition of anonymity due to restrictions on speaking with the media, Turkish Ambassador Devrim Öztürk is expected to arrive in Ankara. The Turkish Foreign Ministry issued a written statement strongly condemning the execution of Motiur Rahman Nizami.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan also condemned the execution of Nizami, while demonstrators in Ankara and Istanbul protested against Nizami's execution. "I condemn the mentality that sentences to death a mujahid, who is over the age of 70 and who we believe has no earthly sin. I think that such proliferation of hatred there, and the ordering of such death sentences despite our repeated initiatives, is neither fair governance nor a democratic mentality," said Erdoğan.

Bangladeshi Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan said the 73-year-old Nizami was hanged at 12:10 a.m. local time inside Dhaka central jail amid tight security. He was executed for his role in atrocities committed during the country's independence war against Pakistan in 1971.

"Twelve million people have been victimized in Syria and about 600,000 innocent people have been killed. No Muslim can completely free himself/herself of responsibility for this sin. Those who keep silent now in the face of what happens in Bangladesh cannot abdicate their responsibility either," Erdoğan said.

Bangladesh's Supreme Court rejected a final appeal by Nizami, who refused to seek presidential clemency to commute his death sentence. A condemned man can seek such clemency from the country's figurehead president.

A crowd of activists celebrated outside the jail in Dhaka, while Jamaat-e-Islami issued a statement condemning the execution and calling for a daylong general strike across Bangladesh. In Ankara, groups connected to several Turkish NGOs protested in front of the Bangladeshi embassy, while members of the Anatolia Youth Association (AGD) gathered to voice their objections at a park in Istanbul.

"Oh Muslim, don't sleep, protect your brother," some shouted, while others chanted "Hell awaits the wrongdoers." AGD head Hasan Karaman described the death sentence as "unlawful," saying a prerequisite of the Islamic faith is to cherish human life.

“Law cannot be implemented in the most brutal manner against the legitimate demands and choices of the people. Oppression cannot continue forever,” Karaman told state-run Anadolu Agency. “It is clear that peace and tranquility cannot be maintained in Bangladesh under the shadow of an oppressive regime, one that makes no legitimate claims and has no conscience of mercy in the world,” he added.

Turkey-EU deal over visas, migrants in jeopardy amid brinkmanship

Anadolu Agency, 12.05.2016



Amendments demanded for Turkey’s anti-terror law have put the Turkey-EU deal on migrants and visa-free travel in jeopardy, with the European Parliament halting the visa liberalization process.

“The draft that the European Commission has sent [to the European Parliament and the European Council] rests on 72 criteria. Turkey has not yet fulfilled all of these benchmarks. Therefore, I have halted the process,” said European Parliament President Martin Schulz at a press conference alongside Turkey’s EU Minister and Chief Negotiator Volkan Bozkır in Strasbourg.

“We cannot restart yet, for the time being,” Schulz added. The commission said there were five key criteria left for Turkey to fulfil, of which amendments demanded on the anti-terror law have caused the biggest controversy.

Other criteria include the completion of flaws in relation to a new data protection law, operational cooperation with Europe’s police agency Europol, implementation of the Group of States against Corruption’s (GRECO) recommendations to combat corruption, and judicial cooperation with all EU member states.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan gave a fiery speech in Ankara, saying it was OK to “perceive the EU as a terrorist organization if it speaks with a terrorist organization rather than the Turkish state itself.”

“If the EU agrees to lower itself to the level of speaking with a terrorist organization instead of the Turkish Republic, then there is no problem from our side. We will look at the people defending their thesis in the same way as we look at the terrorist organization,” said Erdoğan, referring to the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), against which Turkey has ramped up clashes since July 2015. “The EU says ‘soften your approach to the terrorist organization.’ Since when have you run this country? Who has given you this authority?” he added. “They believe they themselves have a right [to fight terrorism] but it is an unacceptable luxury for us. Let me say it clearly, this is hypocrisy,” Erdoğan said.



He also accused “some countries” of supplying terrorist groups with money “to come to Turkey and conduct attacks and divide the country.” “Do you think we don’t know this? We will not exchange the values ... of this country for a few laughs of yours,” said Erdoğan.

For his part, Bozkır said the visa deal situation had come to this “critical point” because amendments to the anti-terror law, which were not brought up until the last three days of the meetings, were added to the criteria late.

Reiterating his remarks from one day before, Bozkır said that there was “no chance that Turkey would amend its anti-terror law” at a time when more than 450 security personnel have been killed in operations aimed at “clearing all of our regions of terrorists.”

“We will not make any changes to the anti-terror law, even if visas are not lifted,” said Bozkır in Strasbourg before departing for Brussels, while vowing that Ankara would put all its other efforts into realizing the implementation of the visa deal. The EU, meanwhile, expressed no change in its position, vowing not to grant visas to Turkish citizens unless Turkey meets all the criteria.

European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker insisted that Europe would not grant visa-free travel to Turkish citizens if Ankara fails to fulfil its end of the deal. “We consider that it is important for these conditions to be fulfilled, otherwise this deal between the EU and Turkey will not happen,” Juncker told a forum organized by German broadcaster WDR.

“If Mr. Erdoğan wants to pursue his strategy, then he has to answer to the Turkish people why Europe is denying free travel to Turks. That’s not my problem; that will be his problem,” he added. The EU dangled the promise of visa-free travel to Turks as part of a landmark March deal between Ankara and Brussels, under which Turkey would help to reduce the flow of migrants crossing illegally to Europe.

Germany also stepped up its calls for Turkey’s anti-terror law to be amended, with Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier saying the EU is waiting to see “the readiness of Turkey to end persecution of journalists through the use of the anti-terror law.” German Deputy Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel, speaking at a separate press conference, also urged Ankara to “allow the opposition and journalists to do their jobs” rather than use the law to “brand them as terrorists and lock them away.”

Turkey may take unilateral action against ISIL in Syria

Hurriyet Daily News, 12.05.2016



President Erdoğan has sent a signal regarding his country's readiness to take unilateral action against the ISIL following a series of attacks by the group on the border province of Kilis.

“While our citizens are being martyred every day by rockets fired from the other side, what will we wait for from the allies,” Erdoğan said at an event called “Domestic and National Will in Turkish Political History.” “If so, we will pull ourselves up by our bootstraps.” “We are doing all the necessary preparations to clean the other side of the border, but we haven’t yet been able to receive the support that we desire from allies,” Erdoğan said.

Erdoğan again accused the international coalition battling ISIL in Syria of abandoning his country to fight the jihadists on its own soil in the face of regular attacks on Kilis by ISIL. Around two dozen people have been killed in the southeastern province of Kilis by rocket fire from ISIL since January, prompting the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) to respond with artillery fire.

Turkey, a member of the U.S.-led coalition battling ISIL, also allows U.S. jets to use its air base in southern Turkey for air strikes on the extremists. “The Kilis issue will serve as a litmus paper which will manifest the anti-DAESH [ISIL] coalition’s sincerity,” he added.

“We do not believe the sincerity of any country that has not seen rockets falling on our town as if they fell on Moscow, London, Brussels, Washington, Paris or Berlin,” he said. Turkish daily Yeni Şafak reported that a 20-strong Turkish military team crossed into Syria over the weekend on a reconnaissance mission to seek out ISIL launchers to target in artillery strikes, but this has not been officially confirmed.

In its edition, The Wall Street Journal also reported that Turkey’s special military force carried out an unusual weekend operation against ISIL fighters in Syria as part of a deepening campaign against the extremist group. Citing American officials, who spoke anonymously, the U.S. daily said the weekend operation was part of an expanding effort by the TSK to push ISIL away from a vital 60-mile stretch of the Turkey-Syria border that serves as the group’s main lifeline.

The president also said Turkey had the right to not care about those who disregarded Kilis and the Syrian city of Aleppo. “We also have the right to not care [about] those who disregard Kilis [and] Aleppo. It is not possible for us to agree either with the allies or the non-moral structure in the face of the current discourse and manners of especially European Union organizations and some countries in Turkey’s fight against terrorism,” Erdoğan said, calling their stance hypocritical. “Those who stirred up the world when DAESH [ISIL] conducted attacks against them left Turkey alone in its fight against the same organization,” Erdoğan said.

Turkey's current account deficit continues to decline amid oil plunge

Hurriyet Daily News, 12.05.2016



Turkey's current account deficit was recorded as \$3.6 billion in March, a decrease of \$1.1 billion compared to March of the previous year, bringing the 12-month rolling deficit to around \$29.5 billion, the Turkish Central Bank said.

“This development in the current account is mainly attributable to a \$1.3-billion decrease in the deficit in goods item recording \$3.5 billion and a \$482-million decrease in primary income deficit recording \$723 million. Besides, the services item indicated a net surplus of \$575 million, decreasing by \$597 million,” said the Turkish Central Bank bank.

“Once again the improvement observed in the foreign trade deficit compared to the same month of last year is the main factor in the decline of the current account deficit in March,” economist Haluk Bürümcekçi said, as quoted by Anadolu Agency. “Also, the continuation of low cost energy imports is positive for the course of current account deficit next month,” he added.

Following the launch of the data, Deputy Prime Minister Mehmet Şimşek warned Turkey still had a current account gap problem, despite the recent decline in the deficit. He said savings were still very low in Turkey, where more investments are needed, in his speech at a meeting, as reported by Reuters.

Turkey can lure more investments only by realizing the required structural reforms, Şimşek added. The travel item, one of the main items under services, recorded a net inflow of \$721 million, decreasing by \$381 million compared to the same month of the previous year, according to the Central Bank data.

Investment income under the primary income item indicated a net outflow of \$673 million, decreasing by \$505 million in comparison to March 2015, it added. Direct investment recorded a net inflow of \$650 million (increase in net liabilities), decreasing by \$144 million. Official reserves recorded a net increase of around \$1.5 billion, according to official data.

Top Hezbollah commander killed in Syria

Reuters, 13.05.2016



Top Hezbollah commander Mustafa Badreddine has been killed in an attack in Syria, the Lebanese group said, the biggest blow to the Iranian-backed organisation since its military chief was killed in 2008.

Badreddine, 55, was one of the highest ranking officials in the group, and assessed by the U.S. government to be responsible for Hezbollah's military operations in Syria, where it is fighting alongside the Syrian President Assad. Hezbollah said Badreddine had been killed, and an investigation was underway into whether it was caused by an air strike, a missile attack, or artillery bombardment.

The Lebanese TV station al-Mayadeen earlier reported he had been killed in an Israeli attack. There was no immediate response from Israel which has struck Hezbollah targets inside Syria several times during the country's five-year conflict. "We decline to comment," an Israeli military spokeswoman said.

A U.S. Department of the Treasury statement detailing sanctions against Badreddine last year said he was assessed to be responsible for the group's military operations in Syria since 2011, and he had accompanied Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah during strategic coordination meetings with Assad in Damascus.

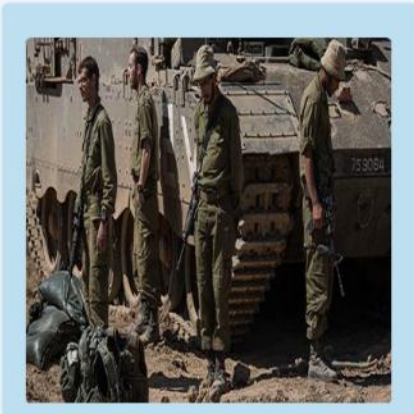
Badreddine, a brother-in-law of the late Hezbollah military commander, Imad Moughniyah, was one of five Hezbollah members indicted by the U.N.-backed Special Tribunal for Lebanon in the 2005 killing of statesman Rafik al-Hariri. He was sentenced to death in Kuwait for his role in bomb attacks there in 1983. He escaped from prison in Kuwait after Iraq, under the leadership of Saddam Hussein, invaded the country in 1990.

For years, Badreddine masterminded military operations against Israel from Lebanon and overseas and managed to escape capture by Arab and Western governments by operating clandestinely. The U.S. Treasury statement also said he had led Hezbollah ground offensives in the Syrian town of al-Qusayr in February 2013, a critical battle in the war when Hezbollah fighters defeated Syrian rebels in an area near the Syrian-Lebanese border.

Around 1,200 Hezbollah fighters are estimated to have been killed in the Syrian conflict. These include prominent fighters Samir Qantar and Jihad Moughniyah, the son of Imad Moughniyah, who were killed in separate Israeli attacks last year. Hezbollah accuses Israel of carrying out the 2008 killing of Moughniyah, who was killed by a bomb in Damascus.

US, Britain, France block Russia bid to blacklist Syria rebels

Reuters, 12.05.2016



Britain, the United States, France and Ukraine blocked a Russian proposal at the United Nations to blacklist Syrian rebel groups Jaish al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham for links to the ISIL and al Qaeda militants, diplomats said.

Russia made the proposal late last month and the U.S. mission to the United Nations had signaled it would oppose the move, saying it would undermine attempts to get a sustained halt in the fighting in Syria. The U.N. Security Council's 15-member ISIL and al Qaeda sanctions committee has to agree by consensus before individuals or groups can be blacklisted.

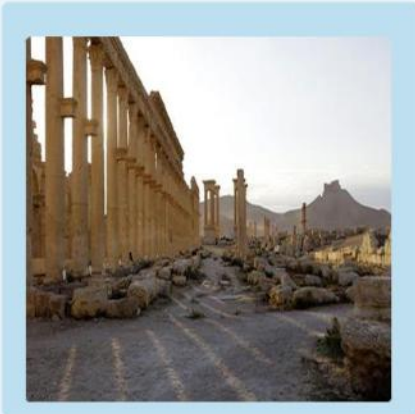
Jaish al-Islam (Islam Army) is a major armed rebel group in Syria and part of the High Negotiation Committee, which was set up in Riyadh last December to negotiate on behalf of opposition groups at U.N.-brokered peace talks with the government.

The High Negotiation Committee is backed by Western nations and key Arab states. Ahrar al-Sham withdrew from the Riyadh meeting, saying "revolutionary groups" were sidelined. But the group did attend the last round of peace talks in Geneva. Russia's Foreign Ministry has long said that Jaish al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham should not be involved in Syria peace talks.

Ahrar al-Sham is an ultra-orthodox Salafist group and has fought as part of a military alliance including the al Qaeda-linked Nusra Front, which was not part of a cessation of hostilities agreement brokered in February. Ahrar al-Sham, whose late leader fought alongside Osama bin Laden, last year denied sharing al Qaeda's ideology or having organizational ties to the group.

ISIL cuts regime supply route to Syria's ancient Palmyra

AFP, 11.05.2016



The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) group cut a key supply route between Syria's Homs and the world heritage site of Palmyra just months after the army recaptured the ancient city, a monitor said.

ISIL "was able to cut the supply road between Homs and Palmyra near the Tayfur military airport after an attack launched from the east of Homs", the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. Both cities are controlled by the regime after troops recaptured Palmyra -- a UNESCO world heritage site -- from the jihadist group in late March, backed by Russian air strikes.

Cutting the road "came as part of ISIL's biggest assault since the army recaptured Palmyra with Russian support" on March 27, Observatory chief Rami Abdel Rahman said. "Violent clashes between regime forces and Daesh are ongoing," he said, using an Arabic acronym for the jihadist group.

"Daesh surrounds Palmyra from all angles except in the southwest," Abdel Rahman said, adding the closest ISIL was to the city was 10 kilometres. ISIL and the regime both control parts of the area between Homs and Palmyra. The road ISIL cut is "the main road between Homs and Palmyra but not the only one as there are other side roads" between both cities, Abdel Rahman said.

Syria's civil war has killed more than 270,000 people and displaced millions since it started with anti-regime protests in 2011. The Britain-based Observatory gathers its information from a wide network of sources inside Syria.

Germany says EU-Turkey deal remains ‘top priority’

Anadolu Agency, 10.05.2016



The agreement between the European Union and Turkey remains Germany’s top priority in addressing the refugee crisis, German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s spokesman said. “The EU and Turkey have made an important agreement to manage this challenge together,” Steffen Seibert told a news conference in Berlin.

“The European side will stick to this agreement and will honor its commitments. And of course we expect the same from our Turkish partners,” Seibert added. German daily Bild reported that EU members had begun discussing alternatives to the agreement amid fears it could collapse.

“It is in our interest, also in the EU’s interest, to work for the further implementation of the EU-Turkey agreement. This is what we are focusing on,” Seibert also said. The agreement aims to discourage irregular migration through the Aegean Sea, develop a mechanism for resettling Syrian refugees from Turkey to the EU, and provide a 6 billion euro aid package for refugees in Turkey.

It also allows for the acceleration of Turkey’s EU membership bid and visa-free travel for Turkish nationals within the Schengen area, on the condition that Ankara meets 72 requirements set by the EU. The European Commission recommended to the European Parliament and the European Council that Turkey be added to the list of countries that are exempt from obtaining a visa to travel inside the EU.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan last week criticized the EU for demanding changes to the country’s anti-terror legislation before approving visa liberalization. Erdoğan’s comments led to speculation in the German media about the future of the EU-Turkey deal, which was hammered out by Merkel and Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, who stood down after calling an extraordinary party congress last week.

Brussels and Ankara increased cooperation on the refugee issue late last year and the implementation of the agreement significantly reduced the flow of migrants. In Germany, which accepted nearly 1.1 million asylum seekers last year, the number of refugees has fallen sharply in recent months. In April, 16,000 asylum seekers arrived in the country, according to the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees - a steep drop from the 90,000 who arrived in January.

France to create regional ‘de-radicalization’ centers, says PM

AFP, 09.05.2016



France will create regional centers to de-radicalize people and prevent them joining jihadist groups, the prime minister said as he laid out measures in response to last year’s terror attacks that killed 147 people.

The centers covering all 12 of France’s regions will take people referred by the justice system and try to stop them being sucked into jihadist networks where they could mount attacks, Manuel Valls said. “The fight against jihadism is the big challenge of our generation,” Valls said. The anti-terror plan, which will cost an additional 40 million euros by 2018 on top of current funding.

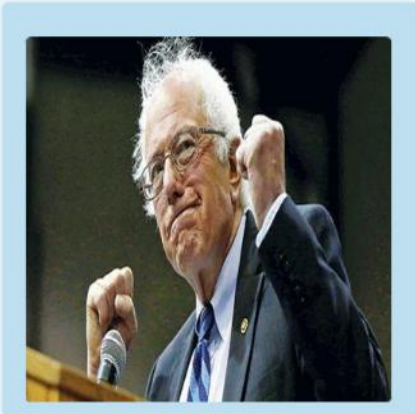
And it aims to double existing efforts to try to help people already in jihadist networks or those likely to join such groups. Around 1,600 young people in France are in state-run de-radicalization programs. The new scheme aims to bring that number up to 3,600 within two years.

The government believes nearly 9,300 people in France have been radicalized and are capable of violent actions as a result. In 2015, France was rocked by two sets of attacks that were carried out mainly by French citizens who had become radicalized and had fought abroad alongside jihadist groups.

Jihadist gunmen stormed the Paris offices of Charlie Hebdo satirical newspaper and a Jewish supermarket in January 2015, killing 17 people, and then 130 people were killed in coordinated shootings and suicide bombings in the capital claimed by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) last November. Valls said at least half of the new de-radicalization centers will take people at the request of the judicial authorities. They will be individuals “who cannot be put in prison.”

Trump rolls unrivaled, Sanders takes West Virginia

AFP, 11.05.2016



Presumptive Republican presidential nominee Trump cruised to victory in two more states, while Sanders beat rival Clinton in West Virginia, bolstering his case for remaining in the race.

Massive wins in West Virginia and Nebraska put Trump ever closer to clinching the 1,237 delegates he needs to be declared the party's nominee. "Thank you West Virginia!" and "Thank you Nebraska!" he said. Now the sole Republican candidate in the contest after his rivals dropped out, Trump is transitioning from the fierce primary battles with the likes of Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio to a general election with Clinton, even amid deep Republican discord about the billionaire.

He has narrowed his picks for running mate, telling Fox News he is considering five vice president options. "I think they are excellent," he added. "I'll announce whoever it will be at the convention" in Cleveland, Ohio, Trump said.

With Republican concern about their nominee sizzling, a Quinnipiac University poll out showed Trump closing in on Clinton's lead in two major battleground states - Florida and Pennsylvania - and overtaking her in swing state Ohio. No candidate has won the presidential election without taking at least two of those three states.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell seized on the polls, telling reporters, "the early indications are that our nominee is likely to be very competitive." Despite Clinton's overwhelming delegate lead, Sanders ensured the race would go on with his win in West Virginia, where he won more than 51 percent to Clinton's 36 percent with more than 95 percent of the vote counted.

With eight contests remaining, "we think we have a good chance to win many of those states," Sanders told supporters in San Francisco, according to CBS News. "We now have won primaries and caucuses in 19 states," Sanders was reported as saying at another rally in Oregon. "Let me be as clear as I can be: We are in this campaign to win the Democratic nomination."

Quinnipiac's poll also found that Sanders, a democratic socialist who commands an enthusiastic following on the left, would do better against Trump than Clinton in all three states if he were the Democratic nominee. The 74-year-old Vermont senator, who defeated Clinton in Indiana, has mounted an unyielding come-from-behind challenge that has exposed weaknesses in the former secretary of state's campaign.

Although almost certain to win the Democratic nomination - she is only about 160 delegates short of that goal - Clinton's ability to excite young and white working-class Democrats going into the general election has been put in doubt by Sanders's primary successes.

US activates Romanian missile defense site, angering Russia

Reuters, 12.05.2016



The United States switched on an \$800 million missile shield in Romania that it sees as vital to defend itself and Europe from so-called rogue states but the Kremlin says is aimed at blunting its own nuclear arsenal.

Senior U.S. and NATO officials declared operational the ballistic missile defense site, which is capable of shooting down rockets from countries such as Iran that Washington says could one day reach major European cities. “As long as Iran continues to develop and deploy ballistic missiles, the United States will work with its allies to defend NATO,” said U.S. Deputy Defence Secretary Robert Work.

Despite Washington’s plans to continue to develop the capabilities of its system, Work said the shield would not be used against any future Russian missile threat. “There are no plans at all to do that,” he told a news conference.

On the other side, the Kremlin insisted the deployment of the US missile defense system to Romania was a “threat” to Russia’s security. “From the very beginning of this whole story, we have said that according to our experts’ opinion, we are convinced that the deployment of the missile defense system is truly a threat to Russia’s security,” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

Before the ceremony, Frank Rose, deputy U.S. assistant secretary of state for arms control, warned that Iran’s ballistic missiles can hit parts of Europe, including Romania. When complete, the defensive umbrella will stretch from Greenland to the Azores. The United States will break ground on a final site in Poland due to be ready by late 2018, completing the defense line first proposed almost a decade ago. The full shield also includes ships and radars across Europe. It will be handed over to NATO in July, with command and control run from a U.S. air base in Germany.



Announcements & Reports

► *Why the U.S.-Nordic Leaders Summit Matters to the Next U.S. President*

Source : CSIS

Weblink : <http://csis.org/publication/why-us-nordic-leaders-summit-matters-next-us-president>

► *Young Arab Voices: Moving Youth Policy from Debate into Action*

Source : Chatham House

Weblink : <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/young-arab-voices-moving-youth-policy-debate-action>

► *Military Health Engagement*

Source : CSIS

Weblink : <http://csis.org/publication/military-health-engagement>

Upcoming Events

► *The Search for Europe*

Date : 21 May 2016

Place : Brussels - Belgium

Website : <http://bruegel.org/events/the-search-for-europe/>

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

Date : 21 May 2016

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 : 22 May 2016

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 : 23 May 2016

Place : London - UK

Website : <http://www.chathamhouse.org/event/future-capitalist-democracy-uk-japan-perspectives>



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

Date : 24 May 2016
Place : Brussels - Belgium
Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/524-emerging-markets-and-europe-time-for-different-relationships/>

► *What future for Europe's Social Models?*

Date : 25 May 2016
Place : Brussels - Belgium
Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/526-what-future-for-europes-social-models/>

► *Challenges for Growth in Europe*

Date : 26 May 2016
Place : Brussels - Belgium
Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/521-challenges-for-growth-in-europe/>

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

Date : 26 May 2016
Place : Paris - France
Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/529-global-governance-of-public-goods-asian-and-european-perspectives/>

► *The Future of the Welfare State*

Date : 28 May 2016
Place : Berlin - Germany
Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/541-the-future-of-the-welfare-state/>