

TEHRAN (Dispatches) -- A deputy of former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad announced Saturday his decision to run in this year's presidential election, becoming the first candidate to contest the top job.

Hamid Baghaie, who was jailed in 2015, was Ahmadinejad's vice president for executive affairs and head of the tourism board. He announced his candidacy in a statement saying he would run as an "independent" and describing himself as a "soldier" of the Islamic republic of Iran. In 2015, Baghaie was arrested and imprisoned for seven months for reasons never made public.

TEHRAN (Press TV) -- The Iranian and Russian foreign ministers have met on the sidelines of the 53rd Munich Security Conference, Russia's Foreign Ministry says.

Ministers Muhammad Javad Zarif of Iran and Sergei Lavrov of Russia discussed the situation in Syria and the recent relevant developments, including negotiations in the Kazakh capital of Astana, the ministry said on Saturday. The top diplomats also discussed bilateral affairs and cooperation, as well as the recent meetings and contacts that had taken place between their respective countries' officials.

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U.S. Muslims Rally Amid Rise in Islamophobia

DETROIT (Dispatches) -- **Hatred of Muslims in the United States is nothing new, said the editor in chief of the Nation of Islam's newspaper, the Final Call.**

While Islamophobia came to the surface after the 9/11 attacks and saw a resurgence under President Donald Trump, Richard B Muhammad said the Nation of Islam has witnessed it throughout its 87-year history.

Followers of NOI were gathered for a four-day conference from 16-19 February in Detroit, the cradle of the organization that advocates for black liberation under the banner of Islam.

The African American nationalist group and its leader, Minister Louis Farrakhan, have faced allegations of anti-Semitism, racism and homophobia. The Southern Poverty law Center says NOI has a "prominent position in the ranks of organized hate".

But Muhammad pointed to the attendees of the conference, highlighting the level of respect between members, saying that the group is about justice and equality, not racial supremacy.

"Our aim is the spiritual, mental, social and economic --political if you will-- resurrection of our people"

On Friday, Cobo Hall, Detroit's iconic conference center, was filled with NOI followers.

Men in elegant suits, many of them with short hair brushed to the side, mirroring Farrakhan's

appearance, stood graciously greeting everyone who came by. The women looked more uniform - they mostly wore long, dark-blue dresses with matching pants beneath them. Female attendees, or the sisters as they are called within the group, covered their heads with scarves that held their hair firmly from the front but hung loose in the back, resembling a nun's apostolnik more than a traditional hijab.

"Assalamu Alaykum (peace be upon you)" - the Arabic words of the traditional Muslim greeting were heard almost constantly among the members, but pronounced quickly by attendees as they greeted each other.

Followers of the group also wished each other a happy Saviors' Day, the occasion that celebrates the group's founder, WF Muhammad, which they are in Detroit to observe.

As a part of the conference, which was expected to draw about 30,000 people, NOI established a bazaar where vendors sold artworks, books, beauty products, and T-shirts, a vibrant space where shoppers interacted gleefully.

"This is us, in a country filled with violence," Muhammad, the editor, told Middle East Eye, illustrating a contrast between his view of the group versus the state of the American nation.

Muhammad said NOI's mission has not changed since the movement began in 1930.

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Hurriyet Daily Report:

Turkey Presents U.S. Plan to Occupy Raqqa



File image of Turkish troops in Syria

ANKARA (Dispatches) -- **Turkey has presented two proposals to the United States for how to carry out a joint military operation to drive Daesh from its stronghold in the Syrian city of Raqqa, Turkish newspaper Hurriyet reported on Saturday.**

Turkey has said repeatedly that the planned operation should be conducted by local Arab forces, possibly with support from Turkish troops, as opposed to the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Force (SDF) - an alliance dominated by Kurdish YPG militia.

Washington's support for the SDF, which launched a campaign to encircle Raqqa in November, has caused tension with NATO-ally Turkey. Ankara views the Kurdish militia as an extension of militants fighting on its own soil.

It is not yet clear whether the new U.S. administration of President Donald Trump will provide weapons to the YPG despite Turkey's objections. The U.S. says weapons provided to the SDF are so far limited to its Arab elements but Ankara says the arms are going to Kurdish militia and is asking for

a halt.

In a meeting on Friday at Turkey's Incirlik air base, a key hub for U.S.-led coalition against militants, Turkish military chief Hulusi Akar and his U.S. counterpart Joseph Dunford discussed the two Raqqa road maps, Hurriyet said, citing security sources.

Ankara's preferred plan of action envisages Turkish and U.S. special forces, backed by commandoes and Turkey-backed militants entering Syria through the border town of Tel Abyad, currently held by Kurdish YPG militia, the

newspaper said.

The forces would effectively cut through YPG territory, before pushing on to Raqqa, which lies about 100 kilometers (60 miles) south.

Such a plan would require the United States to convince the Kurdish militia to grant the Turkey-backed forces a 20-kilometre (12-mile)-wide strip through YPG territory in order to push south, the paper said.

The SDF alliance, which includes Arab and other groups in Syria's north as well as the YPG, controls swathes of territory along the Syria-Turkey border as they push back Daesh.

With airstrikes and special ground forces from the U.S.-led coalition, the SDF is in the middle of a multi-phased operation to surround Raqqa, Daesh's base of operations in Syria.

Hurriyet also said Ankara was betting on securing a Syrian and Arab force of about 9,000 to 10,000 troops for the Raqqa operation, with most coming from among the fighters being trained at two camps inside Turkey.

A second but less likely alternative outlined by Akar to Dunford was to push towards Raqqa via the Syrian town of Bab, Hurriyet reported, which Turkey-backed forces have been fighting to seize from Daesh for the past two months.

But the long journey of 180 kilometers (about 110 miles) and mountainous terrain make that possibility less likely, it said.

Iran Weighs Selling Heavy Water to Euorpe

TEHRAN (Press TV) -- **The Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) said on Saturday Tehran is weighing requests from some European states to purchase heavy water from the Islamic Republic.**

"Following the sale of 70 tonnes of heavy water to Russia and the U.S., some European countries have asked for the purchase of Iran's heavy water and we are considering their requests," Ali Asghar Zare'an, special assistant to the AEOI head, Ali Akbar Salehi, said.

The AEOI chief said in October last year that Iran had sold 32 tonnes of heavy water to the United States and delivered 38 tonnes of the nuclear substance to Russia.

Pointing to the increasing demand for heavy water worldwide, Salehi said Iran had become a major international supplier of the substance.

He also added that heavy water was not used only in reactors but could also be utilized in various industries, including pharmaceuticals.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Zare'an said that Iran would unveil the

first domestically-manufactured centrifuge which would be utilized in the country's oil industry on April 9.

He said that the Islamic Republic had joined the world nuclear club and added, "In addition to the production and sale of heavy water with a high-level purity, we are witnessing the purchase of a large quantity of high-enriched uranium."

The AEOI official also pointed to the injection of uranium hexafluoride (UF6) into advanced domestically-manufactured centrifuge machines, known as IR-8, and said the move was aimed at supplying uranium for power plants.

On January 28, the AEOI said that Iran had started injecting uranium hexafluoride into IR-8 centrifuge machines to launch an important phase of the country's research and development plans.

Iran has successfully conducted all mechanical tests of the machines over the past three years, the AEOI said, adding that the IR-8 centrifuge machines had the capacity to enrich uranium some 20 times more than

the IR-1 ones.

Iran and the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council -- the United States, France, Britain, Russia and China plus Germany -- signed the landmark nuclear agreement, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), on July 14, 2015 and started implementing it on January 16, 2016.

Under the nuclear agreement, Iran undertook to put limitations on its nuclear program in exchange for the removal of nuclear-related sanctions imposed against Tehran.

As part of the JCPOA, Iran is expected to keep its heavy water stockpile below 130 metric tonnes. The deal requires that Tehran sell or dilute the extra amount of its heavy water.

On Friday, the European Union and the UN nuclear agency reaffirmed their support for the 2015 nuclear agreement between Iran and six other countries.

The two sides had communicated the stance in a joint statement a day earlier following the fifth meeting of their senior officials.

Senior IRGC Commander: Iran Engaging Terrorists Daily on Its Borders

TEHRAN (Dispatches) -- A senior commander said on Saturday Iranian security forces either kill or arrest any terrorists seeking to approach Iranian borders.

Brigadier General Muhammad Pakpour, the commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC)'s ground forces, made the remark in a press conference here.

"For sure, Daesh likes to make our country insecure, too, but they do not advance beyond the limits that we have designated, and if they do, they will be annihilated, just as they came and were annihilated last year and this year and some of them were even arrested," he said.

The IRGC commander also said that Iranian security forces are daily engaging counter-revolutionary elements in the country's southeastern borders but the elements find no path to enter because of the fortification

of the borders and the presence of Iranian forces.

"To the northwest of the country (Iran) and beyond the borders, many consulates have been set up to revive dead outfits and provoke them against us," he said.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Pakpour stressed that 70% of the security in Iran's southeast is provided by locals.

Touching on Iran's military advisory support for some regional countries in their campaign against terrorism, he said that the Islamic Republic has ties with different states and that some of them have requested such assistance.

The IRGC is also to conduct military drills next week, Pakpour said, despite warnings from the United States and fresh sanctions over a ballistic missile test.

"The maneuvers called 'Grand Prophet 11' will start Monday and

last three days," he said, adding rockets would be used without specifying which kind.

In early February, Iran conducted drills involving short-range missiles. The Islamic republic said the exercises were aimed at demonstrating Iran's "complete preparedness to deal with the threats" and "humiliating sanctions" from Washington.

U.S. President Donald Trump slapped fresh sanctions against Tehran following a ballistic missile test on January 29. "Iran would do well to look at the calendar and realize there's a new president in the Oval Office. And Iran would do well not to test the resolve of this new president," Vice President Mike Pence said earlier this month.

Iranian officials have rejected the threats emphasizing that the missile program is purely defensive.