

Turkey wants high-level summit to broker visa deal with EU

Hurriyet Daily News, 01.12.2016



Despite ongoing sound and fury in ties between Turkey and the EU, efforts to accomplish a long-standing deal on granting visa-free travel to Turkish nationals in return for implementing the refugee Readmission Agreement have reached a critical point, with officials from Ankara and Brussels developing a formula to overcome the stalemate on the definition of terror.

“[Vice President of European Commission Frans] Timmermans made some proposals to us in October. As the justice, interior, foreign and EU ministers, we made our assessments on these proposals.

We will introduce them to our prime minister next week and then to our president,” EU Minister Ömer Çelik told reporters in Brussels. Çelik made this comment before his scheduled meeting with Timmermans, in which the two officials will further discuss the content of the proposals. “There are surely some things that I will tell him and he will tell me,” he added.

The comprehensive migrant deal between Turkey and the EU stipulated the implementation of visa liberalization for Turkish nationals by the end of June in the event that Turkey fulfilled 72 criteria cited by the European Commission.

Turkey delivered 65 of them but failed to change its anti-terror law amid the campaign against the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Visa liberalization was first postponed to Nov. 1 but developments after the failed July 15 military coup attempt made it impossible. Ankara urged Brussels that the end of the year was the deadline of the deal, saying that if negotiations fail so will the Readmission Agreement.

“I am not sure whether there could be a new process in the new year. But this process is about to expire at the end of this year. This has been dragged out too long,” Çelik said. He suggested that one of the initiatives that could contribute to the accomplishment the visa liberalization, and resolve recent tension between Ankara and Brussels, would be holding a high-level summit where Turkish and European leaders could discuss everything and draw a road map for the future phases of their ties.

“I have spoken with my European counterparts. The point we have arrived at is no longer sustainable. We should hold a Turkey-EU Summit. Things cannot go on like this,” Çelik said. This call is still being evaluated in Brussels, and Çelik referred to the difficulty of such an initiative amid election campaigns in prominent European countries, including France.



Turkey and the EU had held a number of high-level meetings in late 2015 and early 2016 to overcome differences over the refugee crisis. But Europe witnesses five important elections in 2017, as well as ongoing Brexit negotiations, which will make any Ankara-Brussels processes even more complicated.

“Turkey has not lost its determination to join the European Union as a full member, as our President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has put it. We are always willing to continue fair and objective negotiations with the EU,” Çelik said. “It’s true that we are in a serious crisis with the EU. We have to bring about a positive agenda to continue our relations,” he added.

The EU Minister also responded to questions on Turkey’s appeal for membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), known as the Shanghai Five and sometimes suggested as an alternative bloc to the EU or NATO.

“The EU is one thing, the SCO another. Our relationship with the EU has not been cut. If this is ever cut one day, then we would begin our searches. We have always said we are in favor of continuing negotiations on the condition that they are fair and objective,” Çelik said.

He also stressed that the SCO cannot be described as an alternative to Turkey’s NATO membership: “Turkey is not opening its membership to NATO to a discussion. And there is no such discussion on Turkish membership of NATO either. Turkey’s place in NATO will even be more important in the coming period, both for Turkey and NATO.”

Çelik also touched on the rising populist nationalist tide in Europe, along with Islamophobia, xenophobia and discrimination. “As a European country, it’s our duty to urge our European friends and politicians about the future of Europe,” he said.

“As we are against attempts to strengthen sectarian, ethnic approaches in the Middle East, we are also against the rise of extreme right in Europe. Because this is to our disadvantage as well. We need to talk about these issues,” he stressed.

“I have a project in mind to address this: Let’s hold a meeting in Istanbul on the future of the EU, not just on relations between Turkey and the EU. We are working on it. Those in Europe and Turkey who are mulling over this issue will be the participants,” Çelik said.

Kurtulmuş: EU leaders should act reasonably at December summit

Hurriyet Daily News, 28.11.2016



European Union leaders should act reasonably at the European Council's December meeting, Deputy PM Numan Kurtulmuş urged, reiterating that the Turkish government had dismissed a decision by the European Parliament to recommend a freeze in Turkey's EU accession talks.

"I would like to state that in contrast to this decision [of the European Parliament], it is important to exhibit a reasonable approach to Turkey at the leaders' summit. We do not want this relationship to move in a negative direction. But in the event of a negative situation, I would like to say that the EU would be affected more," Kurtulmuş said.

His comment came after the European Parliament advised the European Commission and member states to temporarily freeze Turkey's EU accession talks in a resolution adopted. Commencing and ending full membership negotiations occur through European Council decisions, which require the unanimity of all member states.

Turkey began full membership talks in 2005 but could only open 16 chapters out of 35 until now. The council will gather EU leaders in December to decide on Turkey's future relations with the bloc. Criticizing the resolution for contradicting European values, Kurtulmuş said the government did not acknowledge the European Parliament's decision.

"This decision indicates the rise of the radical right. This decision is an alarm bell for European politics. It is a contradiction to European values. It is visionless and is a decision which has double standards," he said. "We, as the government of the Republic of Turkey, declare this decision void."

Assessing EU-Turkey relations, Kurtulmuş said Turkey expected the EU to stick to the refugee deal, which the EU offered 3 billion euros for and said they would provide visa-free travel for Turkish citizens in response to Turkey taking more responsibility for refugees.

"What we are expecting is for the EU to do its part. They should adopt visa liberalization [for Turkish citizens] which we agreed to implement in June 2016. The EU is due to give 3 billion euros to aid Turkey's help for refugees. We hope the EU makes this due payment," he said.

Lavrov: Neither Syria nor Russia attacked on Turkish soldiers

Anadolu Agency, 01.12.2016



Neither Syria nor Russia carried out an attack on Turkish soldiers in northern Syria on Nov. 24, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has said, calling on Ankara “to continue to improve coordination to concentrate on the anti-terror fight.”

“Neither Russia nor Syria, with its air force, had anything to do with this. We don’t want a repetition of these sort of incidents. It’s essential to discuss this issue with the United States and other institutions,” Lavrov said at a joint news conference with his Turkish counterpart, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, on Dec. 1, without elaborating on who might be responsible.

Four Turkish soldiers were killed and nine others were wounded in an air strike during the “Euphrates Shield” – a Turkish-backed Free Syrian army (FSA) operation in northern Syria. Turkey said it believed the attack was carried out by the Syrian army even though Damascus never claimed responsibility for the strike.

Due to a translation mistake, Lavrov’s remarks were first translated as if he had accepted the Syrian regime’s role in air strikes, but the Russian Embassy and the Turkish Foreign Ministry corrected the statement.

Just before the Lavrov-Çavuşoğlu meeting, it was revealed that Russian officials and representatives from the Syrian opposition had conducted meetings in Ankara with the mediation of Turkey, according to sources. The two parties have been discussing a potential cease-fire in Aleppo, the evacuation of the wounded and humanitarian efforts, sources who wished to remain anonymous told the Hürriyet Daily News.

At the joint press conference, Lavrov confirmed the negotiations with the opposition group and said Russia was “ready for talks with anybody” for a solution to the Syrian crisis. Russia and Turkey “are exchanging views” on the issue, he added.

Çavuşoğlu, for his part, said talks between Russia and Syrian opposition would be natural, indicating that the meeting could be possible upon Ankara’s demand. Another top issue on the agenda of the two ministers was the situation in Aleppo where civilians have been heavily targeted by the Syrian government in recent weeks.

Russia will continue its operations in eastern Aleppo and will rescue the Syrian city from terrorists, Lavrov said, adding that Russia would continue efforts to allow humanitarian aid into the country’s commercial capital. Çavuşoğlu said they had agreed on the need for a cease-fire in Aleppo and the rest of Syria and stressed Turkey wanted a political solution in neighboring country.



Elaborating President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's recent remarks that Turkey's military intervention into Syria was merely aimed at toppling Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Çavuşoğlu said Turkey's stance on al-Assad was clear, and that despite differences on the Syrian president, Ankara and Moscow agreed that a political solution was needed in Syria.

"The target of the Euphrates Shield operation is clear: we want to clear the region from DAESH [the Arabic acronym of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant] and al-Nusra. We are struggling against all terrorist organizations, like the PYD, YPG and PKK," Çavuşoğlu stated, in reference to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and its offshoots in Syria, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the People's Protection Units (YPG).

The two foreign ministers have reviewed the ongoing process of normalization in bilateral ties and preparations for a high-level cooperation council meeting that will take place in upcoming months under the leadership of the countries' presidents.

Lavrov stressed they wanted to accelerate the normalization between Turkey and Russia. Russia intends to lift sanctions on Turkey "gradually," he said, while Çavuşoğlu underlined that both parties should immediately eliminate barriers to trade. Visa requirements should also be lifted, the Turkish minister stated.

They aim to stop a decrease in the foreign trade deficit between Turkey and Russia, the Russian foreign minister said, while recalling the signing of the Turkish Stream natural gas pipeline project.

But Lavrov called on Turkish exporters to increase health standards on agricultural products, particularly in meat products, he stated. Russia promotes major Turkish investments in his country, and the work of Turkish businessman has never stopped, Lavrov noted.

"We'll continue to work with Turkish companies for major projects in Russia," he stated. Before lifting visa requirements, the mobility of people connected to terrorist activities should be prevented, entailing cooperation between security institutions and consulates, he said.

Pentagon: Errors led to coalition strike on Syria forces

Hurriyet Daily News, 30.11.2016



A string of miscommunications and human errors resulted in a U.S.-led coalition air strike in Syria in September that reportedly killed around 90 regime forces, the Pentagon said.

American, Australian, British and Danish planes all took part in the massive air strike, which saw a total of 34 guided bombs and hundreds of rounds of high-caliber ammunition blasted at what were believed to be the ISIL targets. There were “errors in the development of intelligence, as well as missed opportunities for coalition members on duty to recognize and voice contrary evidence to decision makers,” U.S. Central Command said.

The statement, which followed a six-week probe, marked the U.S. military’s first formal admission of fault into the Sept.17 attack near Deir Ezzor. The U.S.-led coalition is focused on attacking ISIL in Syria and Iraq, and is eager to avoid getting involved in Syria’s brutal civil war.

Regime officials have accused the coalition of intentionally killing its troops, but CENTCOM stressed the attack was conducted in the “good faith” belief it was targeting ISIL. U.S. Air Force Brigadier General Richard Coe, who investigated the case, told reporters the probe had only conclusively counted 15 deaths, but acknowledged the toll was possibly much higher.

Meanwhile, Syrian government artillery fire killed 21 civilians, including two children, in an eastern district of Aleppo early Nov. 30, a monitoring group said. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said at least eight of those killed were civilians who had fled from elsewhere in the east as government forces advance, and sought refuge in rebel-held Jubb al-Qubbeh.

The Britain-based monitor said dozens more were wounded in the “fierce” shelling, and many people were stuck under the rubble of collapsed buildings. Tens of thousands of people have poured out of the rebel-held northeast in recent days, with some crossing into territory held by either the government or Kurdish forces, but others moving south into remaining rebel-held territory.

Syrian army announces major advance in Aleppo

Reuters, 28.11.2016



The Syrian army and its allies announced the capture of a swathe of eastern Aleppo from rebels in an accelerating attack that threatens to crush the opposition in its most important urban stronghold. Rebels denied that the army had taken the strategically vital Sakhour area which - if it fell - would mean rebel-held territory in the eastern part of the city was split in two.

But the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the government had taken Sakhour, and rebels had lost control of more than a third of eastern Aleppo in recent days, according to Reuters.

Thousands of residents were reported to have fled. A rebel fighter reached by Reuters said there was “extreme, extreme, extreme pressure” on the insurgents there. The Russian Defense Ministry said the areas captured by Syrian government troops include 10 neighborhoods and over 3,000 buildings in the past few days, The Associated Press reported. The ministry added in a statement that more than 100 rebels have laid down their arms and exited the Syrian city’s eastern suburbs.

Capturing eastern Aleppo would be the biggest victory for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad since the start of the uprising against him in 2011, giving him control of the whole city. For Assad, taking back Aleppo would shore up his grip over the main urban centers of western Syria where he and his allies have focused their firepower even as much of the rest of the country has slipped from their grip.

It would also be seen as a victory for his allies, Russia and Iran, which have outmaneuvered the West and Assad’s regional enemies through direct military intervention. With military backing from the Russian air force, Iran, and Lebanon’s Hezbollah, Assad has gradually closed in on eastern Aleppo this year.

Citing a military source, Syrian state TV said the army and its allies had seized the entire Sakhour area and were working to clear it of mines. Backed by allied militiamen, the army has been advancing into eastern Aleppo from the northeast in recent days, and made significant gains over the weekend.

A military news service run by Hezbollah declared the northern portion of eastern Aleppo was now under government control. Observatory director Rami Abdulrahman called it the biggest defeat for the opposition in Aleppo since 2012. Abdulrahman said part of the area had been seized by the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) militia, which is hostile to the rebels in eastern Aleppo and had advanced into the rebel-held territory from the Kurdish-controlled Sheikh Maqsoud district.

Damascus and its allies have steadily closed in on rebel-held eastern Aleppo this year, first cutting off the most direct route to nearby Turkey before encircling it from the west and then beginning a fierce assault in September.

While some of the rebels in Aleppo have received support from states such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United States during the war, they say their foreign backers have failed them as Assad and his allies unleash enormous firepower.

“There is great, great pressure on the fighters in Aleppo and there is very ferocious shelling and heavy attrition of people and ammunition,” said the rebel fighter. “God willing the fighters will hold on and be able to resist the regime.”

The fighting has forced thousands of residents of eastern Aleppo to flee. Some have gone to the Kurdish-held Sheikh Maqsoud district, others have gone over to government territory, and others have moved deeper into remaining rebel-held areas.

US concerned over Shiite militia joining Iraqi army

AFP, 23.11.2016



The Iraqi government’s effort to integrate a Shiite militia, the al-Hashd al-Shaabi, into the country’s security forces is concerning as it might increase Iran’s influence with Baghdad, a U.S. general said on Nov. 30.

“It will increase obviously Shia - potentially Iranian - influence over the government of Iraq and we have to be concerned about it,” the head of Central Command, Gen. Joseph Votel, said during a panel discussion at the Foreign Policy Initiative, a neoconservative Washington-based think tank, state-run Anadolu Agency reported.

The Iraqi Parliament passed a law last weekend that formally recognized the controversial Iran-backed al-Hashd al-Shaabi as an “independent military entity” operating within the Iraqi army. Votel said he believes that the nuclear deal inked between world powers and Iran last year did not prompt change in “Tehran’s sponsoring of terror groups and fueling of sectarian conflicts.”

“[The nuclear deal] is implemented appropriately but it addresses only one of our concerns,” he said of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, adding that since the deal Iran has sponsored more than 100,000 Shiite militias in conflicts, including in Yemen and Iraq. “I would probably say there is a little bit of uptick,” he said. Meanwhile, Iraqi special forces fighting the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) militants on the eastern side of Mosul have retaken 19 neighborhoods from the extremist group since the battle for the city began last month, Brig. Gen. Haider Fadhil of the special forces told The Associated Press on Nov. 30.

Fadhil said his men were now about four kilometers (2.5 miles) from the Tigris river, which slices the city in half. He said the 19 neighborhoods constituted less than 30 percent of the part of the city east of the Tigris.

Why May's going to court to avoid Brexit vote in parliament

Bloomberg, 01.12.2016



A court case will decide whether PM Theresa May must call a parliamentary vote before triggering Brexit. She has plenty of reasons to avoid one, chief among them a reluctance to reveal her negotiating hand and concerns about delay.

The government's top legal experts head to the Supreme Court in London, seeking to overturn a High Court verdict that Parliament must have a say before Article 50 of the EU's Lisbon Treaty is invoked to formally start Britain's withdrawal from the bloc. With even many ardent pro-"Remain" lawmakers saying they won't try to block Brexit, the question arises why May doesn't just accept the court's decision.

"They may not wish to block it, but that doesn't mean to say that they won't try to use the opportunity to flush out the government's negotiating stance," John Curtice, professor of politics at Strathclyde University in Glasgow, said in an interview. Parliament "may not say 'no,' but they obviously do have the ability to delay saying 'yes.'"

May is trying to keep a tight rein on the divorce proceedings, telling lawmakers repeatedly she won't elaborate on her negotiating stance to avoid giving her EU counterparts the upper hand. She's pledged to trigger Article 50 by the end of March, and is seeking to avoid a potentially time-consuming process in Parliament's two houses. Ministers argue executive privilege -- known in the U.K. as royal prerogative -- allows the government to bypass lawmakers.

"The government is throwing down a very clear sign about who wields power in modern Britain -- the government and not the courts," said Matthew Flinders, a politics professor at the University of Sheffield. "It's also an important part of Theresa May's ideology that she wants to be seen as a strong, powerful politician who makes commitments, follows through on them and isn't willing to be frustrated by outside forces."

Those forces range from the plaintiffs in the High Court case that the government lost -- including Gina Miller, who runs an investment startup, and Deir Dos Santos, a hairdresser -- to Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, who says the semi-autonomous Parliament in Edinburgh must also have a say in pulling the Brexit trigger. Sturgeon's top legal officer is also scheduled to be in court next week.



But for May, the political hurdles may be as high as the legal ones. The bulk of House of Commons lawmakers campaigned for “Remain” in the June referendum, and May doesn’t have a majority in the upper chamber, the House of Lords.

Even so, “if she puts it to a vote in Parliament, MPs will vote to trigger Article 50,” said former Business Minister Anna Soubry, who turned down a post in May’s government and has since been one of the most vocal Conservatives in seeking to temper the government’s stance on Brexit. “Their fear will be that it will be in some way open to amendment.”

Soubry said she won’t personally vote to block Brexit. But earlier this week, she appeared alongside Chuka Umunna, the Labour Party’s former business spokesman, and former Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, a Liberal Democrat, to argue that retaining membership of the European single market should be at the core of Britain’s Brexit plan. The single market joins the 28-member EU with Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein in a free-trade area that also has common regulations and product standards.

May has refused to commit to keeping Britain in the single market or the customs union, which binds the EU and Turkey in a trading zone with common external tariffs. Lawmakers may seek to put riders on a Brexit bill to flush out her stance.

“It will become potentially the focus of a tug of war in which all sorts of different amendments are tabled,” said Flinders. “The parliamentary process is like a sausage machine: It’s a very irrational way to make law. You can understand why she would rather not have to put a bill through that process,” he said. “She may well have to make deals to get things through.”

In a sign of the risks May faces in Parliament, the Liberal Democrats on Thursday overturned a 23,000 Tory majority in a by-election in the London district of Richmond Park. While the Brexit-supporting incumbent, Zac Goldsmith, had quit and was standing as an independent to protest a decision to expand Heathrow Airport, the Liberal Democrats turned it into a vote on Brexit in a strongly pro-Remain seat. Their winning candidate, Sarah Olney, has said she’ll vote against triggering Article 50.

There’s also a risk parliamentary debates will re-expose the longstanding fractures in May’s Conservatives that helped bring down the party’s past three prime ministers: David Cameron, John Major and Margaret Thatcher. Already, pro-Brexit lawmaker Peter Bone has submitted his own bill seeking to hold the premier to her timetable.

“The more action there is in the House of Commons, the more divisions inside the Conservative Party on this issue become exposed,” said Curtice. “There will be the Anna Soubrys of this world who will be looking for one thing, and the Bill Cashes who will be looking for something very, very different.” Cash, a vocal Euro-skeptic, heads the Commons European Scrutiny Committee. The government has laid out the case it will make to the Supreme Court, saying on Nov. 11 it has the power to give effect to the result of the June referendum without going to Parliament. On Thursday, it said the legislatures in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland also don’t need a say because they don’t have jurisdiction over foreign affairs. “We’re appealing because we believe we’ve got a very strong case, and we intend to go to the Supreme Court and win it,” May’s spokesman, Greg Swift, told reporters on Tuesday.

The court won't rule until January, and Flinders said the verdict is "very unlikely" to differ from the lower court's. That would leave the Brexit trigger in the hands of Parliament. "The government will try a short, tight bill that's framed as narrowly as possible in order to limit the opportunity for amendments," said Curtice. "Don't be surprised if the opponents say: 'You're now passing a resolution that we want to leave the EU; well, what are you arguing in this process?' And that will make it quite difficult to carry on saying 'we're not telling you.'"

Au revoir, Hollande

Foreign Policy, 01.12.2016



French President François Hollande announced that he will not be running for reelection in next year's presidential race, amid record high disapproval ratings. This is the first time in postwar history that an incumbent French president has not run for reelection.

"I have decided that I will not be a candidate," he told the nation. "In the months to come, my only duty will be to continue to lead my country." Hollande announced his surprise decision to head off an embarrassing showing in the primaries, says Martin Michelot, deputy director of the EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy.

"He would have risked a real humiliation in the Socialist primaries," Martin told Foreign Policy, "due to deep and historical unpopularity." Indeed, Hollande is the least-liked French president in modern history.

Last June, the French Socialist Party made the surprising and unprecedented announcement that it would hold a primary (it is, after all, the party in power). But, again, so was Hollande's dismal approval rating, which has since only gotten worse — as FP noted, one poll put his favorability rating at 4 percent after a book was published in which the president insulted everyone from his own ministers to footballers (he had sat with the authors over 60 times for self-damning interviews). And spending \$122,000 a year on haircuts may not have helped his public image.

The president's decision to step aside "opens up space for his Prime Minister Manuel Valls, who is now the frontrunner for the party," according to Michelot. Valls is favored to win the French left's primaries in January, although he will face a challenge in the form of former economic minister Arnaud Montebourg. And the Socialist candidate will not be the only left-wing candidate in the race — whoever it is will also have to face far-left candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon in the general election.

It is perhaps worth noting that whoever the Socialist candidate is, is not expected to win the French presidential election. As Frédéric Bozo of the German Marshall Fund succinctly said in an interview with FP, "There's approximately no chance that a candidate of the governing left makes it to the second round of the election in May."

That honor is expected to go to conservative candidate François Fillon and the far-right candidate Marine Le Pen, whose numbers have shot up in the polls amid a nationwide surge of anti-immigrant sentiment.

A poll released Wednesday had Fillon, a free marketeer who's been referred to as the "French Margaret Thatcher" and has written a book called *Conquering Islamic Totalitarianism*, taking 66 percent of the vote over Le Pen.

Most centrist and socialist voters would favor Fillon over Le Pen in a second round vote scenario, says Michelot, which significantly boost his chances of winning. "Fillon has also been able to capture the Catholic conservative right that could have tilted towards Le Pen, had the conservatives presented a more moderate candidate," Michelot added.

Hollande trailed in the poll's fifth and final place, behind Melenchon. On one hand, this speaks to how unpopular Hollande is. On the other, who, at this point, is still trusting polls? The president's surprise announcement may not shape the general election in the long run. "The dynamics of the race won't be fundamentally disturbed," Michelot said. "We knew either Valls or Hollande would run, and one of them would be defending the government's action."

In his address Thursday, Hollande conceded he made mistakes, but defended his legacy of confronting climate change, fixing the national social security debt, and taking political risks to lower unemployment in a country struggling to emerge from an economic slump. But that the French people did not appreciate this legacy is also a failing of Hollande's. As Bozo explained, "It reflects his inability to communicate whatever achievement he has." That's something he will no longer need to do in a political capacity.

Obama is expanding Trump's war-making powers on his way out the door

Foreign Policy, 28.11.2016



The scope of war-making authorities and powers available to the Trump administration depends on decisions made by the Obama administration. Two recent news reports shed some troubling light on its approach to the coming transition.

The Obama administration's present mindset reflects a departure from its approach in the fall of 2012. In anticipation of an election it believed Republican challenger Mitt Romney might win, the Obama White House accelerated the development and implementation of a "drone rule book" that codified the procedures for drone strikes in non-battlefield settings.



As one official worried aloud in November 2012, “There was concern that the levers might no longer be in our hands.” The latest reporting suggests that, rather than restraining and limiting Trump, the Obama administration, in its final weeks in office, is further expanding the geographic scope of airstrikes, the nature of combatants who can be targeted, and the legal justification underpinning such strikes.

The incoming president-elect, who has previously pledged to “bomb the hell out of ISIS,” will have the capabilities and authorities to do just that — for the Islamic State and other terrorist and militant armies.

Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Dan Lamothe revealed the creation of a new unit within the military’s highly secretive Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). According to the reporting, this new entity, known as the “Counter-External Operations Task Force,” is authorized to conduct clandestine operations outside of the battlefields of Iraq, Syria, and Libya, without the approval of regional combatant commanders, such as Gen. Joseph Votel, commander of U.S. Central Command, who himself once led JSOC.

This essentially elevates U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) — within which JSOC resides — to a truly global combatant command, with the resources and authority to strike targets seemingly anywhere, rather than only after being placed under the authority of a regional combatant command.

Obama administration lawyers and officials have always contended that there are no geographic limits to where U.S. forces may conduct operations against terrorism, with the battlefield being anywhere “from Boston to the FATA.”

Now, it appears that it has set up an organizational command structure to support such limitless targeting. As Gibbons-Neff and Lamothe quote a defense official: “Layers have been stripped away for the purposes of stopping external networks. There has never been an ex-ops command team that works trans-regionally to stop attacks.”

There have been previously reported changes to the relationship between SOCOM and regional combatant commanders, each with the objective of integrating them with one another, and speeding up the decision-making cycle for approving strikes.

It is unclear, however, if these changes have increased the volume of clandestine military operations. In a rare interview last year, the current SOCOM commander, Gen. Raymond “Tony” Thomas (who also once led JSOC — you might be sensing a pattern) stated that when it came to such operations:

“I’m told ‘no’ more than ‘go’ on a magnitude of about ten to one on a daily basis.” But the most recently announced changes seem precisely designed to make it easier for JSOC to be told “go” in the last weeks of Obama’s leadership — and when it is under the ultimate command of Donald Trump. Meanwhile, in today’s New York Times, Charlie Savage, Eric Schmitt, and Mark Mazzetti reported a puzzling new legal and policy interpretation for U.S. airstrikes in Somalia.



The article, appropriately titled “Obama Expands War With Al Qaeda to Include Shabab in Somalia,” has revealed that the U.S. military can now undertake “collective self-defense” strikes in support of foreign partners, even where there are no Americans service members or contractors at direct risk.

In other words, U.S. military assets are now permitted to provide close air support against the enemies of foreign ground forces, even if those enemies pose no threat to Americans. Though this mission draws its legal justification from the post-9/11 Authorization for the Use of Military Force, the designers of that law could never have imagined it being used to such ends.

The Obama administration’s new legal interpretation, expected to be disclosed next month, will further entrench its counterterrorism strategy in Somalia. But the Times story would not surprise anybody who reads U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) press releases.

On September 28, for example, a drone strike was conducted in Galcayo, Somalia, against what were believed to be al-Shabab attackers on behalf of the local Puntland Security Forces (PSF). AFRICOM labeled this a “self-defense strike,” even though, as Kevin Sieff reported, the U.S. advisors were not alongside the PSF while they began taking fire.

A subsequent, brief AFRICOM press release stated that the strike killed no al-Shabaab members, but rather ten members of “local militia forces,” who themselves had worked with U.S. advisers to fight al-Shabaab in the past.

Under this broad concept of “collective self-defense,” it seems that U.S. military close air support airstrikes may be called upon anywhere U.S.-partner forces are threatened, whether or not that threat extends to American personnel on the ground.

To give some sense of what that could potentially entail, in 2015, a spokesman from the command acknowledged that SOCOM forces had deployed to 147 countries. Undoubtedly, these deployments primarily consist of short-term military-to-military engagements, like training and education programs, with few direct-action operations.

However, the Obama administration’s claim that certain foreign partner forces can be incorporated into the U.S. military’s inherent right to self-defense could open up the scope and intensity of airstrikes even further.

The Times piece concludes with a quote from yours truly: “this administration leaves the Trump administration with tremendously expanded capabilities and authorities.” Indeed, it has, and with far greater capabilities and authorities than they would have handed over to a President Mitt Romney.

After Obama leaves the White House in January, let us hope that his successor faces far more rigorous scrutiny from congressional members, journalists, and research organizations over these military operations. Lethal drone strikes and special operations raids that were exceptional under President George W. Bush became semi-routine under President Obama. Under President Trump they may further define U.S. counterterrorism strategy and how the world perceives U.S. foreign policy more generally for years to come.



Announcements & Reports

An anatomy of inclusive growth in Europe?

Source : Bruegel
Weblink : <http://bruegel.org/2016/10/an-anatomy-of-inclusive-growth-in-europe/>

A glass half full: The rebalance, reassurance, and resolve in the U.S.-China strategic relationship

Source : RAND
Weblink : <https://www.brookings.edu/research/a-glass-half-full-the-rebalance-reassurance-and-resolve-in-the-u-s-china-strategic-relationship/>

Income convergence during the crisis: did EU funds provide a buffer?

Source : Bruegel
Weblink : <http://bruegel.org/2016/10/income-convergence-did-eu-funds-provide-a-buffer/>

Upcoming Events

Competitive Gains in the Economic and Monetary Union

Date : 09 December 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 : 09 December 2016
Place : London - UK
Website : <http://www.chathamhouse.org/event/future-capitalist-democracy-uk-japan-perspectives>

13th Asia Europe Economic Forum (AEEF)

Date : 10 December 2016
Place : Beijing - China
Website : <http://bruegel.org/events/13th-asia-europe-economic-forum/>

Emerging Markets and Europe: Time for Different Relationships?

Date : 11 December 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 : 12 December 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 : 13 December 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 : 14 December 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 : 14 December 2016
Place : Berlin - Germany
Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/541-the-future-of-the-welfare-state/>

Vision Europe Summit 2016

Date : 15 December 2016
Place : Lisbon - Portugal
Website : <http://bruegel.org/events/vision-europe-summit-2016/>