

## Turkey thanks Merkel for support of safe zones in Syria

Hurriyet Daily News, 25.02.2016



Turkey's foreign minister has thanked German Chancellor Angela Merkel for her support of the Turkish government's demand to establish safe zones inside Syria, while U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry expressed wariness over a safe zone in Syria, saying that up to 30,000 troops would be needed to maintain the area.

"Merkel's support is important. We thank her very much," FM Çavuşoğlu told the. Turkey has long proposed the establishment of safe zones inside Syria so that Syrians leaving their homes but has failed to garner sufficient support from the international community, particularly the US.

Turkey has reiterated its proposal to secure a 10-kilometer-deep strip of the Syrian border as a safe zone, as intensified clashes between Russia-backed regime forces and opposition forces pushed a new refugee influx into Turkey. Given the huge refugee problem threatening the EU's unity, Merkel expressed her support for Turkey's proposal to keep fleeing Syrians inside Syria.

"This proposal of Turkey was not seriously discussed when we first brought it to the agenda. But even with delay, Turkey's proposal is now understood," he said. "It's important that Merkel endorses this idea but this should be taken into account in a serious way.

If you support this idea with the understanding of 'How can we stop refugees?' after this problem knocks your door, then this would be a provisional support. We can only healthily discuss and take steps about the proposals Turkey objectively brought to the table with the understanding of 'What can we do altogether for Syrians?' he said.

Safe zones will not only be useful for stemming the refugee flow but also for providing humanitarian aid to Syrians who have been displaced inside Syria, Çavuşoğlu said. "How many cities could we have built [inside safe zones] with the \$10 billion we have spent so far?" he asked. Meanwhile, Kerry said that up to 30,000 troops will be needed in Syria to protect any safe zone in the northern part of the country.

Citing Pentagon estimates, Kerry told a U.S. Senate committee that protecting a safe zone was more complicated than many anticipated. "All this talk about safe zones does not go through the process of what it really means," Kerry was quoted as saying by Anadolu Agency. "Our Pentagon estimates that to have a true safe zone in the north of the country you may have upwards of 15,000 to 30,000 troops." "Now are we ready to authorize that? Are we ready to put them on the ground?" he asked. He said personnel and equipment would be needed to protect against airstrikes as well as ground attacks.

Recalling that Turkey and EU countries will come together at a summit on March 7 to review the implementation of the Nov. 29, 2015, Action Plan over the refugee issue, Çavuşoğlu stressed, “Turkey has fulfilled and is fulfilling its liabilities on visa liberalization and other issues.

Our reform process continues. We are signing international conventions that we have not signed in the past and making legal arrangements. The EU has to fulfill its own liabilities with the approach of *pacta sunt servanda*.” The Action Plan stipulates the transfer of 3 billion euros to Turkey to meet the needs of Syrians, the minister stated, calling on Brussels to accomplish all necessary procedures immediately.

“We are sharing our plans and projects with the EU. Education, health and employment are important areas. There are 700,000 Syrians of school age. We provide education to 300,000 of them. 270,000 Syrians are in the camps. There are still Syrians who want to come. We need to make camps for the additional 10,000 Syrians who came in recently. We should construct temporary houses. This money should be fully spent for humanitarian issues,” he said.

## Turkish FM calls on Washington to make up its mind on YPG

Anadolu Agency, 22.02.2016



Days after expressing his pleasure over seeing his U.S. counterpart agree with Turkey over the “unreliability” of the Syrian Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG), the military wing of Syria’s Democratic Union Party (PYD), Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu has once more accused Washington of making conflicting statements about the YPG and PYD, urging U.S. officials to eliminate their internal differences and make up their minds over the issue.

“The U.S. is our ally. Different views between their own institutions or different views of persons within the same institutions are not binding for us.

What I had said was what I was told by U.S. Secretary of State, my friend John Kerry, on the telephone,” Çavuşoğlu said, referring to a conversation with Kerry held. “My friend Kerry said the YPG cannot be trusted. When you look at some statements coming from America, conflicting and confused statements are still coming.... We were glad at least to hear from John Kerry yesterday that his views on the YPG have partly changed,” Çavuşoğlu said.

Speaking to reporters at a daily press briefing , State Department Deputy spokesperson Mark C. Toner was asked whether the U.S. “trusted” the YPG. “They have been very effective partners on the ground in northern Syria, as part of a broader group of forces fighting in northern Syria, in pushing back ISIL [the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant].



And we've not seen, in our assessment, any inclination for them to do anything else other than take the fight to Daesh [ISIL]," Toner responded. In response to questions at a joint press conference with visiting Italian Foreign Minister Paolo Gentiloni, Çavuşoğlu reiterated that Kerry had told him the YPG was "not reliable." "And thereby, he said that we would do some things together in the fight against Daesh. Our conversation was recorded anyway; it is clear. I have thanked him for arriving at this point and seeing this truth. We have been trying to explain and we are saying it again.

And I hope that these truths find their places in all institutions inside America too and different views among themselves get eliminated. We are not saying this to intervene in their domestic affairs but we are saying it because this also influences their dialogue with us," he said.

"Relying upon another terrorist organization in the fight against terror organization Daesh just because the former is secular when compared to Daesh is weakness, desperateness and also a very big mistake," he said, after repeating that Ankara has provided Washington with evidence showing that the YPG committed the Feb. 17 bombing that killed at least 28 people in the heart of the capital city.

"Who falls into the sea should not hold a snake because that snake bites you, too," he added, referring to a Turkish idiom meaning "If you are in a bad situation, you will accept any help." Turkey was also informed of the content of a draft agreed to by Kerry and Lavrov when it was sent to Ankara, Çavuşoğlu said, dubbing the deal "a reflection of the Feb. 11 declaration" in Munich.

"What matters here is a halt to Russia's airstrikes. We told our views on this [to Kerry]," Çavuşoğlu said, noting opposition groups would gather in Riyadh to discuss recent developments. "As it has always been the case, we will resume our constructive endeavors. We have encouraged the opposition to participate in the negotiations. The goal is common for all of us but the countries with secret agendas should also stop these activities," he said.

Strictly ruling out plans for a unilateral joint move with Saudi Arabia for a ground incursion into Syria, Çavuşoğlu, however, said, "Instead of getting back from other terror organizations to fight against Daesh on the ground, as the 65 countries [of the anti-ISIL coalition], we can very well fight against these organizations." "But there is a fact in the open," he said, arguing that these 65 countries have "failed" in the fight against ISIL.

# Turkey commemorates Struma victims on tragedy's 74th anniversary

Dogan News Agency, 25.02.2016



The 767 victims killed in the Struma boat tragedy while trying to escape the Holocaust were commemorated for the second time in Turkey, in a ceremony in Istanbul's historic Sarayburnu neighborhood.

The ceremony, , was attended by Istanbul Governor Vasip Şahin, the head of Turkey's Jewish Community Ishak Ibrahimzadeh, and Chief Rabbi İzak Haleva, along with the Istanbul consul generals of Germany, Israel and Romania. Speaking at the commemoration, Şahin described the causes of the tragedy as "anti-Semitism, racism, xenophobia and enmity towards different religions."

He stressed the need to fight these phenomena, which he said are once again on the rise in Europe. "We observe that the necessary lessons were not drawn from such tragedies," he said, comparing the plight of Syrian refugees fleeing the war in Syria with Jews who struggled to escape the Holocaust.

"Today, we need to not look for someone to blame but to draw the necessary lessons and prevent the repetition of such incidents," Şahin added. Ibrahimzadeh also stressed the need to face the realities of the past, "not for revenge but to create peaceful and free tomorrows, to prevent such tragedies in the future."

"History teaches us once again that sacred truths inevitably come to light, despite attempts to hide them," he said, praising recent steps by the Turkish state to "mend history with the Jewish community." On the same date last year, the first ever ceremony was held in the Sarayburnu neighborhood to commemorate the sinking of the Struma, with attendance of then Culture and Tourism Minister Ömer Çelik, who is now the spokesperson for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP).

This year's ceremony was concluded with a prayer by Chief Rabbi Haleva, in memory of the tragedy's victims. Governor Şahin, Chief Rabbi Haleva and Ibrahimzadeh also left a wreath in the Bosphorus, while participants of the commemoration threw white carnations into the sea.

In 1942, the Struma, which was carrying 768 Jewish refugees from the port of Constanza, sank after being torpedoed just off the Turkish coastal village of Şile, in the international waters of the Black Sea. Only one refugee survived and 767 people perished, including 103 children and the entire crew. The Struma disaster took place after British authorities officially declared that no more Jews would be accepted to Palestine. As a result, the Turkish authorities did not allow anyone to leave the boat while it was docked in Istanbul. The boat was then towed back to the Black Sea, where it eventually sunk after being struck by a torpedo, likely fired by a Soviet submarine.



# Turkish presidential office to establish ‘economic and foreign trade council’

Hurriyet Daily News, 26.02.2016



Turkey’s presidential office has decided to establish an economic and foreign trade council that will consist of 50 people, 35 of whom will be leading businesspeople, as well as six ministers, according to sources. The move is expected to follow the launch of similar councils for justice, energy and educational affairs and basic freedoms.

The Economic and Foreign Trade Council will be composed of 50 people in the initial stage and a total of 35 leading businesspeople, mainly from the manufacturing and production sectors, have been chosen to be a part of the council, sources added.

Six ministers from the economy administration will also become council members in addition to the heads of leading economic institutions, such as the banking watchdog, two city governors and two mayors. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan will head the council meetings if his schedule is convenient, according to sources. The council will focus on the demands of the production sectors and general economic planning issues.

Decisions by the council will be compiled in reports to be submitted to the government as recommendations. The cabinet will decide whether these decisions are applied or not. Erdoğan will also follow the process, the sources added. Four other councils will also be established in the areas of justice, energy, education and basic rights and freedoms. These councils are also planned to be composed of 50 people, mainly from non-governmental organizations.

# Sidelining Turkey from the Syria equation

Hurriyet Daily News, 25.02.2016



The Pentagon describes the dispute between the U.S. and Turkey over the Syrian Kurdish group the PYD as an “ongoing topical conversation.” Conversations between PM Davutoğlu and U.S. Vice President Biden, and later between Turkish President Erdoğan and U.S. President Obama over the past two weeks have not been able to solve the dispute.

The Turkish government continues to stress the PYD and YPG, are Syrian branches of the outlawed PKK, which has waged an armed campaign against Turkey for over three decades, claiming more than 40,000 lives so far.

Erdoğan and Davutoğlu say that as the U.S. and the EU recognize the PKK as a terrorist organization, they should consider the PYD-YPG a terrorist group as well. Erdoğan’s statements on Feb. 24 about excluding the PYD from the Syrian truce deal reached between the U.S. and Russia - to be effective as of midnight on Feb. 27 – may well be in vain, but they reflect Ankara’s persistence on the issue.

It is unlikely that the U.S. and Russia will exclude the PYD-YPG, which is fighting against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), from the truce and thus legitimize Turkish operations against it. The truce, like the Munich framework on Feb. 11-12, is based on U.N. Resolution 2254, which clearly singles out ISIL and al-Qaeda affiliate al-Nusra as terrorist targets for all parties.

It is true that Turkey was among the contributors to the Munich framework. But two days later Turkish artillery started to open “reciprocal fire against YPG and Syrian army positions.” Neither Biden nor Obama could stop that. On the contrary, right after his 1 hour, 20 minute phone call with Obama, Erdoğan said on Feb. 20 that Turkey had the right to hit terrorist targets in Syria and elsewhere.

Turkey accuses the YPG-PKK of executing the suicide bomb attack in Ankara on Feb. 17, which killed 29 and injured many others. It also accuses the Bashar al-Assad regime of being behind it. The Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK), a dummy organization used by the PKK, claimed responsibility for the attack, but for Ankara they all amount to the same PKK.

Davutoğlu said that the PYD’s real aim was not fighting against ISIL but actually securing an autonomous Kurdish corridor next to the Turkish border, opportunistically taking the help of the Russians too. British Foreign Minister Philip Hammond also expressed a similar concern, pointing out the coordination between the Syrian regime, the Russians, and the PYD.

U.S. officials certainly have all the information showing the organic link between the PYD and the PKK, but even if the YPG claimed responsibility for the Ankara attack, it would have been difficult for Washington to admit the link as the U.S. needs a fighting force on the ground.

Following Turkey's shooting down of the Russian jet last November, it is not at all likely that Russian President Vladimir Putin would consider any Turkish suggestion on Syria. He would definitely not make changes to the truce deal based on Turkish demands.

That truce deal was only reached by almost effectively sidelining Turkey. However, it may not be realistic to expect any truce or political deal in Syria can last if Turkey is sidelined. After all, Turkey has cultural and social links in common with Syria, as well as a 910-km border; it will also still be here when the Americans and Russians decide to go home one day.

The importance of Turkey in the Syria equation is particularly true when considered alongside the migration dimension, which has become a real headache for the EU. Sidelining Turkey in these deals may bring a short-term success to sell to the U.S. and Russian publics, but such success may last no longer than a few weeks.

## US wants more information from Turkey to reconsider support for PYD

Hurriyet Daily News, 26.02.2016



**Washington will re-evaluate its assistance to Syria's PYD in the event Turkey provides detailed information on the party's direct support to outlawed PKK elements operating in Turkey, a U.S. official has said.**

**"We have very strong concerns about PYD actions in northwest Syria. And of course we are very concerned about potential YPG military support from Syria to PKK elements operating in Turkey," a senior U.S. official told. "When that is raised with me, I continue to ask for the details of the incidents in which Turkish government says it has stopped it from happening.**

I continue to ask for those details so that if those incidents are happening, then we can try to undertake efforts to address them or to re-evaluate the very limited cooperation we have so far with the groups fighting DAESH," the official said, using the Arabic acronym of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

The U.S. has limited the supply of ammunition to the Syrian Arab forces that includes the PYD's armed wing, the People Protection Units (YPG), in their fight against ISIL, but the move still caused unprecedented tension between Turkey and the U.S. Turkish media aired videos of the PYD using high-tech U.S.-made Javelin missiles in a show of the supply of its sophisticated weaponry system.

"I just want to underscore that the U.S. government has not deployed Javelin missiles or any weapons directly to the YPG. We have provided limited quantities of ammunition to the Syrian Arabs who fight with the YPG and not directly to the YPG," the official noted.

“The second thing: if you do any research on Javelin missiles, you will find that these missiles are manufactured in the U.S., but the US military is not the only one that purchases them. Several other NATO militaries and militaries of some non-NATO partners, maybe 10 or 15 countries, have purchased these missiles in the past and I assume that they have them in their inventories,” said the U.S. official. “I can’t obviously say whether or not one of those countries and militaries engaged to provide these to the PYD. I just don’t know.”

The official said the U.S. was very sensitive to Turkish concerns over its security. “And that’s why we have been so conservative in what we are providing and more importantly to whom we are providing it.”

The reactions of the Turkish leadership on the issue are political implications emanating from these concerns, the official said. “Obviously we recognize that this is a very sensitive political issue. And that’s why you will continue to hear such strong statements from Washington, condemning PKK terrorism and calling on the PKK to cease the violence it [has committed] in Turkey.”

## All eyes on Syria as ceasefire deadline looms

AFP, 26.02.2016



**U.S. President Barack Obama has warned Moscow and Damascus the “world will be watching” their commitment to a looming ceasefire, as the 17-nation group backing the Syria peace process prepared to fine-tune the deal.**

Obama said the next few days would be critical for the partial truce brokered by Moscow and Washington which has been agreed by both Assad’s regime and Syria’s top opposition grouping. The deal - which excludes the ISIL and the Nusra Front - marks the biggest diplomatic push yet to help end Syria’s violence, but has been plagued by doubts after the failure of previous peace efforts.

Members of the 17-nation International Syria Support Group (ISSG) backing the process are to meet in Geneva on Feb. 26 to work out further details of the agreement, which is expected to be endorsed by the U.N. Security Council on the same day, diplomats said. UN draft resolution to be voted on Feb 26, diplomats say

The joint draft resolution, which Russia and the United States circulated to the U.N. Security Council and diplomats say the 15-nation council plans to put to a vote on the afternoon of Feb. 26, would endorse the halt in fighting and demand that it begin as planned at midnight local time. It also “demands that all parties to whom the cessation of hostilities applies ... fulfill their commitments,” according to Reuters, which says it saw the draft resolution.





The draft further “urges all Member States, especially ISSG members, to use their influence with the parties to the cessation of hostilities to ensure fulfillment of those commitments and to support efforts to create conditions for a durable and lasting ceasefire.” There are hopes a successful “cessation of hostilities” will lead to the resumption of peace talks that collapsed in Geneva earlier this month.

“Tomorrow is going to be a very important, I will say a crucial day,” the U.N.’s Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura told reporters at the U.N.’s European headquarters in Geneva. The agreement allows military action to continue against ISIL, which seized control of large parts of Syria and Iraq in 2014, as well as against the Al-Qaeda affiliated Al-Nusra Front and other jihadist groups.

Obama said he was certain those groups would continue to fight, but stressed the U.S.-led coalition was winning the war against ISIL, citing territorial gains. He also said he was not “under any illusions” about possible pitfalls, but that the ceasefire could help bring about an end to the war. “A lot of that is going to depend on whether the Syrian regime, Russia, and their allies live up to their commitments,” Obama said.

“The coming days will be critical, and the world will be watching.” Russian President Vladimir Putin has promised to do “whatever is necessary” to ensure the ceasefire is implemented. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said he hoped Washington will keep its obligations under the Syria truce deal, the Associated Press reported.

Russia and the United States are on opposing sides of the conflict, with Moscow backing Assad and Washington supporting the opposition, but the two powers have been making a concerted push for the ceasefire to be respected. Iran is also a supporter of Damascus, and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said that Tehran had withdrawn a “significant number” of its elite Revolutionary Guards troops from Syria.

The United Nations has managed to boost aid ahead of the ceasefire deadline and expressed optimism of more deliveries. Jan Egeland, a special advisor to De Mistura, said that more than 180 trucks filled with aid had reached six areas under siege from different sides in the past two weeks.

They have brought assistance to just under a quarter of the 480,000 people estimated to be living in 17 besieged places across Syria. Egeland said permission had been requested to bring aid to besieged parts of Aleppo, Homs and Eastern Ghouta, all hotspots in the country’s conflict. “We have high hopes that we will be able to get through to these places,” he said. Observatory says Russia conducts airstrikes on rebels, Russia denies The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitor said, that Russian warplanes had carried out intense air strikes on rebel strongholds around in Syria’s Damascus, Homs and Aleppo on the same day.

“From last night [Feb. 25] to this morning [Feb. 26] there have been Russian air strikes that are more intense than usual on rebel bastions including on Eastern Ghouta east of Damascus, in the north of Homs province and in the west of Aleppo province,” Observatory head Rami Abdel Rahman said. The Kremlin, on the other hand, said that Russian warplanes were bombing “terrorist organizations” in Syria ahead of the ceasefire, but dismissed reports that Moscow’s air force had conducted intense strikes on rebel strongholds. “The Russian air force is certainly continuing its operation in Syria” against “terrorist organizations,” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

# Iran votes in vital elections after nuclear deal

AFP, 26.02.2016



Iranians began voting across the country on Feb. 26 in elections billed by the moderate president as vital to curbing conservative dominance in parliament and speeding up domestic reforms after a nuclear deal with world powers.

A pro-government coalition called “The List of Hope” is representing President Hassan Rouhani’s ambitions in the polls. Almost 55 million people are eligible to cast ballots that will ultimately elect 290 lawmakers. They will also vote in a second election to select the Assembly of Experts, a powerful committee of 88 clerics that monitors the work of supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

While MPs are elected for four years the assembly will be granted an eight-year term. Should Khamenei, who is 76, die during that time its members would pick his successor. Voting started at 8am (04:30 GMT) and will close at 6pm although officials say polling stations could stay open if there are queues and more time is needed to cast ballots.

Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei cast his vote in a televised ceremony and urged everyone to do so “quickly, as it’s both a duty and a right”. “Everyone must vote, those who love Iran, those who like the Islamic Republic, those who love the grandeur and glory of Iran,” he told a state television reporter after casting his vote.

“We have enemies. Elections should be such that make the enemy disappointed. We must vote with insight and open eyes.” As Iran’s ultimate authority, Khamenei’s powers outrank those of Rouhani, but the president is looking for gains in parliament to allow him to build on the nuclear deal by bringing improvements at home.

The economy has featured strongly during the election campaign as Iran faces a stubborn challenge to overcome the damage that almost a decade of sanctions caused. The elections will be a crucial indicator of the future direction Iranians want for their country.

“I expect the situation of the country to improve through reforms,” Atefeh Yousefi, 38, told AFP while waiting in line at a polling station in Tehran, adding that she regretted boycotting elections in the past. Rouhani has played up the potential for foreign investment which he says will bring jobs, particularly for Iran’s youth whose unemployment rate of 25 percent is two-and-a-half times the national average.

However, conservatives say strong economic growth will only be possible if an emphasis is placed on domestic production under a “resistance economy” model more in tune with the ideals of Iran’s 1979 Islamic revolution.

Although he returned the economy to growth after inheriting a recession, the president remains vulnerable as the benefit of sanctions relief and a return of international business will take time. If voters support the pro-Rouhani list, a coalition of moderate and reformist candidates, the president could swing the balance of power in parliament, creating an opening for social and political reforms on which he has so far been blocked by lawmakers.

But a one-week official campaign for the parliamentary election has been largely overshadowed by controversies over who was allowed to run for office. The exclusion of thousands of candidates -- reformists said they were worst hit, with the barring of their most prominent faces leaving them with untested hopefuls -- has raised concerns over turnout.

A total of 4,844 candidates, about 10 percent of whom are women, are standing in the parliamentary election. Only 159 clerics -- a fifth of the applicants -- are seeking a place on the Assembly of Experts. Rouhani sent a text message urging people to vote, saying participation was needed "to build the future of the country with plenty of hope," echoing the campaign message of his allies.

The main conservative faction is headed by Gholam-Ali Hadad Adel, a former parliament speaker, whose daughter is married to one of supreme leader Khamenei's sons. Results from outside Tehran are expected within 24 hours but the vote tally in the capital, which has a population of 12 million and is electing 30 lawmakers, will take three days.

## Moderates test hardliners' grip on power in Iran vote

Reuters, 25.02.2016



The Feb. 26 vote for Iran's parliament and the Assembly of Experts, the body that will pick the next supreme leader, have assumed an importance well beyond the perennial battles between hardliners entrenched in power and reformists seeking to unseat them.

These are the first elections since Tehran reached an accord with major powers to curb its nuclear program, leading to the removal of most of the punitive international sanctions that have strangled the economy. The breakthrough took place under President Rouhani, who sees it as a springboard for Iran to reintegrate and return to world markets.

But hardline opponents are determined to prevent it leading to any liberalization of the Islamic system through the ballot box. These electoral contests are seen by some analysts as a make-or-break moment that could shape the future for the next generation, in a country where nearly 60 per cent of the 80 million population is under 30.

The outcome could be skewed by the disqualification of many pro-reform candidates by an unelected clerical Guardian Council that reports directly to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The stakes are high for all factions, since the outcome may well determine whether Rouhani has a mandate to push ahead with long-promised political, social and economic reforms, as well as influencing his chances of re-election in 2017.

In the final days of campaigning, the fight turned vicious. Reflecting an abiding mistrust in Rouhani's overtures to the West, Khamenei accused the West of plotting to influence the vote and said he was sure Iranians would vote in favor of keeping Iran's anti-Western stance.

Rouhani, whose allies have come under growing pressure in the election campaign from hardliners who accuse them of links to Western powers, has denied such accusations, calling them an insult to the intelligence of Iranians.

Moderate allies of Rouhani, buoyed by the nuclear deal, are hoping to win back positions they lost over the past decade. But the filtering out of candidates and the slow pace of economic improvement have added to popular disillusion over Rouhani's stalled reforms, leaving them facing an uphill battle.

## Kerry issues warning over holding Syria together if cease-fire not implemented

Reuters, 24.02.2016



The United States warned it would be hard to hold the country together if the fighting did not stop after a cease-fire deal was reached to take effect as of Feb. 27. With hostilities reported on several fronts, rebels backed by Saudi Arabia expressed doubts about the proposal, which excludes attacks by the Syrian army and its Russian backers on the jihadist groups the ISIL and the al-Qaeda-linked Nusra Front.

Saudi-backed rebels said Russia had stepped up air strikes since the plan was announced. For its part, the Syrian government in Damascus has made clear that continued foreign help for the rebels could wreck the deal.

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said the United States would soon know if the plan would take hold. "The proof will be in the actions that come in the next days," he told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in Washington.

If a political transition to a government to replace the current administration does not unfold in Syria, there are options, Kerry said, in a reference to undefined plans believed to include military action. The next month or two would show if transition process was serious and Assad would have to make "some real decisions about formation of a transitional governance process that's real," Kerry said.





Faced with skepticism about the cessation of hostilities plan, Kerry said that things in Syria could get uglier. "It may be too late to keep it as a whole Syria if we wait much longer," he said. Kerry insisted Washington is working on ways to react if diplomacy does not work. "There is a significant discussion taking place now about Plan B if we don't succeed at the table," Kerry said.

France said the leaders of the United States, France, Britain and Germany hoped the cessation deal could take effect soon. The plan is the result of intense diplomacy to end the five-year-long war that has killed at least 250,000 and forced millions to flee their homes helping to cause a refugee crisis in Europe.

But the Saudi-backed opposition, the High Negotiations Committee (HNC), said the exclusion of ISIL and the Nusra Front would give the government a pretext to keep attacking them because its fighters are widely spread in opposition-held areas. Salem al-Muslet, a spokesman for the HNC, said that Russia had stepped up air strikes since a U.S.-Russian ceasefire plan was announced and that it feared worse was to come in the days before the agreement is due to take effect.

HNC chief negotiation Mohammad Alloush said that the opposition had yet to decide whether it would commit to the cease-fire deal. Alloush said the HNC would give the final answer. "We have until Friday [Feb. 26]," Alloush told Orient News, who heads the political office of the Jaish al-Islam rebel group.

One day after announcing that they would abide by the deal with reservations, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad assured Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin of his government's readiness to respect a ceasefire deal brokered by Moscow and Washington, the Kremlin said.

The Kremlin said the two leaders discussed the deal in a phone call and that Assad noted that the proposals laid out in the agreement were an "important step in the direction of a political settlement." "In particular, [Assad] confirmed the readiness of the Syrian government to facilitate the establishment of a ceasefire," it said in a statement.

Russian Defense Ministry spokesman, Maj.-Gen. Igor Konashenkov, that a coordination center to help enforce a cease-fire was set up and it was located at Syria's Hemeimeem air base hosting Russian warplanes, the Associated Press reported. Konashenkov said in a statement that the center had been created in line with cease-fire deal.

Konashenkov said the coordination center will help organize cease-fire negotiations between the Syrian government and the opposition. He said Russia has given out its hotline numbers for enforcing the truce to the U.S. Turkey's state-run Anadolu Agency reported that the U.N.-brokered Syria peace talks which were scheduled to resume had been delayed.

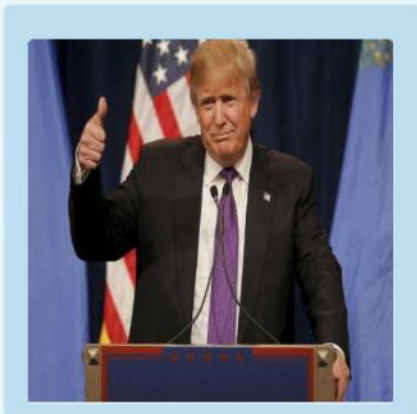
Syria peace talks have been "delayed for technical and logistics reasons," a U.N. official told an Anadolu Agency correspondent. The official did not give further information about when the talks would resume. U.N. envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura had announced a "temporary pause" of the peace talks on Feb. 2 due to intensified fighting in Syria and had set the date of Feb. 25 for their resumption in Geneva. Meanwhile, Gennady Gatilov, Russia's deputy foreign minister, said that he expects peace talks between the Syrian government and opposition to resume in days. With political will, Gatilov said, "we can achieve great results."

ISIL fighters were reported to have tightened their grip on a supply route to Aleppo that had been used by the Syrian government in its campaign to seize the city. Heavy Russian air strikes in support of the army were also said to be targeting one of the last roads into opposition-held parts of Aleppo.

Damascus, backed by ground forces including Lebanon's Hezbollah and Iranian Revolutionary Guards, is making significant advances near Aleppo, which is split between rebel- and government-control. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which reports the war using a network of sources on the ground, said ISIL fighters had seized the village of Khanaser on the road, which remained closed for a second day. A Syrian military source told Reuters that army operations continued to repel the attack.

## Trump storms to victory in Nevada Republican caucuses

AFP, 24.02.2016



Donald Trump stormed to victory in Tuesday's Republican caucuses in Nevada, giving the billionaire businessman his third straight win in the race for the White House. With 20 percent of the vote in, TV networks gave Trump 44 percent, with senators Marco Rubio of Florida and Ted Cruz of Texas trailing some 20 points behind in a tight race for second.

"This is an amazing night," Trump told cheering supporters in a victory speech. The lopsided result underscored the enormous challenge Trump's rivals face as the candidates head into next week's all important "Super Tuesday" contests involving 11 states.

As early returns came in, CNN and Fox News had Rubio in second place with about 25 percent of the vote and Cruz in third place with about 22 percent. Trump said his win was broadly based. "We won the evangelicals. We won with young. We won with old. We won with highly educated. We won with poorly educated," he said.

"I love the poorly educated. We're the smartest people. We're the most loyal people." The remaining two candidates for the Republican presidential nomination, retired neurosurgeon Ben Carson and Ohio Governor John Kasich, lagged far behind in the single digits.

Cruz insisted he was the only candidate who could beat Trump and said he was now setting his sight on next Tuesday's crucial contests. "One week from today will be the most important night of this campaign," he said. Trump had been all but certain to triumph in Nevada, with the big question being whether Rubio -- favoured by mainstream Republicans -- could clinch second place. The contest was the fourth for the Republican presidential candidates, with Trump so far winning in New Hampshire and South Carolina. He came in second in Iowa.



Although the caucus in Nevada is not expected to have a significant impact on the overall race -- only 30 delegates or slightly more than one percent of the total are up for grabs -- it was the first contest for the Republicans in the US West.

It is also the first test of Republican voter sentiment after Jeb Bush pulled out of the race last week following a poor showing in South Carolina. All eyes were on whether Rubio and Cruz would be able to slow Trump's momentum and which of the two candidates would come in second.

"Who is going to be the strongest guy to go against Trump... is going to be more clear after today," said Dan Lee, assistant professor of political science at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. "Today we are going to see whether voters are going to move over more in support of Rubio."

He noted that the Nevada caucus was taking place as mainstream Republicans are grudgingly accepting the fact that Trump may well end up the party's nominee given his seemingly unstoppable winning streak. "A lot of Republicans -- especially the Republican establishment, professionals, governors -- don't really want Trump to win the nomination," Lee said. "They want to get Cruz out and have Rubio go against Trump."

The real estate magnate dished out his trademark rhetoric against his rivals ahead of the vote Tuesday, comparing Cruz to a "soft, weak, little baby" at a rally. "But for lying, he's the best I've ever seen," he added. Cruz fired back, accusing Trump of consistently vacillating on issues and saying his insults showed how rattled he was. "@realDonaldTrump, showing class & grace, calls me a 'soft weak little baby,'" Cruz tweeted. "Hope he doesn't try to eat me!"

The Republican field, which once stood at 17, has shrunk to five, with Bush the latest to pull out. After Nevada, the real test on where the presidential candidates stand will come on March 1, when 11 states go to the polls in what is known as "Super Tuesday."

Unlike primaries, caucuses allow participants to openly engage with one another and hear arguments from candidates' supporters or surrogates, in meetings at schools, community centers and churches. Republicans then vote by secret ballot, in 130 caucus sites across Nevada. The results will be used to determine the number of Republican delegates who represent the state at the party's nominating convention in July.

# Announcements & Reports

## ► *The Turkish Economy in 2015*

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

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

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

## ► *Seeing the Forest through the SAMs on Woody Island*

**Source** : CSIS  
**Weblink** : <http://csis.org/publication/seeing-forest-through-sams-woody-island>

# Upcoming Events

## ► *Central Banking After The Great Recession*

**Date** : 27 February 2015  
**Place** : Brussels - Belgium  
**Website** : <http://bruegel.org/events/monetary-policy-after-the-great-recession/>

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

**Date** : 28 February 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** : 28 February 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** : 28 February 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** : 12 March 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** : 14 March 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** : 15 March 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** : 15 March 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** : 27 March 2015  
**Place** : Berlin - Germany  
**Website** : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/541-the-future-of-the-welfare-state/>