

Turkey denies Russian commander's claims over violation of Turkish airspace

Hurriyet Daily News, 05.11.2015



Turkish security forces have refuted claims by Russian Air Force Commander Viktor Bondarev that a Russian aircraft had violated Turkey's airspace for a short while, state-run Anadolu Agency has reported.

Bondarev said in newspaper Komsomolskaya Pravda a Russian aircraft had violated Turkish airspace for a short while trying to avoid being hit by a defense system which was locked on the aircraft. "Our aircraft had finalized its duty flight in Syria's north. The weather was quite cloudy. As aircraft was flying near Turkish airspace, radar determined an air defense system was trying to place a lock on the aircraft.

The pilot therefore needed to make an escape maneuver and violated Turkish airspace for a short time," Bondarev was quoted as saying in the interview. "And we openly accepted this," he added. Turkish security forces, according to Anadolu Agency, denied a breach of its airspace, adding that a fighter jet, whose country of origin could not be identified, had flown around 10 kilometers away from the Turkish border, inside Syrian territories.

Turkish sources also denied a lock had been placed on a Russian aircraft. The issue of the violation of Turkish airspace by a Russian aircraft had put the two countries against each other. "The Russian aircraft exited Turkish airspace into Syria after it was intercepted by two F-16s from the Turkish Air Force, which were conducting patrols in the region," a written statement by the Foreign Ministry said.

The ministry summoned Russian Ambassador to Turkey Andrey Karlov and strongly protested the violation, according to the statement. It told Karlov that any such violation must not be repeated and in the case of another violation Russia would be responsible for any undesired incident. The U.S. and its NATO allies had denounced Russia for the Oct. 3 incursion and Ankara threatened to respond if provoked again, raising the prospect of direct confrontation between the Cold War enemies.

Turkey welcomes US statement to not provide arms to YPG

Hurriyet Daily News, 05.11.2015



Ankara has welcomed a U.S. statement that the country is not currently providing arms to the People's Protection Units (YPG), the military force protecting the northern Syrian region of Rojava.

“We have gladly noted [the U.S. statement],” Foreign Ministry spokesperson Tanju Bilgiç said following a statement by Col. Steve Warren, a Baghdad-based spokesman for the U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). “We previously conveyed our concerns,” Bilgiç told reporters adding that they would “resolutely follow how this will be implemented in the field.”

“As of now, we are not providing weapons or ammunition to the YPG. The weapons that we've provided thus far, with the ammunition that we've provided in our one airdrop executed, was for the Syrian-Arab coalition,” Warren, a Baghdad-based spokesman for the U.S.-led coalition against ISIL, told reporters via teleconference from Baghdad. “As of now, future resupplies will also go to Arab-vetted Syrian opposition members,” he added, after a reporter said a senior defense official had recently said the YPG would not be receiving any ammunition or weapons. “So, you know, as of now, that's where our policy stands.”

Turkey regards the YPG as “terrorists” like the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has been involved in a fight against the Turkish state for greater cultural rights for over 30 years. The state launched a peace process to solve the Kurdish problem in the country in the early 2010s, but the solution process was halted by the state during the run-up to Turkey's general elections on June 7. Responding to a question as to whether or not the U.S. would talk to Turkey about the issue, Warren said they were in “very close contact” with Turkey. “Obviously the Turks have concerns. You know, they're our partners and allies. We're going to address those concerns. We're going to work with them to achieve our common goal, which is to defeat ISIL,” Warren said.

EU 'late to support Turkey on migrants issue'

Hurriyet Daily News, 04.11.2015



The European Union's offer of funds to Turkey as part of a plan to deal with the refugee crisis should have been made a long time ago, European Parliament Turkey Rapporteur Kati Piri has told Anadolu Agency.

"Turkey should have been given support much earlier when it comes to financially coping with providing for these 2.5 million refugees," Piri said. "[It] is not enough." Faced with the worst migrant crisis since World War II, the EU is in the process of negotiating with Turkey on a refugee action plan, under which the 28-nation bloc has offered Turkey funds to reduce the flow of asylum seekers coming into Europe.

Under the action plan, which was presented by European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Brussels on Oct. 5, the EU offered 1 billion euros (\$1.13 billion) in humanitarian assistance for refugees hosted in Turkey. The Turkish government, according to official figures, has so far spent \$7.6 billion on caring for the 2.5 million refugees it hosts inside the country.

"It's very much in the interest of the EU to find good agreements on how to deal with this refugee crisis," Piri said. She said the EU and Turkey must discuss ways to deal with the resettlement of refugees, which she called "a sensitive topic in Europe" because of disagreements among member states on how to distribute refugees across the bloc. "The solution cannot just be [that] we pay Turkey in order to keep the refugees in Turkey ... that is of course not the solution, and it wouldn't be fair to Turkey either," she said. "We already have problems among the 28 [member states] about how to divide the refugees in solidarity with each other; that is already difficult, let alone to make an agreement on how we can provide safe and legal routes for refugees who want to come [to Europe] through Turkey," Piri said.

The EU border agency Frontex said that 710,000 asylum seekers had entered the EU within the first nine months of the year, with many traveling through Turkey. "If we [EU] really want to help refugees to stay close to their homes but also help Turkey and Turkish society which is under much more pressure because of a large number of Syrians in Turkey ... it means we need to live up to what we say if we want to have better facilities for refugees in the region," Piri said. "It simply means Europe will also have to pay for it," she said.

The EU wants leaders of the world's 20 biggest economies to also help tackle a growing migration crisis when they meet in Turkey this month to discuss tax cooperation, trade and climate change. The chairman of EU leaders, Donald Tusk, and Juncker will push at a Nov. 15-16 meeting of the G-20 in Turkey for a global response to the challenge faced by Europe from the influx.

“Meeting in Turkey in the midst of a refugee crisis due to conflicts in Syria and elsewhere, the G-20 must rise to the challenge and lead a coordinated and innovative response to the crisis that recognizes its global nature and economic consequences and promotes greater international solidarity in protecting refugees,” Tusk and Juncker wrote in a letter to other EU leaders.

Tusk urged Turkey to show its readiness to work with Brussels on issues such as the migrant crisis. Erdoğan, however, has criticized some European countries for their stance on the refugee issue. “As some European countries are trying to sink the boats, we have collected 65 victims from the sea since the start of the year and saved their lives,” Erdoğan said while addressing village and neighborhood heads (muhtars) in Ankara.

Warning that the influx of migrants has probably not yet “reached its peak,” Frontex head Fabrice Leggeri called for European states to detain unsuccessful asylum seekers so they can be “rapidly” sent back to their countries of origin. “EU states must prepare for the fact that we still have a very difficult situation ahead of us in the coming months,” added Leggeri.

White House hits Turkey over vote ‘intimidation’

Hurriyet Daily News, 28.10.2015



The White House voiced displeasure at the “intimidation” of Turkish journalists during an election that bolstered the AKP. Just weeks before President Barack Obama meets his counterpart Erdoğan in Turkey, spokesman Josh Earnest said the White House was “deeply concerned that media outlets and individual journalists critical of the government were subject to pressure and intimidation during the campaign.”

The Nov 1 snap elections delivered a clear victory to the AKP, a dramatic turnaround after it lost its parliamentary majority in the June 7 general elections.

“We have both publicly and privately raised our concerns about freedom of the press, freedom of speech and freedom of assembly in Turkey,” said Earnest. “We continue to urge Turkish authorities to uphold universal democratic values.”

The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) issued a critical report on the vote, which it described as marred by a media crackdown, violence and other security issues. The European Union said the vote showed the “strong commitment” of Turks to democracy, but also said it would be attentive to the OSCE’s findings. Concerns over media freedoms were already running high in the run-up to the poll after riot police last week stormed the Ankara and Istanbul offices of two television stations critical of the AKP and President Erdoğan.

The elections were also held against a backdrop of a military campaign against outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) militants in the southeast of Turkey and in northern Iraq after attacks on security forces by the militants.

Kremlin: Putin, Erdoğan discuss Syria, ready for political dialogue

Hurriyet Daily News, 27.10.2015



The Kremlin said Russian President Putin and Turkish President Erdoğan have spoken on the phone to discuss the crisis in Syria, in light of international meetings in Vienna.

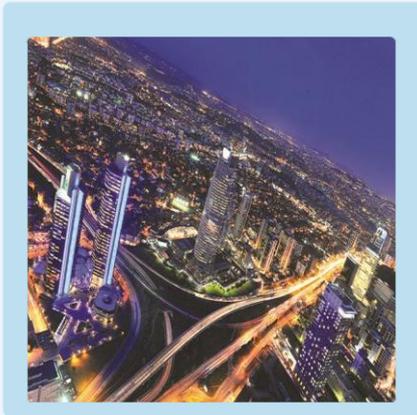
Russia said that both sides confirmed they were willing to continue political dialogue, though the Turkish president's spokesperson, İbrahim Kalın, said that the Vienna talks were unable to resolve differences over the future of Syrian President Assad. "The two meetings were primarily about developing conditions for ensuring a political transition period in Syria, and of course transmitting humanitarian assistance to refugees," Kalın said.

"Although a consensus has been reached on this issue, differences of opinion on al-Assad's future continue. Our position on this issue, the position of Saudi Arabia, and the position of a lot of other regional countries, is clear. In the same way, a lot of French, American and British officials have also stated that al-Assad will not have a place in Syria's future. Al-Assad has lost his characteristic of being a leader who unites Syria and can carry Syria to the future," he added.

Meanwhile, anonymous sources from President Erdoğan's office told the state-run Anadolu Agency that the Turkish president and Putin agreed that they would thoroughly discuss bilateral relations during an upcoming "high-level cooperation council" meeting in Russia in December, while also holding a face to face meeting later this month during the G-20 leaders' summit in Antalya.

Moody's: Turkey outlook hinges on ability to spur growth, but risks remain

Reuters, 04.11.2015



Turkey's credit outlook will hinge on the new government's ability to tackle slowing growth and high inflation as credit risks of the country still remain, ratings agency Moody's said.

The AKP won back its single-party rule in an election on Nov. 1, ending months of uncertainty for investors and briefly sending assets sharply higher. But that rally largely petered out after a day, and investors are once again forced to confront deeper structural problems, such as waning growth and large external financing needs. "The election result removes political uncertainty," Alpona Banerji, a senior credit officer at Moody's told a conference in Istanbul.

"However, the credit outlook will be determined by the policy environment and policy implementation that would overcome a slowdown in growth and high inflation, as well as the inhospitable capital environment that most (emerging markets) are going to be facing." Government officials said in July the economy was likely to expand between 2 and 2.5 percent this year, falling far short of an official target of 4 percent, due to the uncertainty after a June election failed to produce a single-party government.

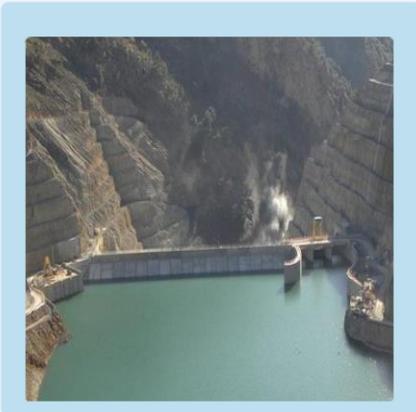
Economists also expect growth will fall short of official targets next year, too, a Reuters poll has shown. Moody's has a "Baa3" rating on Turkey, with a "negative" outlook. It is next due to review Turkey on Dec. 4. Investors have been hoping the new government will see Finance Minister Mehmet Şimşek and former Deputy Prime Minister Ali Babacan once again named to the economic team. Both men are well known by foreign investors and are seen of anchors of investor confidence. But Moody's Banerji the actual names were not important.

"We're pretty agnostic about who comes to power, we're not tied to any one individual," he told Reuters on the sidelines of the conference. "It is the policies that matter to us. It is the economic policy execution, trying to weaken this link between the current account and growth." The rating agency said despite the majority win for AKP lowering political uncertainty, banks in Turkey still face elevated risk aversion towards emerging markets and elevated geopolitical risks in a note.

"Key to the the country's banking system outlook will be the new government's economic strategy and the extent to which reforms boosting the country's savings rate and growth potential are introduced, both essential to tackle fragile investor confidence and volatile Turkish lira," it added.

Turkey's EnerjiSA 'looking to sell three new hydropower plants'

Reuters, 28.10.2015



Turkey's EnerjiSA, a joint venture between Sabancı Holding and Germany's E.ON, plans to sell three hydroelectric power plants to rationalize its portfolio and cut debt, and has appointed bankers to manage the sale, three banking sources said. EnerjiSA has put up for sale the 400 megawatt (MW) Pervari, 280 MW Alpaslan and 168.4 MW İncir plants, all of which are still under construction, the sources said.

The three plants are expected to be operational by the first quarter of 2018, according to the company's website. "The sale represents an optimization of EnerjiSA's portfolio. It also wants to cut its indebtedness," one of the sources said.

EnerjiSA declined to comment. Helped by government incentives, the Turkish power industry has expanded its generating capacity to 70,000 MW (70 gigawatts), which far outstrips demand and is driving down prices. That has prompted some companies to reconsider their holdings in the industry.

The head of Sabancı's energy business, Mehmet Göçmen said this month the conglomerate wanted to reduce debt levels at EnerjiSA to prepare it for an eventual initial public offering. Over the last decade Turkey's energy industry attracted \$64 billion in investment, with more than 60 percent of that through borrowing. EnerjiSA invested about \$11 billion in the same period, Göçmen said. "The high indebtedness of energy companies is pushing them to diversify their portfolios and sell inefficient assets. Yet, the problem is there are very few buyers outside," one of the sources said.

EnerjiSA had previously appointed Goldman Sachs to look for a financial investor in Başkent Elektrik, its electricity distribution grid in Ankara, but there were no interested parties, two of the sources said. Turkish electricity demand is expected to grow 2.5 percent in 2015, lower than the expected 3 percent growth for the whole economy, continuing to put downward pressure on prices, Göçmen has said. EnerjiSA aims to have an installed capacity of 3.5 GW by April 2016 under its current investment plan.

Gov't readies 100-day urgent action plan to fulfill election promises

Hurriyet Daily News, 04.11.2015



Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu has instructed his party officials to draft an urgent action plan to keep the election promises he has made – particularly in regard to the economy. A commission will duly be established to determine which promises will first be fulfilled by the government to be formed by Davutoğlu.

“There are promises we have given to various segments of the society: to public servants, to the retired, to students, to farmers. We will make the necessary plans for the fulfillment of these promises,” a source from the Justice and Development Party (AKP) told daily Hürriyet.

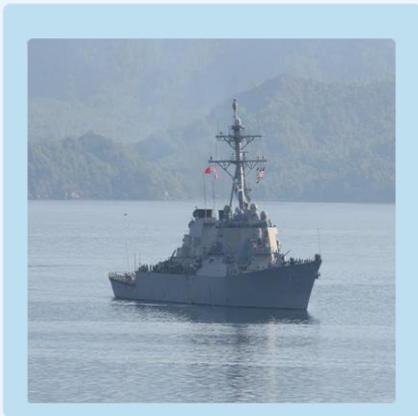
The decision to establish the commission was taken upon Davutoğlu’s instructions during the party’s first high-level meeting, the source said. A timetable will be set as well because some of the promises require new legislation, the source said. “But before doing this, the government should first be formed and the parliament should start to work.”

In the meantime, Deputy Prime Minister Yalçın Akdoğan also confirmed the action plan. “We will keep our word. Our prime minister issued instructions during the party meeting. It’s very important that we immediately form the government. We are making a plan for [the first] 100 days.” Akdoğan said the urgent action plan would detail which promises will be kept first and which procedures will be applied during the first 100 days.

The commission will be composed of some ministers and party officials who have expertise on the contents of the promises, sources said. Among the promises are increasing the minimum wage to 1,300 Turkish Liras, increasing the pensions and salaries of police officers and extending some subsidies to farmers.

US destroyer attends exercise with Turkish Navy in East Mediterranean after Russia's advance in Syria

Hurriyet Daily News, 05.11.2015



A US destroyer has visited a Turkish naval base and participated in a joint exercise in the Eastern Mediterranean, following Russia's military advances in Syria.

The USS Donald Cook, which has ballistic missile defense capabilities, visited the Aksaz Naval Base between Oct. 30 and Nov. 2 and moved to the Eastern Mediterranean in order to attend the "Eastern Mediterranean Sea Exercise," Turkish military sources told. Elements of the Turkish Naval Forces including submarines, surface and air defense units, conducted joint training with the USS Donald Cook aimed at enhancing military coordination between the two countries.

Military sources stressed that NATO was closely monitoring the increasing military presence of Russia in the Eastern Mediterranean and the threat posed by ballistic missiles of the Syrian regime. They said Ankara was continuing its discussions with NATO and other allies for the defense of Turkey.

Meanwhile, the Russian Navy's Vice-Admiral Kulakov, an Udaloy-class destroyer, has entered the Mediterranean Sea, the Sputnik News agency quoted Northern Fleet spokesperson Capt. 1st Rank Vadim Serga as saying. NATO will outline proposals next month for a new "southern strategy" in response to mounting instability across the Middle East and Russia's growing military presence south of the Bosphorus, the Financial Times reported.

The strategy will focus on a range of measures including increased surveillance and reconnaissance activities across the Mediterranean by NATO forces, deployments of NATO troops in advisory roles to crisis-hit countries across north Africa and the Middle East, and reinforced permanent NATO military deployments in the region, according to NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg.

"We will discuss a southern strategy at our foreign ministerial which will take place on Dec. 1 and 2," said Stoltenberg in Zaragoza, Spain. "There we will have a report addressing and assessing the challenges we face to the south." "Freedom of navigation [in the Mediterranean] is fundamentally important to NATO," General Adrian Bradshaw, NATO's deputy supreme allied commander said. "As we observe the deployment of more sophisticated [Russian] capabilities with considerable reach it becomes more and more important that we refresh our deterrence."

Obama, Netanyahu eye arms deal to mend ties

AFP, 06.11.2015



The US President Barack Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will hold a post-row summit on Nov 9, hoping a massive 10 year defense deal will help them move beyond a bitter public fight that shook a decades-old alliance.

After acerbic clashes over the US-backed nuclear deal with Iran, the US President Barack Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will discuss a deal expected to be worth more than \$30 billion which will include a string of advanced weaponry systems, officials said. The deal will not be finalized during the summit and would only come into effect after a current accord expires in 2017.

But Obama and Netanyahu are expected to discuss commitments that could see Israel get more than the 33 hi-tech F-35 jets already ordered, precision munitions and a chance to buy V-22 Ospreys and other weapons systems designed to ensure Israel's military edge over its neighbors. The weapons said to be under discussion reflect the prominence of Iran in US and Israeli military thinking. The F-35 is the only aircraft able to counter the S-300 surface-to-air missile system that Russia has suggested it may sell to Tehran. Officials said Israel may also seek to ensure that other US allies in the region do not get the F-35.

The White House has so far rebuffed Arab Gulf states' requests to buy the planes. But while Israel has been offered some bunker-busting bombs, divisions over how to handle Tehran may put the sale of 30,000 pound "Massive Ordnance Penetrators" that could be used to target Iranian nuclear sites off the table. "This is not something that has been raised in the context of the MoU discussions," said senior Obama national security aide Ben Rhodes referring to the deal, known formally as a memorandum of understanding. Military experts say Israel's lack of bunker busting capability has limited Netanyahu's ability to launch a unilateral strike against Iran, effectively giving Washington a veto over military action.

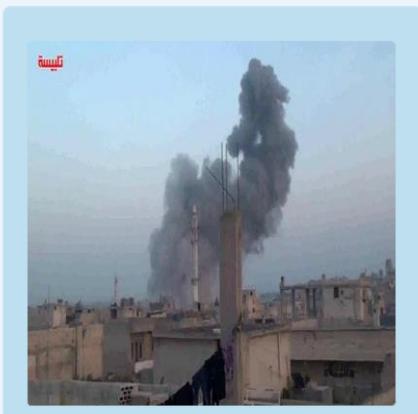
The visit, Rhodes said, "would be an opportunity to discuss and hear from Israel its assessment of its security challenges and the related security needs it has... whether it is something like the F-35 or a variety of others." During his last trip to Washington in March, the Israeli prime minister found the door of the White House slammed firmly shut, with Obama refusing to meet him. The White House had been infuriated by Netanyahu's decision to appear in Congress at Republicans' invitation and urge US lawmakers to vote against a deal to curb Iran's nuclear program. Obama views the deal as a signature achievement that will close down Tehran's pathway to getting a bomb. The Israeli leader publicly and stridently opposed a deal, describing it as a "stunning, historic mistake."

He will try to make amends in part by addressing the Center for American Progress, a Washington think-tank with close ties to the White House and the Democratic Party. Israel could still be a help or hindrance to Obama in keeping the deal on track, ratcheting up domestic pressure on the White House should Iran stall or falter on implementation. Some commentators have called for Israel and the United States to set up a formal joint implementation mechanism, a move that would infuriate Tehran. Amid an uptick in violence between Israelis and Palestinians, Obama will also be looking for Netanyahu to recommit to a peace process centered around a two-state solution, which he seemed to shy from during a recent election campaign, much to Obama's chagrin.

Rob Malley, the National Security Council coordinator for the Middle East, said Obama would look to hear ideas from Netanyahu about how to move the process forward. "The President has said we have to reach a realistic assessment that there will not be a comprehensive final status agreement in the remainder of his term, and there likely may not be meaningful negotiations between the two sides," said Malley. "Given that reality, which is a new one, how does the prime minister himself see Israel going forward?"

Monitor: Apparent Russian Syria strikes killed 23 civilians

AFP, 04.11.2015



Air strikes believed to have been carried out by Russian warplanes on an Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)-held town in central Syria killed 23 civilians, a monitoring group said. Among those killed in the Nov 2 strikes on the Homs province town of Al-Qaryatain were three children and a woman, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

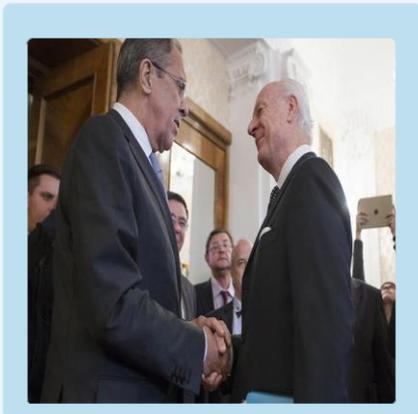
The Britain-based group had earlier reported at least 10 people killed in apparent Russian strikes on the town. It said ISIL fighters were also believed to have been killed in the strikes, but had no confirmed figure. ISIL seized Al-Qaryatain in August, kidnapping several hundred civilians.

The group has also destroyed an ancient monastery in the town, which was once seen as a symbol of coexistence in Syria. The Observatory relies on a network of sources on the ground in Syria, including opposition activists and individuals in government-held territory. The group says it distinguishes between strikes carried out by Syrian, Russian and US-led coalition aircraft based on flight patterns indicating whether planes took off from inside the country, as well as the type of planes and ordnance used. Russia began its air campaign in support of ally President Bashar al-Assad on September 30, saying it was targeting ISIL and other "terrorists". But rebels and their backers accuse Moscow of focusing largely on moderate and Islamist opposition forces rather than jihadists. According to the Observatory, the first month of Russian strikes killed nearly 600 people, two-thirds of them fighters.

The rest -- some 185 -- were civilians, it says. A US-led coalition that has been bombing jihadist targets in Syria since September 2014 has killed 3,649 people, according to the Observatory. It says 226 of those, around six percent, have been civilians. More than 250,000 people have been killed in Syria since the conflict began with anti-government protests in March 2011.

Russian FM to meet UN Syria envoy amid diplomatic push

AFP, 03.11.2015



Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov will meet the UN's Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura in Moscow as diplomats try to keep up a push aimed at ending the bloody war. "The main subject will be the political process in Syria and starting a genuine dialogue between Damascus and the Syrian opposition," Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova told AFP.

Lavrov and de Mistura met in Vienna alongside the top diplomats from 17 other key international players on the Syrian conflict, including the United States, Iran and Saudi Arabia, in the broadest push yet to end the four-year conflict.

The participants -- who did not include any representatives of the Syrian government or its opponents -- agreed to ask the UN to broker a peace deal between the regime and opposition to clear the way for a new constitution and UN-supervised elections. But divisions remain on the fate of President Bashar al-Assad, with Russia and Iran resisting Western and Saudi pressure to force the Syrian leader from power.

De Mistura has since been to Damascus to brief the government on the talks and called for new ceasefires on the ground to build on the diplomatic efforts. Russia said that it could host a meeting between the Syrian government and unspecified members of the opposition next week in Moscow. "Next week we will invite them to Moscow for consultations," deputy foreign minister Mikhail Bogdanov was quoted as saying by Russian news agencies. "There is no issue with the government, they said so a long time ago," he said. "Now we are in contact with the representatives of different opposition groups to get them to come to Moscow." Russia said that it handed Saudi Arabia and the United States a list at the Vienna talks of dozens of Syrian opposition figures with whom it is liaising in a bid to thrash out who each side thinks represents the factious opposition.

Greek PM gears up for refugee talks in Turkey

AFP, 25.10.2015



Greek PM Tsipras said he would visit Turkey for key refugee talks as he called for the faster release of EU aid funds for the crisis. “On behalf of the EU, I will have the opportunity to discuss issues related to a more substantial cooperation between EU and Turkey on refugee issue,” Tsipras told, adding that the visit would take place in mid-November.

Greece, a gateway for the bulk of over 750,000 arrivals from the Mediterranean Sea this year - mostly families fleeing the civil war in Syria - wants Turkey to play a more active role in registering the refugees and migrants on its soil.

“It’s very important for us that this procedure be carried over, sooner or later, I hope sooner, to the other side of the Aegean,” Tsipras said, reiterating a call “to have Turkey handling the resettlement procedure from reception centers there that exist or will be created.” Tsipras was present alongside senior European officials as six Iraqi and Syrian families were put on a plane to Luxembourg, initiating Greece’s participation in an EU scheme to share some 160,000 refugees among member states.

Hundreds of refugees have died trying to cross the Aegean in barely seaworthy vessels this year. Five more people including a woman and two children died off the island of Lesbos, the Greek coastguard said. Tsipras said Greece would continue meeting its responsibilities despite facing an “incalculable” cost to rescue, register and feed the refugees. “We have only received 5.9 million euros (\$6.5 million) in European funds since the (refugee) crisis began,” he said.

“Imagine how much we spend on a daily basis to keep the coastguard, army, police and municipal staff on 24-hour alert, to transport, provide first aid and feed these people,” he said. “But we cannot put a price... on humanity, on a warm embrace for children drowning in the sea,” he added. Greece plans to provide temporary accommodation to an additional 20,000 refugees by the end of January, the PM said.

British PM denies Syria strikes climb down

AFP, 28.10.2015



The British government denied it was abandoning plans for a parliamentary vote to join air strikes in Syria as an influential committee of MPs advised against action. Newspaper reports suggested PM David Cameron had abandoned plans to seek parliamentary approval to extend missions against the ISIL jihadist group from Iraq into neighbouring Syria.

That came after an MPs' panel said Britain should not do so without a clear strategy to defeat the jihadist group and bring peace to the country. But Cameron's office said his position had not changed and the premier would not seek a vote without broad support across the House of Commons.

"He's consistently said that we would only go back to the House on this issue if there was clear consensus," a Downing Street source said. "Meanwhile, the government continues to work to bring the conflict to an end in Syria and we are working closely with our allies to inject greater momentum into efforts to find a political solution."

The Commons Foreign Affairs Committee -- a cross-party MPs' body which scrutinises Britain's foreign policy -- said in a new report that Cameron's focus on joining air strikes was "incoherent" and "a distraction". "We are concerned that the government is focusing on extending airstrikes to Syria... without any expectation that its action will be militarily decisive, and without a coherent and long-term plan for defeating ISIL and ending the civil war," said committee chairman Crispin Blunt, a senior MP from Cameron's Conservative Party.

"There is now a miscellany of uncoordinated military engagements by an alarming range of international actors in Iraq and Syria. "These forces desperately need coordinating into a coherent strategy and that is where our efforts should be focused." Blunt urged the government to concentrate on supporting international diplomacy to end the conflict -- which has killed more than 250,000 people -- following last week's talks in Vienna attended by 17 countries.

Several newspapers reported on Nov 3 that Cameron had dropped his plan for a vote, in the wake of Russia's entry into the war by bombing to support the embattled regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Cameron assessed that airstrikes would not now have the support of enough MPs to pass, given the Conservatives' slim majority of 12 in the House of Commons, The Guardian and The Times reported.

The Times, citing government ministry sources, said the vote, widely expected before the end of the year, would not now go ahead. The Guardian said Cameron thought he had not won over enough opposition MPs to compensate for Conservative rebels and acknowledged that Russia's intervention had complicated the picture. The government has argued that it is illogical to conduct air strikes in Iraq and not neighbouring Syria, saying the two countries are "a single theatre of conflict".

In his response to the report, Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond said ministers would use “every tool available” to save lives in the region. “Air strikes against ISIL are not the sole solution but military action, in coordination with our coalition allies, is having a substantial impact in degrading ISIL in Iraq,” he added.

“It is right that we continue to use military force against ISIL while we use diplomatic power to work towards a political solution in the Syrian war.” Cameron’s previous government, a coalition, was badly bruised by a Commons defeat over a plan to launch air strikes in Syria in 2013. Jeremy Corbyn, the new leader of the main opposition Labour Party, is a leading anti-war campaigner who is opposed to extending air strikes, although some Labour MPs support the move.

For action in Iraq, Britain is currently part of a coalition of more than 60 countries and has eight Tornado jets flying missions plus an unconfirmed number of Reaper drones. This was approved by parliament in September last year.

Obama says bomb may have caused Egypt plane crash

Reuters, 03.11.2015



US President Barack Obama raised the possibility that a bomb brought down a Russian plane that crashed over Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula, undermining efforts by Cairo and Moscow to downplay the suggestion of an attack. With concerns over security mounting, a number of European airlines readied to bring home thousands of tourists from the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh, where the plane took off.

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) jihadist group has claimed responsibility for the disaster, in which the Saint Petersburg-bound jet crashed minutes after taking off, killing all 224 mainly Russian tourists on board.

“I think there is a possibility that there was a bomb on board and we are taking that very seriously,” Obama told a US radio station, while emphasising it was too early to say for sure. In London, where David Cameron was hosting Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the British premier told reporters it was “more likely than not that it was a terrorist bomb” that caused the crash.

And The Times newspaper reported that electronic communications intercepted by British and American spies suggested a bomb may have been carried onto the plane. “The tone and content of the messages convinced analysts that a bomb had been carried on board by a passenger or a member of the airport ground staff,” the newspaper reported, without giving a source. But Egypt’s civil aviation minister Hossam Kamal said there was “as yet no evidence or data confirming the theory” of an attack and the Kremlin has dismissed the notion as “speculation”.



Russian President Vladimir Putin, who authorised strikes against fighters including ISIL militants in Syria, said assessments of the crash should be based on the “ongoing official investigation”, according to the Kremlin. Sisi sought to use his trip to London to allay fears over the safety of tourists in his home country after several nations suspended flights to and from Sharm el-Sheikh -- leaving holidaymakers stranded while officials assessed security at the airport. There is no global or European blanket ban and some flights have continued from the airport, but France and Belgium have warned citizens against travelling to Sharm el-Sheikh and Britain has advised against all but essential travel by air to or from the resort.

Outbound flights from Britain to Sharm el-Sheikh remain suspended but the British government authorised flights to resume from the resort to bring home an estimated 20,000 British tourists -- but passengers will only be allowed to carry hand luggage. “The government has decided, in consultation with the airlines, that flights from Sharm to the UK will resume tomorrow,” a spokeswoman for Cameron said. “The additional security measures will include permitting passengers to carry hand baggage only and transporting hold luggage separately.” Belgian airline Jetair announced similar measures, while British airlines easyJet and Monarch said they would lay on extra flights to get customers home.

Joining a string of airlines in avoiding Sharm el-Sheikh, the Lufthansa Group announced its subsidiary Eurowings would halt flights between Germany and the Red Sea resort, while Turkish Airlines also cancelled two flights. Russia began burying the first victims of the crash, with several hundred people gathering in Veliky Novgorod, south of Saint Petersburg, to mourn 60-year-old Nina Lushchenko. Flight KGL9268 was flying at altitude of 30,000 feet (9,150 metres) when it lost contact with authorities, 23 minutes after take-off from Sharm el-Sheikh to Russia’s second city. Experts say the fact that debris and bodies were strewn over a wide area indicates the aircraft disintegrated in mid-air, meaning the crash was likely caused by either a technical fault or an explosion on board. ISIL, in claiming responsibility for the crash, said it would reveal how it had done so at a time of its choosing. If confirmed, it would be the first time ISIL, which controls large areas of Syria and Iraq, has attacked a passenger plane. It has the potential to deeply damage Egypt’s tourism industry, still struggling to recover from a turbulent few years following the revolution of 2011.

Kerry reassures Afghanistan's neighbors over US troop drawdown

Reuters, 03.11.2015



U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry sought to reassure the rulers of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan that Washington remained committed to Central Asia's security, even though it is withdrawing troops from neighboring Afghanistan.

Both countries fear the spread of Islamist militancy, and U.S. officials worry that government crackdowns will backfire and bring greater instability. Kerry met Tajik President Imomali Rakhmon in Dushanbe and was Turkmen President Kurbanguly Berdymukhamedov in Ashgabat. "I emphasized the US' commitment to work with Tajikistan and other countries to strengthen border security," Kerry told.

The two visits come on the last day of Kerry's tour of Central Asia. He made stops in all five of the region's former Soviet republics, in an effort to show that Washington intends to stay engaged as Russia, fresh from forays into Ukraine and Syria, reasserts itself. U.S. officials hope Central Asian leaders will see President Barack Obama's recent decision to slow the pace of U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan as proof that Washington is not abandoning them. Kerry's trip was also meant to show that the United States wants to deepen not only security cooperation but also economic ties. At the same time, Kerry emphasized in the Kazakh capital, Astana, that Central Asian governments must not use fears of extremism as an excuse to crack down on dissent or as a "license to use violence indiscriminately." Either would only radicalize more people, he said.

U.S. officials are especially concerned about Tajikistan. During the summer, Rakhmon's government banned the only official Islamist political party in former Soviet Central Asia. Last month, authorities arrested almost two dozen of its members. Before Kerry's trip, a senior U.S. official noted that men with the traditional long beards of devout Muslims have faced "particular persecution" in Tajikistan, something that has drawn criticism from international rights groups. "... The great difficulties and challenges involved in counter-terrorism and the fight against violent extremism" needed to be balanced with human rights and religious freedom," Kerry said.

Announcements & Reports

► *Firmer Foundations for a Stronger European Banking Union*

Source : Bruegel
Weblink : <http://bruegel.org/2015/11/firmer-foundations-for-a-stronger-european-banking-union/>

► *U.S.-Japan Cooperation in Cybersecurity*

Source : CSIS
Weblink : <http://csis.org/publication/us-japan-cooperation-cybersecurity>

► *Benchmarking Greater Washington's Global Reach: The National Capital Region in The World Economy*

Source : Brookings
Weblink : <http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports2/2015/11/04-greater-washington-global-reach-marchio-berube>

Upcoming Events

► *Venezuela's High-Stakes Legislative Elections*

Date : 09 November 2015
Place : Washington - USA
Website : <http://www.brookings.edu/events/2015/11/09-venezuela-december-elections>

► *Secular Stagnation in Europe and Japan*

Date : 17 November 2015
Place : Brussels - Belgium
Website : <http://bruegel.org/events/secular-stagnation-in-europe-and-japan/>

► *The Role of The Nordic Social Model in The Future*

Date : 18 November 2015
Place : Brussels - Belgium
Website : <http://bruegel.org/events/the-role-of-the-nordic-social-model-in-the-future/>



▶ *Lebanon's Deepening Domestic Crisis*

Date : 19 November 2015
Place : Washington DC – The USA
Website : <http://www.brookings.edu/events/2015/10/12-lebanon-domestic-crisis>

▶ *The Politics of The Fed: Past, Present and Future*

Date : 22 November 2015
Place : Washington DC – The USA
Website : <http://www.brookings.edu/events/2015/10/22-politics-of-the-fed-past-present-and-future>

▶ *Supporting Military Families and Veterans, Sustaining The All-Volunteer Force*

Date : 29 November 2015
Place : Washington – The USA
Website : <http://www.brookings.edu/events/2015/10/29-military-families-veterans-lifestyle-survey>

▶ *Competitive Gains in the Economic and Monetary Union*

Date : 23 December 2015
Place : Brussels - Belgium
Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/534-competitive-gains-in-the-economic-and-monetary-union/>

▶ *The Future of Capitalist Democracy: UK-Japan Perspectives*

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

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

Date : 26 December 2015
Place : Brussels - Belgium
Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/524-emerging-markets-and-europe-time-for-different-relationships/>

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

Date : 27 December 2015
Place : Brussels - Belgium
Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/526-what-future-for-europes-social-models/>

▶ *Challenges for Growth in Europe*

Date : 28 December 2015
Place : Brussels - Belgium
Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/521-challenges-for-growth-in-europe/>



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

Date : 28 December 2015

Place : Paris - France

Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/529-global-governance-of-public-goods-asian-and-european-perspectives/>

► *The Future of the Welfare State*

Date : 29 December 2015

Place : Berlin - Germany

Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/541-the-future-of-the-welfare-state/>