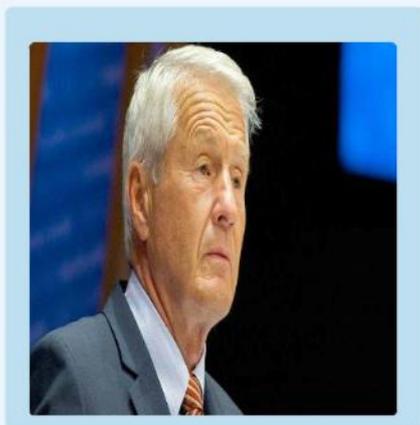


Turkey moves to ratify key CoE convention against financing of terrorism

Hurriyet Daily News, 01.01.2016



The Turkish government has moved to boost its contribution in global counter-terrorism efforts by ratifying a key convention of the Council of Europe (CoE), of which it is a founding member state.

Ankara signed the CoE's Convention on Laundering, Search, Seizure and Confiscation of the Proceeds from Crime and on the Financing of Terrorism back in March 2007, but it has so far refrained from ratifying the convention. However, Parliament's Foreign Affairs Commission approved the convention and it is expected to be sent to the General Assembly floor for ratification in the New Year.

The convention is aimed at facilitating international cooperation and mutual assistance in investigating crime and tracking down, seizing and confiscating the proceeds thereof. It is also intended to assist states in attaining a similar degree of efficiency even in the absence of full legislative harmony.

By becoming a party to the convention, member states are expected to criminalize the laundering of the proceeds of crime and confiscation of instrumentalities and proceeds (or property the value of which corresponds to such proceeds).

For the purposes of international cooperation, the convention provides for forms of investigative assistance in procuring evidence, transferring information to another state without a request, adopting common investigative techniques, and lifting bank secrecy. It provides measures to confiscate the proceeds of crime such as enforcement by the requested state of a confiscation order made abroad and domestic proceedings leading to confiscation at the request of another state. It also provides for provisional measures such as freezing bank accounts and seizing property to prevent its removal.

The convention outlines the establishment of a financial intelligence unit (FIU) in signatory states: A central, national agency responsible for receiving, analyzing and disseminating to the competent authorities, disclosures of financial information concerning suspected proceeds and potential financing of terrorism, or required by national legislation or regulation, in order to combat money laundering and terrorism financing.

It also requires each party to adopt such legislative and other measures as may be necessary to ensure that its FIU has access, directly or indirectly, on a timely basis to the financial, administrative and law enforcement information that it requires to properly undertake its functions, including the analysis of suspicious transaction reports.

Back in February 2013, Turkey adopted a much debated bill on the prevention of terrorism financing, the Law on the Prevention of Financing of Terrorism (No.6415). The law came into effect only days before Turkey's possible demotion to the "black list" of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), an inter-governmental action group established to combat international money laundering and terrorist financing.

At the time, opposition parties had strongly resisted the bill, arguing that the commission authorized with the bill would be able to freeze the financial assets of all dissident media outlets, associations, companies, labor unions, political parties, business people, foundations and trade bodies.

The Assessment Commission on Freezing Assets set up with the Law No. 6415 works under the chairmanship of the President of Turkish National Financial Intelligence Unit (MASAK). If Ankara ratifies the CoE convention, the commission will deal with asset freezing requests made by foreign countries and requests made by Turkey to other countries.

Turkey says Arab League not getting its Iraq efforts

Anadolu Agency, 26.12.2015



The Arab League has failed to understand Turkey's self-sacrificing and resolved efforts against the ISIL in the region, Turkish Foreign Ministry spokesman Tanju Bilgiç said.

His remarks came after foreign ministers of the Arab League condemned Turkish military presence in Iraq and called on Turkey to withdraw its troops from the Arab country."The statement of the Arab League, unfortunately, reveals that it has not comprehended both the extent of the threats posed by Daesh [ISIL] to mainly Iraq and our region, and Turkey's self-sacrificing and resolved efforts in the face of this threat," Bilgiç told Anadolu Agency.

The spokesman said no change had occurred in Turkey's will to negotiate with Iraq to maintain mechanisms necessary to boost and deepen cooperation against ISIL. Turkey has said it has been running a training program at a camp established in Bashiqa, near ISIL-held Mosul, to provide training to Iraqi volunteers as part of its fight against ISIL. Turkish troops at the camp are not assigned combat duties.

Turkey reinforced the protection component of its units at the camp due to increasing threats to their security. Following a series of bilateral talks to alleviate Iraq's concerns, Turkey rearranged the number of troops in Bashiqa and the additional security elements started leaving the camp. Iraq also appealed to the United Nations Security Council, stating that Turkey was violating its sovereignty and asked the Security Council to use force to make Turkey withdraw its troops from Iraqi soil.

Turkish PM calls Iraqi counterpart, congratulates on Ramadi success

Hurriyet Daily News, 30.12.2015



Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu called his Iraqi counterpart, Haidar al-Abadi, and congratulated him on the recapture of Ramadi from the ISIL militants.

Abadi reiterated his stance on respecting the territorial integrity of Iraq in regards to the deployment of Turkish troops at the Bashiqa camp near Mosul. Accordingly, Davutoğlu reassured that Turkey understood Iraq's sensitivity over its sovereignty. Davutoğlu said the issue should be evaluated in context of Turkey's struggle against both ISIL and the outlawed PKK threats in the region, added Turkish support to the liberation of Mosul would continue.

Davutoğlu also condemned attack targeting Abadi's convoy in Ramadi during his visit to the city after the recapture. Meanwhile, Abadi accused Turkey of failing to respect its agreement to withdraw its troops from the country's north.

Abadi told his Turkish counterpart during the call that a Turkish delegation had promised to withdraw its troops, according to a statement from his media office. "But the Turkish government has not respected the agreement and we request that the Turkish government announce immediately that it will withdraw from Iraqi territory," Reuters quoted Abadi as saying.

The diplomatic dispute flared after Turkey deployed a military protection unit of around 150 troops earlier this month, citing heightened security risks near the Bashiqa military base where its troops were training Iraqi militia to fight ISIL insurgents in nearby Mosul.

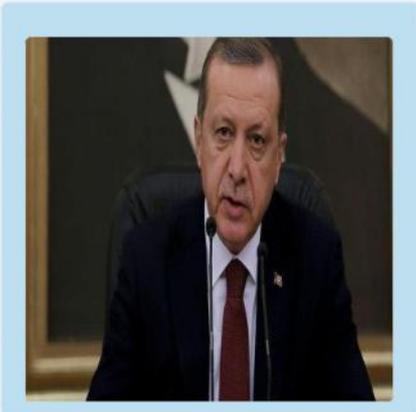
Iraqi security forces have had only a limited presence in the Nineveh province, where the camp is located, since collapsing in June 2014 in the face of a lightning advance by ISIL. U.S. Vice President Joe Biden will travel to Turkey next month amid the ongoing fight against ISIL.

Biden will visit Turkey during his previously announced trip to Davos, Switzerland, for the World Economic Forum during the week of Jan. 17. The White House said Biden will meet with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. The U.S. is pressing Turkey to do more in the fight against ISIL and tighten its border with Syria, as Turkey has been a target of ISIL attacks.

Biden is also working to stamp out a fiery spat between Turkey and Iraq over the Turkish troops in northern Iraq. Iraqi Foreign Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari reiterated the country's demands that Turkish troops pull out of northern Iraq, warning that Baghdad may have to consider military action.

Erdogan seeks public discussion on presidential system

Anadolu Agency, 01.01.2016



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has proposed broad-based public participation in deciding on a new constitution and Turkey's potential shift to a presidential system.

His remarks on Thursday came amid Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's ongoing talks with the opposition parties over drafting a new constitution to replace the current one that dates back to the Sept. 12, 1980 coup d'etat. "A search conference will help lay the groundwork towards drafting a constitution on which a full societal agreement can be reached," he told upon returning from his Saudi Arabia visit.

Erdogan described the "search conference" as "a kind of public survey" that could involve Turkish citizens on a large scale, proposing "not small numbers like 500,000, but by increasing the numbers much further".

In a 1995 article, Robert Rehm and Nancy Cebula define the search conference as a "participative planning method that enables people to create a plan for the most desirable future of their community or organization, a plan they take responsibility for carrying out themselves". They add that the term was first used in 1959 by Fred Emery and Eric Trist, who introduced it to merge two aircraft engine manufacturers in Great Britain.

"The issue is to avoid having a presidential system that has a structure or character that will cause practical annoyances for the public. As long as you uphold justice in practice -- that's what the people seek and expect -- there will be no problem," Erdogan said.

The president stressed that he himself would chair meetings with various circles in society -- including the academia and the media -- at the presidential complex to listen to their opinions. Erdogan said most of the developed countries have a presidential or semi-presidential system. "I believe we can take much stronger steps once Turkey has shifted to such a system," he added. "We are in search of the better."

Russian minister: Turkey remains important trading partner despite spat

Reuters, 29.12.2015



Turkey remains an important trading partner for Russia, and Moscow aims to minimise problems for Turkish and Russian businesses caused by sanctions, Russian Economy Minister Alexei Ulyukayev said.

His comments, playing down the impact of recent economic sanctions introduced as retaliation for Turkey's shooting down of a Russian jet, suggest that Russia is eager to prevent sanctions harming Russia's own economy. "Turkey remains our large trading partner. Our embargo is selective, very selective, concerning food and only certain (items)," Ulyukayev said in an interview with Russian state television.

"They are designed in a way so that existing contracts won't be violated. Here we are for the time being very cautious. We don't want to create problems for Turkish business, and even less for our own business and citizens."

Relations between Moscow and Ankara soured last month after a Turkish warplane shot down a Russian jet bomber near the Syrian-Turkish border. Russia denied it had violated Turkish air space. Following the incident, Russia introduced economic sanctions against Turkey. These included banning the import of Turkish fruit and vegetables, bird meat and salt, and the sale of charter flights and tourist visits to Turkey, from January 1.

Ulyukayev's comments come a day after President Vladimir Putin signed a decree that widened the sanctions to include companies controlled by Turkish citizens even if the companies did not fall under Turkish jurisdiction.

At the same time Putin also ordered his government to draw up a list of exceptions to the sanctions, giving Russia leeway to continue doing business with Turkish companies if it thinks Russia would benefit.

Spokesman: Turkey sees no normalisation of Israel ties without end to Gaza blockade

Reuters, 28.12.2015



Turkey sees no normalisation in ties with Israel unless its conditions for ending the Gaza blockade and compensation for the deaths of 10 Turkish activists in 2010 are met, a presidential spokesman said.

Relations between Turkey and Israel soured when the activists were killed in a raid by Israeli commandos on a Turkish boat, the Mavi Marmara, which was trying to breach the blockade. Expectations of a breakthrough were intensified after senior officials met this month to try to repair ties. The talks have raised hopes of progress in negotiations to import Israeli natural gas.

Particularly since Turkey's relationship with major energy producer Russia has worsened over Syria. But comments from Presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalin suggest Turkey may be trying to play tough in the negotiations.

"Turkey - Israel relations will not normalise until Israel realises the three conditions. We have not given up on these," Kalin said at a regular news conference. Ankara wants an apology for the Mavi Marmara killings, and compensation for families. It also wants Israel to end the blockade of Palestinians living in Gaza, seen as a sticking point in the talks.

"Turkey will continue to play its role until a two-state solution is reached, and the Palestinian people have their own state. There cannot be permanent peace in the region until the Palestinian problem is solved," Kalin told reporters in Ankara.

Asked to respond to the remarks from Ankara, an Israeli official declined to discuss Gaza policy, saying only: "We will not be conducting negotiations through the media." Israeli officials have previously described the blockade on Gaza, which is supported by neighbouring Egypt, as a necessary means of preventing arms smuggling by Palestinian militants. Israel allows commercial goods into Gaza through its land crossings and said that nearly 128,000 tons of material, or 3,750 truckloads, entered the enclave.

Six major problems ahead of Turkey in 2016

Hurriyet Daily News, 01.01.2016



2015 has been a problematic year for Turkey both in domestic and international politics. Two general elections, the changing mood of the Kurdish problem and the spillover of Syrian war in the form of jihadi terrorism were major problems inside Turkey.

The Syrian war with the worsening situation with the downing of the Russian plane, the changing nature of the fight in cooperation with the U.S. against the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) and the possibility of reactivating relations with the European Union over the flux of Syrian refugees were major foreign policy and security issues.

In 2016, there are six major problems ahead of Turkey as of today; three domestically and three in foreign policy.

The government considers that to extend operations against the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has resumed its armed campaign with demands of autonomy along its Iraq and Syria borders, could further alienate the people living in those regions. On the other hand, the PKK is not likely to give up the campaign because of the same reason and wants to bring security forces face to face with civilians in towns, rather than militants in the mountains. If the government cannot find an innovative solution to break the stalemate, the problem is likely to continue in 2016 as well.

Following the 2015 election win, President Tayyip Erdoğan is happy to see that Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu has given priority to a shift to a presidential system in Turkey in his Justice and Development Party (AK Parti) work for a new constitution. After Erdoğan has signaled that reconciliation with the social democratic Republican People's Party (CHP) could speed up the process, the stance of the CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu has softened regarding a system change. If such reconciliation takes place, that could decrease the political polarization in the country and be good for economy as well.

Besides curbed trade routes to its south and east due to serious problems in Syria and Iraq and also with Iran and Egypt, Turkey is likely to suffer from its trade with Russia, especially in tourism and construction sectors, because of the Syria situation. The government could try to close the gap, especially in construction and finance sectors by attracting Gulf capital but that might not be enough. Turkey needs to get more foreign investment but there are security and court independence problems affecting that. A democratic constitution and closer relations with the EU could help the situation. Syria's civil war is likely to continue despite peace efforts. As a part of the U.S.-led coalition against ISIL, Turkey's moves in the Syria theater would be limited because of the Russian presence there, after the downing of the plane, unless President Erdoğan manages to find a way out with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

That limit makes Ankara nervous especially regarding the advances of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian wing of the PKK, mainly because of its own Kurdish problem. The pressure on the Turkish government could lessen with the closure of the remaining 98 km part of the border against speculations of ISIL infiltration, but that could mean an end to Turkey's Syria policy for the last four years.

Turkey has become a major target for ISIL as it has become more involved in the anti-ISIL fight. Because of the Russian constraints in Syria, Turkey may not take an active part in the strikes, but that is not the only way to fight against ISIL. Nor are the relations between Turkey and the U.S. limited to the anti-ISIL fight or Syria. The U.S. backs Turkey against Russian accusations on Turkey about ISIL, but makes its point behind the doors. The conflict with Iran over Syria and Iraq seems to continue in 2016.

The first half of 2016 is likely to show whether there will be progress in Turkey's relations, which is closely linked to the Greek Cyprus talks under the auspices of the United Nations. Keeping in mind the possibility of a Russian obstruction there, a deal between Turkish and Greek Cypriots could be a major breakthrough in the region with its influence on peace and stability in the East Mediterranean and the use of the area's natural sources like natural gas and water. That is valid for Turkey's relations with Israel as well, if diplomatic contact produces a political settlement, but in terms of that, no time frame can be given for now.

Russia suspends visa-free travel with Turkey

Novinite, 01.01.2016



As had been previously announced, Russia suspended its visa-free regime with Turkey. This is one of the retaliatory measures taken by Russia in response to the downing of the Russian Su-24 bomber by Turkey near the Turkish-Syrian border on November 24. Russia has also imposed bans on the import of certain Turkish fruits and vegetables.

Among the other economic sanctions featured in a decree signed by Russian President Putin in November are: ban on charter flights between Russia and Turkey; ban on selling Russian nationals tours and related services linked to visits to Turkey; suspending the employment of Turkish nationals.

According to the decree, visa restriction will not affect Turkish citizens with a temporary residence permit in Russia and those on diplomatic mission. The relations between Russia and Turkey have deteriorated since the incident, with both sides hurling mutual accusations at each other. Ankara maintains that the Russian aircraft had violated Turkish airspace and was issued with ten warnings before being shot down, while Moscow claims that the airplane stayed exclusively within Syrian airspace.

Turkey, Israel need each other, says Erdoğan

Today's Zaman, 01.01.2016



Speaking to a group of journalists aboard a plane en route to Turkey from a visit to Saudi Arabia, Erdoğan said Turkey still wants an apology for a 2010 Israeli raid on the Gaza-bound Mavi Marmara aid ship that killed 10 Turks, compensation for families of the victims and the lifting of the blockade of Gaza for normalization of ties with Israel, severed after the deadly raid.

“Israel needs a country like Turkey in the region. We need to accept that we also need Israel. This is a reality of the region,” Erdoğan said in remarks published in Turkish newspapers.

Expectations of a breakthrough were intensified after Turkish and Israeli senior officials met last month for talks on mending ties. The talks, which come as Turkey's relations with its No. 1 gas supplier, Russia, have worsened, raised hopes of progress in negotiations to import Israeli natural gas.

Erdoğan said the Israeli side has agreed to allow transfer of goods and construction materials to Gaza from Turkey but that Ankara awaits the agreement to be put in writing. “If we manage to take these steps with mutual sincerity, normalization will come along. We need to look out for our Palestinian brothers,” Erdoğan said.

He said “an end to the violations of the sanctity of al-Aqsa Mosque” was another issue of importance for Turkey, referring to one of the holiest sites in Islam located in the Old City of Jerusalem. Erdoğan also dismissed criticism that a newly-formed alliance of Muslim countries led by Saudi Arabia was a sectarian initiative. “The alliance primarily aims at fighting terrorism,” he said. “It does not have a sectarian nature.”

Saudi Arabia said last month that more than 30 nations, including Turkey, have agreed to form a new “Islamic military alliance” to fight terrorism with a joint operations center based in its capital, Riyadh. Shiite majority Muslim nations Iran and Iraq are among the countries excluded from the alliance.

Turkish PM vows better future with new constitution

Anadolu Agency, 31.12.2015



Turkish PM Davutoglu has expressed hope for a better future for Turkey in 2016 as Ankara works toward a new constitution that will bring “advanced democracy” to the country.

Delivering a written New Year message, Davutoglu said: “We will hopefully crown our success -- which has been continuing since 2002 -- with the new constitution.” The current constitution was drafted in 1982 following a military takeover and has undergone several amendments since. “The new constitution that we will prepare (...) will duly guide Turkey towards standards of advanced democracy,” Davutoglu said, adding:

“It will be a political contract that every citizen will be proud of and embrace.” He also stressed progress in Turkey’s European Union accession bid, saying that Turkey’s efforts to become an EU member would also contribute to Ankara’s democratic vision.

The European Union has opened a new chapter on economic policy in Turkey’s ongoing accession talks, bringing the country a step closer to full membership of the 28-nation bloc. Chapter 17, which aims at bringing Turkey in line with EU’s economic and monetary policy and guaranteeing independence of the central bank, is the first chapter to be opened in two years and raises the total number of chapters opened so far in the accession talks to 15 out of 35. Davutoglu also wished peace, justice and stability in 2016. “Our efforts will continue to bring much more democracy, justice and peace,” he added.

Iraq FM tells Turkey to pull out of north, threatens action

The AP, 30.12.2015



Iraq's foreign minister has reiterated demands that Turkish troops pull out of northern Iraq, warning Ankara that Baghdad may otherwise have to consider military action.

A Turkey-Iraq spat flared up after Turkey deployed reinforcements to a camp in northern Iraq's Bashiqa region where Ankara is helping train Sunni and Kurdish fighters to battle ISIL militants. The deployment riled Baghdad, which considers the new troops an illegal incursion and which subsequently demanded their immediate and complete withdrawal. After Iraq's demands, Turkey began withdrawing the troops but not completely.

Iraqi Foreign Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari said that Baghdad will continue to pursue peaceful means, but that if there is no other solution and if "fighting is imposed on us, we will consider it to protect our sovereignty."

US: Russian strikes in Syria killing civilians

Hurriyet Daily News, 30.12.2015



The United States expressed concern at what it said was the heavy civilian toll of "indiscriminate" Russian air strikes in Syria. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry spoke to his Russian counterpart Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and conveyed Washington's worries.

"Russian air strikes in Syria have killed hundreds of civilians, including first responders, [and] hit medical facilities, schools and markets," said State Department spokesman Mark Toner. Toner added that in October and the first half of November, more than 130,000 Syrians had been forced to flee their homes, in part because of intensified Russian bombing.

Moscow has angrily denied reports from Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Syrian rights groups that its air campaign in support of President Bashar al-Assad's government is hitting civilians.

Russia slammed as “absurd” accusations by the United States that Russian air strikes in Syria are killing hundreds of civilians. Russia has come under growing criticism from the West as well as human rights groups and Syrian rebels for inflicting civilian casualties in its two-month bombing campaign in the war-torn country.

“All of these anonymous and unsubstantiated statements about the alleged use of Russian aircraft on civilian targets in Syria is increasingly reminiscent of hypnotists’ acts in travelling circuses,” Russia’s Defense Ministry said in a statement, calling the claims “absurd.” The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said that Moscow’s strikes had killed 2,371 people since they were launched Sept. 30. It said the toll includes 792 civilians, among them 180 children.

Russia’s Defense Ministry said it deplored the “absolute silence” about the strikes by the United States, which is leading a coalition conducting its own bombing campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). It said the U.S. raids had caused “mass casualties.” Amnesty International last week issued a damning report claiming that the Russian raids had killed hundreds of civilians, many in targeted strikes that could constitute war crimes.

Defense Ministry spokesman Igor Konashenkov dismissed the report, saying it was made up of “clichés and fakes.” Toner said the United States had expressed its concerns to Moscow about “these indiscriminate attacks ... on infrastructure, on medical facilities, on civilians.”

Kerry also complained to Lavrov about the killing of Syrian rebel chief Zahran Alloush, in an air strike claimed by al-Assad’s government. Toner said the United States had concerns about the rhetoric and tactics of Alloush’s rebel group – Jaish al-Islam – but had noted that he was ready to take part in U.N.-mediated peace talks. “It is our hope that it does not send a discouraging message to other members of the Syrian opposition ... who have expressed a willingness to take part in this process,” Toner said.

US: Iranian Revolutionary Guards fired rockets near US warships in Gulf

Reuters, 30.12.2015



Iranian Revolutionary Guards launched rockets near the U.S. aircraft-carrier Harry S. Truman and other warships as they were entering the Gulf, giving only brief notice in a “highly provocative” act, a U.S. military spokesman said

NBC News said the Truman came within about 1,500 yards of a rocket. “The rockets were not fired, only near them,” the network said. Several Revolutionary Guard vessels fired the rockets “in close proximity” of the warships and nearby merchant traffic “after providing only 23 minutes of advance notification,” said Navy Commander Kyle Raines.

“These actions were highly provocative, unsafe, and unprofessional and call into question Iran’s commitment to the security of a waterway vital to international commerce,” Raines said in an email. The Truman, accompanied by two warships from the U.S.-led coalition supporting air strikes against Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) militants in Iraq and Syria, was entering the Gulf through the Hormuz Strait on a routine transit when the incident occurred, he said.

NBC News said the U.S. destroyer Buckley and a French frigate were in the area where the rockets were fired. “While most interactions between Iranian forces and the U.S. Navy are professional, safe, and routine, this event was not and runs contrary to efforts to ensure freedom of navigation and maritime safety in the global commons,” Raines said.

Iranian and U.S. forces have clashed in the Gulf in the past, especially during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s after the 1979 Islamic revolution. Tehran and six world powers including the United States clinched an agreement in July that would curb Iran’s nuclear program in return for lifting economic sanctions.

US: Ship with low-enriched uranium leaves Iran for Russia

Reuters, 29.12.2015



A ship carrying more than 25,000 pounds of low-enriched uranium materials left Iran for Russia in an Iranian step toward honoring nuclear deal with major powers, the US said.

Under the landmark nuclear accord, certain U.S., European Union and U.N. sanctions are to be removed in exchange for Iran accepting long-term curbs on a nuclear program that the West has long suspected was aimed at creating a nuclear bomb. A key provision of the agreement, negotiated by Iran with the US, Britain, China, France, Russia and Germany, is Tehran’s commitment to reduce its stockpile of low-enriched uranium to below 660 pounds.

If much further refined, low-enriched uranium can yield fissile material for nuclear weapons. “The shipment included the removal of all of Iran’s nuclear material enriched to 20 percent that was not already in the form of fabricated fuel plates for the Tehran Research Reactor,” U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said in a written statement.

“This removal of all this enriched material out of Iran is a significant step toward Iran meeting its commitment to have no more than 300 kg of low-enriched uranium by Implementation Day,” Kerry added. Implementation Day refers to the date when the International Atomic Energy Agency, the Vienna-based U.N. nuclear watchdog, confirms Iran has taken a series of steps to curb its nuclear program, paving the way to U.S., EU and U.N. sanctions relief.

Kerry said the low-enriched uranium shipment would more than triple Iran's "breakout time" of an estimated two-to-three months. "Breakout time" refers to the amount of time needed to obtain enough nuclear material to make a single atomic bomb. With full implementation, the nuclear deal is supposed to push Iran's breakout time to at least one year.

Germany to increase scrutiny of Syrian asylum applicants

AFP, 31.12.2015



Germany will start holding personal hearings for asylum seekers from Syria as of Jan. 1, an Interior Ministry spokeswoman, reversing a policy of granting almost automatic refugee status for Syrians.

Syrians have enjoyed a simplified asylum process, which has exempted them from personal hearings. Critics say this has allowed Islamic State to smuggle in militants to carry out attacks in Europe. Chancellor Merkel has repeatedly rebuffed pressure to clamp down on migrant arrivals along German borders, saying Germany has a duty to shelter people fleeing conflict and persecution.

But opposition to her stance grew at home and abroad after two of the suicide bombers in the Nov. 13 Paris attacks were found to have been carrying fake Syrian passports. "This regulation will be valid as of January 1 regardless of the country of origin," the Interior Ministry spokeswoman said of the change in policy, confirming a report in best-selling Bild newspaper.

France asked the European Union to improve the detection of fake Syrian passports used by people trying to get into Europe. French Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve called on the European Commission to tighten security by improving the quality of equipment used to check travel documents at external borders, notably in Greece and Italy.

Blank passports were in circulation that had been stolen from administrative facilities in places run by Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and once an identity had been added to them they were very hard to detect, he wrote in a letter.

Two of the suicide bombers who detonated explosives outside the Stade de France stadium, as part of the November attacks which killed 130 people, were carrying false Syrian passports they had shown in Greece when entering the EU on Oct. 3, Cazeneuve said. Germany has taken in just over a million migrants this year, far more than any other European country.

Brussels cancels New Year's fireworks, festivities over terror threat

AFP, 31.12.2015



Belgian authorities cancelled the annual New Year's Eve festivities and fireworks in the heart of Brussels after revealing an alleged jihadist plot to attack the capital during the holiday.

The city of 1.2 million people has been on high alert since France said several men involved in the deadly November 13 attacks in Paris had links to Brussels, which is home to the headquarters of the European Union and NATO. "Unfortunately we have been forced to cancel the fireworks and all that was planned," mayor Yvan Mayeur told Belgian broadcaster RTBF.

Some 100,000 people turned out to watch the traditional New Year's Eve fireworks display at the Place de Brouckere, a central square. Mayeur said in the current circumstances it wasn't possible to "guarantee that we can check everyone coming to the event." "It's better not to take any risks," he added.

The authorities said they had arrested two people suspected of plotting attacks on "emblematic sites" in Brussels during the New Year festivities. A source close to the investigation told AFP officials were trying to determine whether members of a motorcycle gang, the so-called "Kamikaze Riders", were involved in the plot.

Belgian media said the gang's founder was one of the two held on suspicion of terrorism-related activities. The pair are due to appear before a judge who will determine whether or not to keep them in custody. Speaking for the first time since the plot Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel said the decision to cancel the New Year's festivities was a tough one but the right one.

"It was, I understand well, a delicate, difficult decision for the mayor to take," Michel told RTBF television. It is not however the first time that the New Year's Eve fireworks have been cancelled as the authorities made the same decision in 2007 in connection with another terror threat.

"It's better to be safe than sorry," Georges, a Belgian of Greek origin told AFP as he sat with friends at a bar in Ixelles, just outside the city centre. Since the Paris attacks and its links to Brussels, the friends said they had been avoiding crowded areas, including the central Grand Place, which Belgian media said may have been a target in the latest plot.

Alexandre, a Frenchman who moved to Brussels just weeks ago, told AFP he had been planning to attend the fireworks with his brother and some friends. "It's a bit disappointing," said the 28-year-old, but he insisted it should not be seen as a win for the jihadists. "We see it more as an act of prevention rather than a victory," he added.

Officials said the plot disclosed was not directly linked to last month's Paris attacks that left 130 dead. A key suspect in those attacks, Belgian-born fugitive Salah Abdeslam, is believed to have fled to Brussels in the hours after the gun and suicide bombing attacks claimed by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) jihadist group.

Belgian police held a man for questioning following a new search in the troubled Brussels neighbourhood of Molenbeek in connection with the Paris attacks. The French capital also remains on high alert and has abandoned its fireworks display on the Champs-Élysées, although the traditional gathering on the famous boulevard will go ahead under tight security.

Serbian politician's remark 'unfortunate'

AFP, 20.12.2015



Serbian President Tomislav Nikolic's claims that Turkey attempted to start a war between NATO and Russia with the Nov. 24 downing of Russian warplane near the Syrian border are "unfortunate," Turkish Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Tanju Bilgiç has said.

"The statement has nothing to do with the truth," Bilgiç told reporters. Bilgiç said Turkish leaders clearly noted Turkey's views on the downing of the Russian plane. "Every state has the right to expect respect for its sovereignty," he added. "Turkey acts responsibly in international relations since it's a country in a region in crisis," Bilgiç said.

Speaking to Russian RIA Novosti news agency, Nikolic said the downing of the Russian warplane was an attempt to bring NATO and Russia into conflict with each other in Syria. "It was an attempt to involve the two powerful forces in one big military conflict in Syria," Nikolic said.

He also said Turkish warplanes had violated Greek airspace many times but that Greece did not down them, highlighting that such responses have serious consequences, as Turkey should have known. Nikolic's remarks came after Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's visit to Serbia. His office said Davutoğlu had voiced the country's desire for the normalization of relations with Moscow during the meeting.

Putin names United States among threats in new Russian security strategy

Reuters, 01.01.2016



A new appraisal names the US as one of the threats to Russia's national security for the first time, a sign of how relations with the west have deteriorated in recent years.

The document, "About the Strategy of National Security of Russian Federation", was signed by President Vladimir Putin on New Year's Eve. It replaces a 2009 version, endorsed by then- President Dmitry Medvedev, the current prime minister, which mentioned neither the United States nor NATO. It says Russia has managed to heighten its role in solving global problems and international conflicts. That heightened role has caused a reaction by the West, it says.

"The strengthening of Russia happens against the background of new threats to the national security, which has complex and interrelated nature," the document says. Conducting an independent policy, "both international and domestic" has caused "counteraction from the USA and its allies, which are striving to retain their dominance in global affairs."

That in turn is likely to lead to "political, economical, military and informational pressure" on Russia, the document says. Relations between Russia and the West reached a low after Russian forces annexed the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine in March 2014, after protests in Ukraine forced its pro-Moscow president to flee to Russia.

Since then, the West has accused Russia of aiding insurgents in eastern Ukraine. Moscow denies actively assisting the rebels. The United States and the European Union have since imposed wide-ranging sanctions against Russian individuals and companies. Moscow has reacted by restricting food and other goods from the EU.

The document says that the United States and the EU have supported an "anti-constitutional coup d'état in Ukraine", which led to a deep divide in Ukrainian society and a military conflict. It also names the expansion of NATO as a threat to Russia's national security and said that the United States has expanded its network of military-biological laboratories in neighbouring to Russia countries.

The document, which serves as a basis for planning strategy related to national security by different state bodies, does not mention Syria. Russia began air strikes against anti-government rebels opposed to the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, a Russian ally.

White House ‘delays imposing new sanctions on Iran’

Reuters, 01.01.2016



The White House has delayed imposing new financial sanctions on Iran over its ballistic-missile program, The Wall Street Journal reported.

The Journal, citing U.S. officials, said the Obama administration was preparing to sanction nearly a dozen companies and individuals in Iran, Hong Kong and the United Arab Emirates for their role in developing Iran’s ballistic-missile program. The U.S. sanctions were expected to be formally announced, the newspaper said. Sources familiar with the situation confirmed to Reuters that the United States was preparing sanctions.

The Obama administration is committed to combating Iran’s missile program and the sanctions being developed by the U.S. Treasury Department remain on the table, the Journal reported, citing U.S. officials. But U.S. officials offered no definitive timeline for when the sanctions would be imposed, the newspaper said.

At one point, they were scheduled to be announced in Washington, according to a notification the White House sent to Congress, the Journal reported. Imposing such penalties would be legal under the landmark nuclear agreement forged between global powers and Iran in July, the officials said, according to the Journal.

Iranian officials have said the country’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, would view such penalties as violating the nuclear accord. U.S. officials have said the Treasury Department retains a right under the nuclear deal to blacklist Iranian entities suspected of involvement in missile development.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani ordered his defense minister to expand Iran’s missile program, in defiance of the U.S. threat to impose sanctions over a missile test Iran carried out in October.



Announcements & Reports

► *Matching Research and Innovation Policies in EU Countries*

Source : Bruegel
Weblink : <http://bruegel.org/2015/12/matching-research-and-innovation-policies-in-eu-countries/>

► *Global Economic Governance: Italy's Role in the G7 and G20*

Source : Bruegel
Weblink : <http://bruegel.org/2015/12/global-economic-governance-italys-role-in-the-g7-and-g20/>

► *Afghanistan a Year After "Transition": Losing the War at Every Level*

Source : CSIS
Weblink : <http://csis.org/publication/afghanistan-year-after-transition-losing-war-every-level>

► *CIO-Enabled Innovation Playbook: Lessons For The Public Sector*

Source : Brookings
Weblink : <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/techtank/posts/2015/12/23-innovation-playbook-public-sector-desouza>

Upcoming Events

► *Stability and Human Security in Afghanistan in 2016*

Date : 04 January 2015
Place : Washington DC, The US
Website : <http://www.brookings.edu/events/2016/01/04-stability-and-security-in-afghanistan>

► *The New Silk Road: What is in it For Europe*

Date : 14 January 2015
Place : Shanghai - China
Website : <http://bruegel.org/events/the-new-silk-road-what-is-in-it-for-europe/>



► *Competitive Gains in the Economic and Monetary Union*

Date : 18 January 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 : 24 January 2015
Place : London - UK
Website : <http://www.chathamhouse.org/event/future-capitalist-democracy-uk-japan-perspectives>

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

Date : 26 January 2015
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 : 27 January 2015
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 : 28 January 2015
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 : 28 January 2015
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 : 29 January 2015
Place : Berlin - Germany
Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/541-the-future-of-the-welfare-state/>