

Merkel set to visit Turkey next week

Hurriyet Daily News, 15.04.2016



German Chancellor Angela Merkel will visit Turkey next week with representatives from the European Union, German government spokesperson Steffen Seibert said. Speaking to journalists, Seibert said European Council President Donald Tusk and European Commission First Vice-President Frans Timmermans will accompany Merkel during her visit on April 23.

Merkel will arrive in the southeastern province of Gaziantep from Germany directly and will visit the refugee camps, hospitals and schools in the border province of Kilis, Deutsche Welle reported.

It is yet unknown who the Turkish official tasked to greet Merkel will be. Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu had said that Merkel would join other European leaders in opening a school and hospital in Kilis, which houses a massive refugee camp for Syrians who have fled their country's devastating five-year war.

The center was built under a new agreement between Turkey and the EU, spearheaded by Merkel, which aims to stem mass migration to Europe and the drowning of migrants trying to cross the Aegean in rickety boats. Despite Davutoğlu's announcement, German authorities had not previously confirmed the visit to the city, which is frequently a target of rocket fire from Syria.

The visit comes amid a diplomatic row between Germany and Turkey. Ankara has requested that German comedian Jan Boehmermann be prosecuted over a poem he recited on German television about Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Merkel said she accepted Turkey's request to seek prosecution of Boehmermann.

Turkish PM calls for broader view of Muslims

Hurriyet Daily News, 14.04.2016



Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu has put forth a call to “liberate all Islamic lands under occupation,” while also asking for a common and broader view of Muslims in order to discuss the problems of the Muslim world with maturity.

“We need a common stance for the liberation of all the Islamic lands that are under occupation, especially Palestine,” said Davutoğlu, while delivering an opening speech at the 13th Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) summit in Istanbul. The prime minister added the OIC should improve efficiency in areas where Muslim minorities have met difficulties and felt alone.

“The most important indicator which would show the effectiveness of the OIC is protecting Muslim minorities and liberating occupied lands such as Palestine, Karabakh and Crimea,” Davutoğlu said. He added the common stance should be for occupied territories, where the Islamic identity is under threat of being demolished. Davutoğlu also called for a common attitude against the troubles facing the Muslim world.

“Despite differences of opinion, we need to maximize political relations and improve bilateral contacts in maturity so we can discuss all problems in the Muslim world,” he said. Turkey is currently hosting the OIC summit under the theme “Unity and Solidarity for Justice and Peace” for the first time since the body’s inception in 1969. It will lead the bloc for the next two years.

Davutoğlu also warned that some Muslim countries were confronted with the problem of separatism. “We need to compose a principled attitude against the risk of dismemberment of some states,” he said. Before the opening speech, Davutoğlu held separate meetings with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, Lebanese Prime Minister Tammam Salam and Pakistani President Mamnoon Hussain.

A total of 57 member states, which have a total of \$10 trillion GDP, will participate in the IOC summit. Apart from the high-level security measures taken in Istanbul for the summit, which started days prior to the launch of the event, some 5,000 more police officers are on duty.

Signs of Turkey-Egypt reconciliation at summit

Hurriyet Daily News, 13.04.2016



Tense relations between Turkey and Egypt could soon give way to reconciliation as Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry attended the 13th Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) summit in Istanbul and handed the term presidency to Turkey.

The Egyptian minister, who came directly to the summit from Atatürk Airport, attended the opening ceremony of the OIC summit, during which he staged a speech to hand over the term presidency of the OIC to Turkey, which is hosting the summit for the first time since the body's foundation in 1969, for a period of two years.

Shoukry said he was addressing the body on behalf of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Ties between Ankara and Cairo have been strained since el-Sisi, a former army chief, toppled Islamist President Mohamed Morsi, who is affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, after mass protests against the latter's rule.

The Turkish government and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan expressed anger over the coup targeting one of their key regional allies. Shoukry called on Muslim countries to form a common approach against Islamophobia, which he said was a flagrant violation of human rights, adding that terrorist groups' attacks served to fuel Islamophobia.

"We need to form a mechanism to increase tolerance and establish a real dialogue among divine religions," Shoukry said. He suggested forging a dialogue with countries that have Muslim minorities "in order to enhance Muslims' freedoms." Shoukry stressed that in order to fight terror, some religious rhetoric or misconceptions should be "corrected."

"This is not important for political or security reasons. It is also important to understand Islam correctly," he said, adding that such misconceptions led young people to join terror groups. Erdoğan, for his part, thanked Egypt for their efforts as the 12th Islamic Summit chair. "I thank Egypt for their efforts and events they realized during their term presidency of the 12th Islamic Summit era," said Erdoğan during his opening speech at the OIC summit in Istanbul.

Turkish, Saudi leaders discuss Syria, terror on King Salman's visit

Hurriyet Daily News, 12.04.2016



Turkey has decorated Saudi Arabia's visiting King Salman with its highest state medal in recognition of the two countries' close ties, with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan extending his guest a lavish welcome after the latter's arrival.

Erdoğan welcomed Salman with an official ceremony at his presidential palace, the first day of the Saudi monarch's official visit to Ankara. The Saudi monarch will proceed to Istanbul later this week for a summit of the OIC. Erdoğan bestowed the Order of the State of Republic of Turkey saying the Saudi monarch had exerted "great efforts" to forge friendly ties since taking the throne.

"My Precious Friend, my Dear Brother, since acceding to the throne in Saudi Arabia, you have made great contributions to development of friendly relations between our countries," Erdoğan said during the presentation of the medal.

"You have constituted an assurance for regional peace, security, serenity and stability with your astute administration. In this regard, the cooperation and the solidarity you have displayed with our country are beyond all kinds of appreciation. Turkey's and Saudi Arabia's further deepening of their cooperation in every field with your support is an opportunity for regional and global peace," Erdoğan said.

Saudi Arabia and Turkey are both strong supporters of the opposition forces in Syria and have been building strong military ties. Turkey participated in military drills in Saudi Arabia this year. Riyadh has deployed warplanes at a Turkish air base as part of the U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

Talks during the king's three-day visit are expected to focus on Syria and other regional issues, as Erdoğan hosted a luncheon for Salman with the attendance of Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. Later, Erdoğan and Salman were scheduled to hold a tête-à-tête meeting.

Salman's visit to Turkey comes shortly after he arrived on his first official visit to Egypt, with Cairo saying it was hoping to boost ties with its most important Arab ally and garner trade deals to help bolster its shaky economy. Strained Ankara-Cairo relations were expected to be on the agenda, as Erdoğan had already commented that the Saudi leadership was pressing both sides to reconcile their relations. Egypt will also be present at the OIC summit at the foreign minister level.

"No doubt, this historical visit which you carried out today is a very strong and meaningful message given in regards to future of our relations," Erdoğan said, voicing confidence that the two states will continue with determination taking steps that will cement bilateral cooperation in every field.

For his part, Salman delivered a brief speech in which he expressed “gratitude” for the presentation of the medal and voiced appreciation of Saudi Arabia’s relations with both the Turkish people and the Turkish government.

Turkey continues to cooperate with Russia, says naval commander

Hurriyet Daily News, 07.04.2016



Turkey’s naval commander said Turkey was continuing its cooperation with Russia, noting that cooperation would produce results. Admiral Bülent Bostanoğlu said naval force would be one of the most significant elements both at present and in the future as it was in the past.

He added that the country was continuing on cooperating with Russia.”Despite the fact that Russian Federation gives [us] various problems, we are continuing to carry out cooperation in this sense. Cooperation will produce results. Therefore, we know that maritime security nowadays can only be guaranteed by working together,” Bostanoğlu said.

Bostanoğlu also pointed that the problems in maritime jurisdiction should be solved by applying international law. “The sea will only bring us trouble unless we resolve our differences within the law,” Bostanoğlu said while urging for the necessity of more creative solutions in maritime security.

Relations between Moscow and Ankara have been thorny since Turkey shot down a Russian warplane near the Syrian border on Nov. 24, 2015, for violating Turkish airspace despite repeated warnings.

Erdoğan urges Islamic leaders to ‘pay their dues’

Hurriyet Daily News, 04.04.2016



The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) summit in Istanbul witnessed a heated debate over unpaid dues and unfulfilled donation pledges, with Turkish President Erdoğan telling the participants that it was “time to pay up.”

Turkey will donate a total of \$2 million to the OIC, Erdoğan said at the summit, calling on volunteer countries to publicly declare their own donation pledges at the summit. “Of the money we have donated, \$1.8 million will be delivered to the secretary-general’s office. \$100,000 will be delivered to the Human Rights Commission and another \$100,000 will be delivered to the Islamic Unity Fund,” said Erdoğan.

However, his call for further donations was rejected by a group of states led by Saudi Arabia. The Saudi, Indonesian and Kuwaiti delegations said they would prefer to talk about donations in mutual, smaller talks, while the other participant countries remained silent.

This reaction received a swift reply from Erdoğan, who said there would be no need for donations if all OIC member countries had paid their dues, stating that only 20 countries out of 56 members had been loyal to their debts. He then went on to read the list of the 20 countries that were regular payers.

“The other countries have problems in their payments. The amount that should be paid to the General Secretary is \$160 million dollars. How active can you be if the amount is not paid? It seems that no one else wants to express the amount,” Erdoğan said. The Turkish president later held a joint press conference with OIC Secretary-General Iyad Madani, where he said the “three main problems” that Muslims experience are “sectarianism, racism and terror.”

“We can’t overcome the problems we experience if we can’t unite. It is really sad that the heirs of a civilization that is built on the pillars of peace and justice is remembered mostly for civil wars, armed clashes, sectarian fanaticism, and terror,” Erdoğan said.

“I find it worth stressing something here: In sectarianism, the one who is killed is a Muslim and dies while saying ‘Allahu Akbar’ [God is great]. The one who kills also says ‘Allahu Akbar,’” he said, adding that the only religion they all share is Islam. “We are neither from the Shiite religion nor the Sunni one ... We only have one religion and that is Islam. I’m a Muslim,” Erdoğan said.

He also said racism causes divisions among Muslim countries and removes them from their inner conscience and humanity. “God created us in tribes. We respect everyone’s tribe. We respect every tribe and race in the world. If one race tries to prove superiority over another, that is mischief,” Erdoğan said.

On the third major issue of terrorism, the Turkish president slammed Russia's decision to arm the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the People's Protection Units (YPG), which he said were "terrorist organizations."

"Humanity is paying the price for terror now. We've been struggling with terror for nearly 35 years in our country. The number of people we've lost and the financial price is obvious. The PKK [outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party] gave birth to new terrorist organizations. Among them are the PYD and the YPG. Russia says it is arming the PYD. The ones who are siding with terrorist organizations are no longer hidden, but out in the open," Erdoğan said.

He also stressed that the jihadist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Boko Haram were "not related to Islam," saying "our religion is a religion of peace." Meanwhile, the OIC summit's final communique was issued, in which it emphasized the need to preserve Syria's unity, independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. The OIC also condemned the "aggression" of the Republic of Armenia against the Republic of Azerbaijan, calling on Armenia to withdraw its armed forces from the Nagorno-Karabakh region "completely and unconditionally."

The OIC also condemned Lebanon's Hezbollah, the Shiite organization fighting alongside the Syrian army, for its "terrorist activities" in Syria, Bahrain, Kuwait and Yemen and for "supporting terrorist movements undermining the security of OIC states." At the summit, Turkey formally took over the OIC chair for the next two years.

Deputy FM: Most criteria for visa-free travel finalized

Hurriyet Daily News, 13.04.2016



Most of the European Union's requirements to grant Turkish citizens visa-free travel have been completed, a top diplomat has said, while Turkey's EU minister said Turkish nationals could expect travel to the EU without a visa by June.

Deputy Foreign Minister Naci Koru said 44 out of a total of 72 required criteria for Turkish citizens to travel to EU countries without a visa was already finalized and works for conducting the other criteria were ongoing. "We have finalized 44 criteria out of the 72 conditions; works on ongoing for 28 criteria. Our aim is to finalize all the criteria by the end of this month," said Koru during a presentation at the parliament.

Koru said some 856,000 irregular migrants had gone to Europe via Turkey in 2015, and 56 percent of them were Syrians, while Afghans and Iraqis followed respectively. "These are not people who were previously living in our country. These are people who came to our country after realizing that the transit to the Greek islands over the Aegean was so easy," he said.

Referring to the Turkey-EU deal reached in March, Koru said that while the daily number of people crossing the Aegean was 6,827 in October 2015, this figure had decreased to 70 people on April 6 and none on April 10. Stating that Turkey would send the same amount of Syrian refugees to the EU as the EU sends to Turkey, Koru said they selected people based on United Nations criteria.

“The ones we primarily send are the relatives of people who are already in European countries, who have very crucial diseases or who are impaired,” said Koru. Meanwhile, Bozkır said Turkish nationals could expect visa-free travel to the EU by June. “We expect that the decision for the citizens of the Republic of Turkey to enter the Schengen zone without visa requirement will be taken before the end of June,” Bozkır said following a meeting with Dutch Foreign Minister Bert Koenders. The Netherlands currently holds the EU presidency.

Bozkır said the EU Commission would release a report early May on the visa agreement. “We expect that the commission report will be positive and they will be of the opinion to remove the visa,” he said at a news conference in Amsterdam. “All the developments are advancing in this direction.

“Following that, the topic will be presented before the term president, the Netherlands. It is the Netherlands that will organize the council’s decision. We talked about this. Then it will go to parliament and the decision... will be finalized.”

European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and Davutoğlu will meet in Strasbourg next week to discuss the implementation of the migration deal between Brussels and Ankara, an EU official said, according to Reuters. Juncker and Davutoğlu are both due to speak at the plenary session of the Council of Europe’s Parliamentary Assembly on April 19 and the official said they would also have a bilateral meeting on the migration pact.

Turkey’s EU minister discusses regional issues with Dutch FM

Hurriyet Daily News, 12.04.2016



Turkey’s minister Volkan Bozkır, held talks with Dutch Foreign Minister Bert Koenders as the ministers of the bloc were in Amsterdam to attend an EU ministers meeting.

The ministers discussed regional issues, namely the migrant crisis and counter-terrorism efforts. “Met MFA Bert Koenders in Amsterdam. Discussed EU relations, counter-terrorism, irregular migration & visa,” tweeted Bozkır. In order to tackle the migrant influx, Europe’s largest since World War II, the EU and Turkey signed a deal in March, in which Turkey agreed to take all migrants who reached Greece after March 20 and whose asylum applications were rejected.

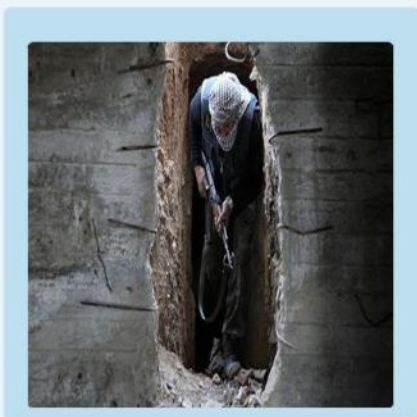
The return of migrants from Greece to Turkey started, while Turkey has also started sending Syrian refugees to the EU, under the scope of the same deal. Bozkır also attended the EU Ministers Meeting in Amsterdam hosted by Netherlands, which currently holds the EU presidency until July. Meanwhile, the EU said Greece's plan to strengthen its borders to cope with the refugee emergency was not good enough and gave Athens two weeks to flesh out the details.

The European Commission said in a statement that Greece needed to "provide the additional elements and clarifications by April 26." If Athens fails to do so, the commission is set to recommend that other countries be allowed to prolong their border controls, possibly until the end of the year. Greece, on the other hand, said authorities would start ruling on asylum applications from hundreds of migrants in the next two weeks, in a major test of a new deal to try to control the flow of people desperate to reach Europe.

By the latest count, more than 50,000 people, mostly from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, have been stranded in Greece since Balkan countries closed their borders in February to migrants and refugees wanting to cross, mostly on the way to Germany. Many of them are refugees from war, but others are economic migrants. "The first results of the asylum applications will be ready in about 15 days and the next phase of the implementation of the agreement will begin," Greek government spokeswoman Olga Gerovasili told reporters.

Turkey, US in bid to revive train-and-equip program in Syria

Hurriyet Daily News, 08.04.2016



In the wake of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's meeting with his U.S. counterpart, Barack Obama, during a visit to the U.S. capital late last month, Ankara and Washington have intensified their contacts to revitalize a program for training "moderate" Syrian rebels in favor of ramping up support for established and proven forces.

With no concrete consensus having been publicly announced yet, the two capitals appeared to have taken baby steps with a review of the failed \$500-million program months after the Pentagon announced in October 2015 that it had abandoned it.

During his visit to Washington to attend the Nuclear Security Summit, Erdoğan met Obama for closed door talks. During the visit, Turkish officials handed over "some lists" to the U.S. side in relation with Turkey's willingness to restart the train-and-equip program for the moderate opposition in Syria, a Turkish official told. "Our contacts and meetings with the U.S. about these kinds of issues, including the train-and-equip program, have been going on. As a matter of fact, we shared with the U.S. some lists in this context within the scope of our president's Washington visit," a Foreign Ministry official, speaking under customary condition of anonymity, said.



The official's explanation came in response to a question about an April 13 report by daily Yeni Şafak, which claimed "the Pentagon asked the Turkish Foreign Ministry [for the] names of 500 Turks for [a] planned train and equip program which will involve 2,000 persons at [the] first stage."

The Turkish official, however, did not comment on the content of the Yeni Şafak report. Likewise, U.S. Embassy officials in Ankara refused to comment on the report. "Works have been going on in this manner," the Turkish official briefly said of Ankara's contacts with Washington over the issue.

During a teleconference from Baghdad, the spokesperson for the U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Col. Steve Warren, spoke about the issue, acknowledging mistakes with the past program.

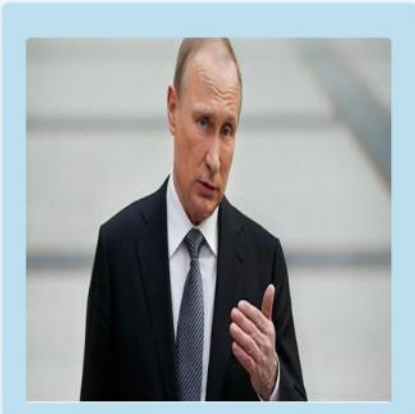
"A training and equipping program that we are now doing that is based on the lessons that we learned from our ill-fated train-and-equip program of 2015. In that program, in the old 2015 program, we would identify an entire unit, exfiltrate that unit to a training location, train the unit, equip the unit, infiltrate the unit back into the battlefield and have them go fight," Warren said.

"And you know, that program didn't work out the way we wanted it to, so we - we paused it, stopped it, ceased it, didn't do it anymore. We conducted some assessments, we figured out what went right, what went wrong, how can we do this better.

And so now, we are trying again with adjustments. And the adjustment in this case is that it's a group of individuals," he said. The Los Angeles Times cited a U.S. official, who was not authorized to speak publicly on the program, as saying that the Pentagon aimed to integrate more Sunni Arabs into the training to satisfy Turkey's demands and eventually to launch an attack on Raqqa.

Sources: Iran's Soleimani in Russia for talks on Syria, missiles

Reuters, 15.04.2016



Iranian Major General Qassem Soleimani has flown to Moscow for talks with Russia's military and political leadership to discuss the conflict in Syria and deliveries of Russian missiles, sources with knowledge of his trip said.

The main purpose of his visit was to discuss delivery routes for shipments of Russian S-300 surface-to-air missile systems, sources said, with saying Soleimani wanted to talk about how Russia and Iran could help the Syrian government take back full control of Aleppo. "General Soleimani travelled to Moscow last night to discuss the delivery of S-300s and further military cooperation," a official told.

Soleimani met both Russian President Vladimir Putin and Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu one source said. A Kremlin spokesman said a meeting with Soleimani was not on Putin's schedule. Asked about Soleimani's visit, the Iranian embassy in Moscow said it had no information about it. The visit is likely to be seen as a sign that the tactical alliance struck up by Russia and Iran over Syria remains strong despite some reported differences over battlefield strategy.

Iranian media reported that Russia had delivered the first part of the S-300 missile system, starting to equip Tehran with technology that was blocked before it signed a deal with world powers on its nuclear programme. Soleimani, the commander of foreign operations for Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards, flew to Moscow in July last year to help Russia plan its military intervention in Syria and forge an Iranian-Russian alliance to support Syria's President Bashar al-Assad. He helped reactivate the stalled S-300 deal, which Russia had put on ice in 2010 under pressure from the West.

Russia, despite withdrawing some of its fast jets, still maintains a significant military presence in Syria providing air support, advice and training to the Syrian army. A senior regional source told Reuters last year that Russia's military intervention in Syria was set out in an agreement between Moscow and Tehran that said Russian air strikes would support ground operations by Iranian, Syrian and Lebanese Hezbollah forces.

Iran has committed troops to help prop up the Syrian army, sometimes sustaining heavy losses, and Soleimani has been reported to be spending time in Syria where he is thought to have helped coordinate operations. He was previously subject to an international travel ban by the U.N. Security Council with Washington designating the Quds Force, the unit of the Revolutionary Guards which Soleimani leads, as a supporter of terrorism. That ban was rescinded earlier this year however when a nuclear deal between Iran and world powers was implemented, triggering sanctions relief for Tehran.

Pentagon says first step in anti-ISIL battle in Iraq, Syria ‘complete’

AFP, 14.04.2016



The U.S.-led coalition campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Iraq and Syria has successfully completed its first “phase” of operations, Baghdad-based U.S. military spokesman Colonel Steve Warren said.

The coalition is working through three main steps as it wages its 20-month-old fight against ISIL, Warren said. “Our enemy has been weakened and we now are working to fracture him. Phase one of the military campaign is complete,” Warren told Pentagon reporters, noting that this initial step was to “degrade” ISIL by stopping it from making additional territorial gains.

“We are now in phase two, which is to dismantle this enemy,” he added. Warren said the final phase of the campaign is to ensure ISIL is dealt a lasting defeat, primarily by enabling local forces to prevent a resurgence of jihadist influence. Meanwhile, U.S. President Barack Obama said ISIL was on the defensive and “their cause is lost.”

Obama paid a rare visit to CIA headquarters in Virginia to discuss progress of Operation Inherent Resolve, the 20-month-old U.S.-led campaign against ISIL in Iraq and Syria. “ISIL is on the defensive, and we are on the offensive,” Obama said. “We have momentum, and we intend to keep that momentum.”

Obama pointed to recent U.S. air strikes that killed three senior ISIL leaders and a report this week showing the group’s ranks are at their lowest level since 2014. “In the days and weeks ahead we intend to take out more [leaders]. Every day, ISIL leaders wake up and understand it could be their last,” Obama said. “Their ranks of fighters are estimated to be at the lowest levels in two years and more and more are realizing that their cause is lost,” he added.

Monitor: ISIL seizes Syria villages near Turkish border

AFP, 14.04.2016



The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) group jihadists have seized a string of opposition-held villages in Syria's Aleppo province near the Turkish border, a monitoring group said. Areas around Aleppo have seen a spike in violence on several fronts in recent days, sparking concern over a fragile six-week truce as a new round of peace talks gets under way in Geneva.

“Fierce clashes are raging between rebels and ISIL after the jihadists secured an advance and seized control of six villages near the Turkish border,” the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

The most important village to come under ISIL control was Hiwar Kallis, about one kilometre (less than one mile) south of the Turkish border, Observatory director Rami Abdel Rahman said. Warplanes meanwhile raided ISIL positions in the area, he said, adding that they were likely from the U.S.-led coalition.

In recent weeks, battles have been intensifying between ISIL and rebels over the border strip, which both sides use to transport fighters and weapons. Rebels had secured significant gains against ISIL before the jihadists pushed them back, like in the strategic town of Al-Rai, which is on an ISIL supply route to Turkey.

Meanwhile, rebels and their allies from the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Al-Nusra Front fought fresh clashes against regime troops and militia in southern Aleppo, the Observatory said. Over 100 fighters from both sides have been killed in fighting there, the Britain-based monitor said. Neither Al-Nusra nor ISIL are included in the truce that began on February 27, but the fact that rebels are fighting alongside Al-Nusra while regime forces push back has sparked concerns over its durability.

Washington voiced concern that a regime assault on Al-Nusra in Aleppo could spread to areas controlled by moderate rebel factions, and cause the truce to collapse and derail peace efforts. Syria's conflict began in 2011 as a peaceful revolt seeking democratic change, but has since escalated into a multi-front civil war that has left over 270,000 people dead and forced millions to flee their homes.

Top Syrian official rules out Assad departure

AFP, 13.04.2016



A top Syrian official said that the opposition must let go of its “dream” for a transitional government, saying that such a thing amounts to a coup d’etat and “will never be accepted.”

A transitional government is the centerpiece of the peace program that the United States, Russia and other world powers agreed on at a 2012 Geneva Conference. The terms have been intentionally left vague and are supposed to be worked out in negotiations resuming this week - but the presumption, at least in the opposition’s mind, is that a transitional government means one without President Bashar Assad.

“This will not happen, not now, nor tomorrow nor ever,” Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad said of opposition’s calls for Assad’s departure. He spoke to The Associated Press in Damascus Wednesday, ahead of the resumption of indirect peace talks in Geneva which the U.N. envoy says will focus on a political transition.

Assad recently floated the idea of a national unity government, rejecting the opposition demand for a transitional ruling body. Mekdad echoed the rejection. “We believe such an idea has failed, it is outdated, it will never be acceptable. This amounts in fact to a coup d’etat. People organize a certain rebellion and then they get power. This will never happen in Syria,” he said.

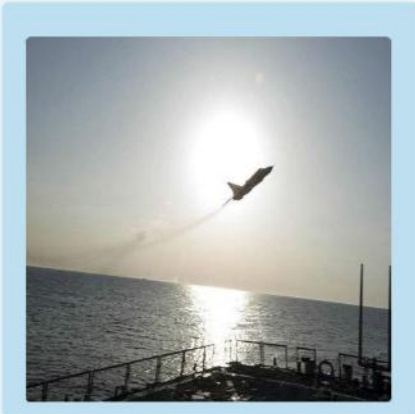
“We believe that if we have to proceed then we need to forget or we need others to forget the dreams they had for the last five years and to come with factual, actual solutions to the problem,” he said. “This includes the possibility of establishing a national unity government or a broad government that includes members of the opposition.”

“President Bashar Assad has become a guarantor for the existence of Syria, and for the unity of Syria’s territory and people... this is why those dreaming of this must stop,” he said, adding that divisions among the opposition make it “impossible to negotiate a viable agreement.”

He acknowledged that the Syrian government recently released Kevin Patrick Dawes, an American freelance photographer it was holding in detention for three years for illegally entering the country, handing him over to Russia. “If we wanted to apply the laws he would still be in Syria but the Syrian leadership based on a purely humanitarian initiative and based on a request from our friends in Moscow decided to release him,” he said. He added that the Syrian government has informed U.S. officials that Austin Tice, a journalist taken hostage in Syria in 2012, is not in Syria. He added: “Austin Tice is not in the hands of Syrian authorities and we don’t have any information about him at all.”

Russian jets in repeated 'aggressive' passes of US warship

AFP, 14.04.2016



A Russian military jet came within a few feet of a US destroyer in international waters during a series of “aggressive” overflights, US officials said. Russian aircraft buzzed the USS Donald Cook, including an incident in which a Russian Su-24 flew just 30 feet above in a “simulated attack profile,” the US military’s European Command said.

“We have deep concerns about the unsafe and unprofessional Russian flight maneuvers,” EUCOM said. “These actions have the potential to unnecessarily escalate tensions between countries and could result in a miscalculation.”

The incidents come at a time of friction between Moscow and Washington over Russian involvement in conflicts in eastern Ukraine and in Syria, and in an area of eastern Europe that the Kremlin considers its “backyard.” EUCOM released video showing warplanes zooming so close past the Cook that one sailor can be heard saying: “He is below the bridge wing,” meaning the plane was flying lower than the highest point of the ship.

A senior US defense official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said: “This is more aggressive than anything we’ve seen in some time.” White House spokesman Josh Earnest called the overflights “entirely inconsistent with the professional norms of militaries operating in proximity to each other in international waters and international airspace.”

The maneuvers began while the destroyer was located about 70 nautical miles from Kaliningrad, a Russian exclave, in international waters. Two Russian Su-24s flew 20 times past the USS Cook at a distance of less than 1,000 yards (meters) and at an altitude of about 100 feet, the official said.

Then a Russian Ka-27 Helix anti-submarine helicopter flew seven times around the destroyer, taking photographs as it passed. Shortly after, two Su-24s roared toward the ship, making 11 close-range and low-altitude passes, including one that was “so low it created wake in the water,” the official said. The plane was “wings clean,” meaning it was not visibly armed, he added.

US sailors tried multiple times to hail the Russian craft on international frequencies but got no response. “The Russian aircraft flew in a simulated attack profile and failed to respond to repeated safety advisories in both English and Russian,” EUCOM said.

“USS Donald Cook’s commanding officer deemed several of these maneuvers as unsafe and unprofessional.” A Polish helicopter had been conducting drills on the destroyer and was refueling during one of the overflights. “As a safety precaution, flight operations were suspended until the Su-24s departed the area,” EUCOM said.

The Pentagon periodically decries the risky tactics displayed by Russian pilots. “There have been repeated incidents over the last year where the Russian military, including Russian military aircraft, have come close enough to each other or have come close enough to other air and sea traffic to raise serious safety concerns,” Earnest said. Exactly two years ago a Russian Su-24 made numerous close-range, low-altitude passes near the USS Donald Cook while it was in the Black Sea, in an incident the Pentagon at the time called a “provocative act.”

Schulz: EU must watch rights in Turkey despite refugee deal

AFP, 03.04.2016



European Parliament President Martin Schulz said the EU must make no concessions to Turkey over human rights but voiced confidence in a deal with Ankara to manage the refugee crisis.

Under the controversial agreement, Turkey is due to take back illegal migrants from Greece, when it will also start an orderly resettlement program of Syrian asylum-seekers to the 28-member bloc. Turkey has received EU financial aid and other concessions, but Schulz, speaking to Germany’s Bild am Sonntag newspaper, said Europe must give no ground to President Erdoğan when it comes to fundamental freedoms.

Schulz said Erdoğan “went one step too far” when his government called in Germany’s ambassador last month over a satirical TV program that mocked the leader, demanding it be pulled off the air. “It is unacceptable that the president of another country demands that we restrict democratic rights in Germany because he feels he was caricatured,” said Schulz, a German citizen.

“We must not be silent on violations of fundamental rights in Turkey just because we are cooperating on the refugee question,” he said. “On the contrary, we must denounce these violations and permanently stay in discussions with Turkey on freedom of expression and human rights issues.”

However, speaking of the refugee deal, he said “I am optimistic that the distribution will work.” “All EU countries have agreed to this scheme. Germany alone is ready to accept 40,000 refugees, France 30,000 and Portugal 10,000. “And once we have managed to distribute a first group in the EU, I am confident that it will work from then onwards.”

Schulz predicted that “in 2016, we will not feel the same pressure as last year”, when more than one million asylum seekers arrived in Germany alone. “The ceasefire in Syria has now held for more than two weeks already. This is a record,” he said. “The IS [Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant] terrorists are being driven back,” he said, adding that new aid money had also improved conditions in refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon.

German spy chief says ISIL wants to attack but no firm plan known

Reuters, 10.04.2016



The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) wants to carry out attacks in Germany and the security situation is “very serious”, the head of the country’s domestic intelligence agency (BfV) told a newspaper, adding that he knew of no concrete plot to strike.

The militant group released a video suggesting it may carry out further attacks in the West after the Brussels bombings and Paris attacks, naming London, Berlin and Rome as possible targets. Hans-Georg Maassen told German newspaper Welt am Sonntag the group wanted to carry out attacks against Germany and German interests, but added:

“At the moment we don’t have any knowledge of any concrete terrorist attack plans in Germany.” He said ISIL propaganda was aimed at encouraging supporters to take the initiative to stage attacks in Germany. Maassen said there were several cases linking Germans returning from Syria to attack plans and warned that the danger posed by jihadists from Germany remained “virulent”.

He said the country had avoided a big attack so far thanks to the successful work of security authorities and luck such as a bomb detonator not working properly on one or two occasions. In 2014, a German man described as a radical Islamist was charged with planting a pipe bomb -- which never exploded -- at Bonn train station in 2012. In 2006, two suitcase bombs left by Islamist militants on trains in Cologne failed to explode.

Asked how many Islamists in Germany were considered highly dangerous, Maassen said there were about 1,100 Islamists who were seen as a potential terrorism risk. Maassen said his agency was aware of about 300 attempts by Salafists and other Islamists to recruit refugees. “I’m particularly concerned about the many unaccompanied minors -- this group is being deliberately targeted,” he said, adding that he saw a “huge radicalisation potential” in these attempts to recruit people.

Sanders wins Wyoming, prepares to take on Clinton in New York

Reuters, 10.04.2016



Bernie Sanders won the U.S. presidential Democratic nominating contest in Wyoming, besting rival Hillary Clinton and adding to a string of recent victories as the two candidates gear up for a crucial matchup in New York.

Sanders, a U.S. senator from Vermont, has won seven out of the last eight state-level Democratic nominating contests, trying to chip away at Clinton's big lead in the number of delegates needed to secure the party's nomination. Wyoming's 14 Democratic delegates - fewer than any other state - are awarded proportionally based on support from individuals participating in the nominating contest.

Early estimates showed that while Sanders won the contest, both he and Clinton would likely receive seven delegates each in the close race, maintaining Clinton's lead overall. Going into Wyoming, Clinton had more than half of the 2,383 delegates needed to win the nomination. Sanders trailed her by 250 pledged delegates, those awarded based on the results of the state nominating contests.

Clinton's lead widens when superdelegates, Democratic leaders who can decide whom to support at the party's July convention, are included in the tallies. Clinton and Sanders both spent campaigning in New York, which holds its contest and where a total of 291 delegates are up for grabs, more than 10 percent of the tally needed to win the party's nomination.

Sanders' wife, Jane Sanders, went onstage where he was speaking at a community college in Queens, a borough of New York City, to alert him to victory. "News bulletin - we just won Wyoming!" Sanders said to cheers. Speaking to reporters after the event, Sanders said he believed he had enough momentum to secure the nomination. "We are closing very fast," Sanders said. Clinton, a former U.S. secretary of state, campaigned in the nearby borough of Brooklyn, where her campaign is based.

Clinton represented New York as a U.S. senator and considers the state her home turf. Recent polls have shown Clinton more than 10 points ahead in the state. Tension between the two candidates flared earlier this week in a party race that has typically focused on policies and not personal attacks. The candidates dialed back their criticism of one another.

In Wyoming's Republican contest last month, U.S. Senator Ted Cruz of Texas beat New York billionaire Donald Trump, the party's front-runner. Cruz is trying to block Trump from receiving enough delegates to win the nomination outright, which would lead to a contested convention in July. A new Reuters/Ipsos poll shows that a third of Trump's Republican supporters could consider abandoning the party's candidate if Trump is denied the nomination at a contested convention.

Announcements & Reports

► *How to Reform EU Fiscal Rules*

Source : Bruegel

Weblink : <http://bruegel.org/2016/04/how-to-reform-eu-fiscal-rules/>

► *A Proposal to Revive the European Fiscal Framework*

Source : Bruegel

Weblink : <http://bruegel.org/2016/03/a-proposal-to-revive-the-european-fiscal-framework/>

► *Barriers to Bankable Infrastructure*

Source : CSIS

Weblink : <http://csis.org/publication/barriers-bankable-infrastructure>

Upcoming Events

► *The Search for Europe*

Date : 19 April 2016

Place : Brussels - Belgium

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

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

Date : 23 April 2016

Place : London - UK

Website : <https://www.chathamhouse.org/event/uk-and-eu-managing-euro-and-single-market>

► *Competitive Gains in the Economic and Monetary Union*

Date : 24 April 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 : 24 April 2016
Place : London - UK
Website : <http://www.chathamhouse.org/event/future-capitalist-democracy-uk-japan-perspectives>

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

Date : 30 April 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 : 30 April 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 : 30 April 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 : 30 April 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 : 30 April 2016
Place : Berlin - Germany
Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/541-the-future-of-the-welfare-state/>