

Turkish PM Seeks Votes for 'Strong, Stable' Turkey in Referendum

ANKARA (Dispatches) – Turkey's prime minister called on the public on Saturday to back constitutional change that would greatly strengthen President Tayyip Erdogan's powers, portraying the reform as a vote for stability at the start of campaigning ahead of an April referendum.

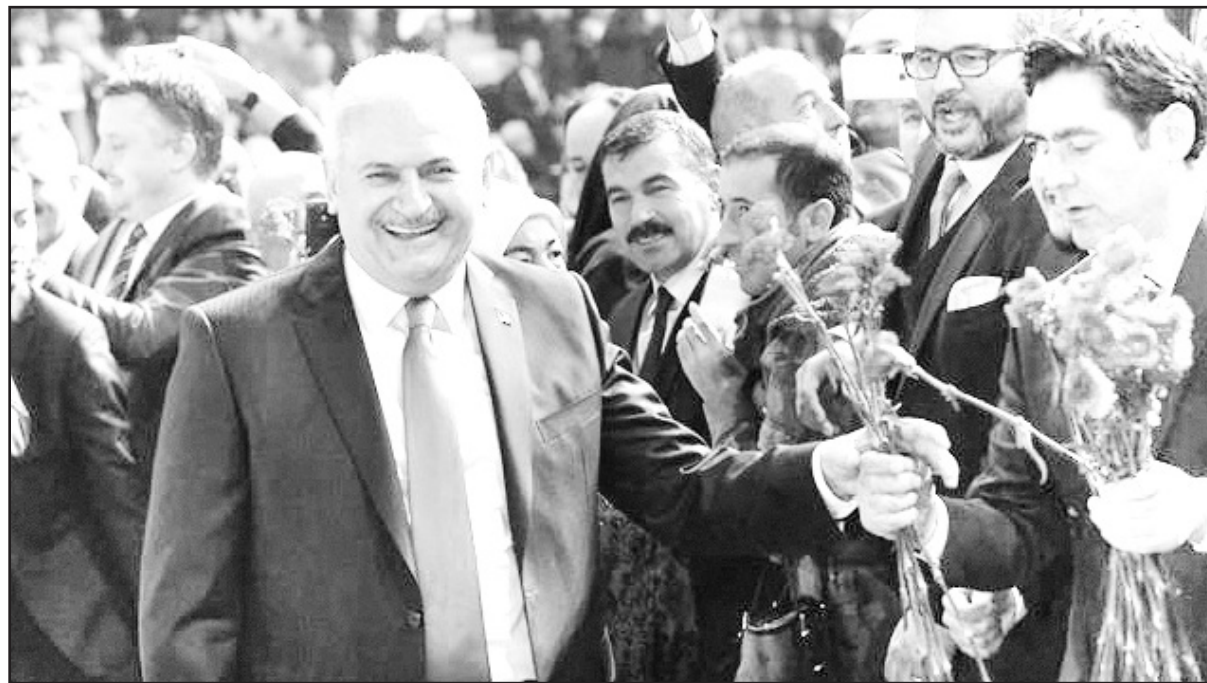
Thousands of ruling AK Party members waved Turkish flags and rallying songs resounded around a sports arena in the capital as Prime Minister Binali Yildirim handed out red carnations after briefly addressing thousands gathered outside.

"There is a rising voice from the town squares: for a strong Turkey, for lasting stability our decision is..." Yildirim called out, eliciting the repeated shouted response "Yes" from the multitude unable to enter the packed arena.

Some 6,500 police provided security inside and around the arena on Saturday, according to state-run Anadolu news agency.

The bid to replace the EU candidate country's parliamentary democracy with a powerful executive presidency is seen by Erdogan supporters as a guarantee of stability, preventing a return to the fragile coalitions of previous decades.

But opponents fear a surge in au-



Binali Yildirim, Turkey's prime minister and the leader of the ruling Justice and Development party, greets supporters on February 25, 2017 in Ankara, Turkey.

thoritarianism.

Tens of thousands of people have already been detained and more than 100,000 public sector workers suspended or dismissed since a failed coup last July.

The NATO-member country of 80 million will vote on the reform in a plebiscite on April 16, with a simple majority needed to approve legislation passed by parliament in January and rubber-stamped by Erdogan last month.

The AKP, which he founded, has been in power since 2002, and Er-

dogan became prime minister in 2003. He assumed the largely ceremonial post of president in 2014 but has pushed its powers to the limit.

In another development, Turkey says prisoners serving lighter sentences would be transferred to open prisons amid reports of jail overcrowding since Ankara began its crackdown in the wake of the failed coup of July 2016.

Yildirim said on Friday that "there is some overcrowding due to the fight against terror," add-

ing that major crimes such as terrorism, organized crime or child abuse, would be excluded from the reassignment policy.

He said the prisoners would not be granted amnesty, and the length of the jail sentence would not change.

On February 22, the Turkish Ministry of Justice revised its regulation, allowing for convicts with sentences shorter than 10 years who achieve at least one month of good behavior to be reassigned to more comfortable open prisons.

Terrorists ... (Continued From Page One)

De Mistura said that despite government and militant delegations being present for the talks there had been little discussion of substance between the rival parties.

"We discussed issues relating to the format of the talks exclusively," said Syrian government delegation chief Bashar al-Jaafari after meeting de Mistura on Friday.

The Homs attack came after Daesh claimed a Friday bombing that killed nearly 70 people outside the northern town of Al-Bab, which Turkish-backed militants said this week they had taken from rivals.

The Observatory said that a car bomb targeted twin command posts at a militant base in Susian, about eight kilometers (five miles) from Al-Bab, which was one of Daesh's last remaining strongholds in Aleppo province.

Separately, two Turkish soldiers were killed in an attack in Al-Bab on Friday as they were carrying out road checks.

The attacks came as the top U.S. military commander for the Middle East made a secret trip to northern Syria on Friday to meet a U.S.-backed militant group, the alliance's spokesman said.

General Joseph Votel, who heads U.S. Central Command (Centcom), met with leaders from the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces in the first such trip under the new U.S. administration.

In an online statement, SDF spokesman Tala Sello said Votel "visited areas under our control today (Friday) and met with several SDF commanders."

"The results were positive. We discussed the developments in the Euphrates Rage campaign and shared military matters."

He described the meeting as "confirmation of U.S. support for our forces." An SDF source told AFP the visit lasted four hours.

Votel made a similar trip to Syria in May 2016, meeting with SDF commanders as well as U.S. military advisers working alongside them.

Founded in October 2015, the SDF alliance is dominated by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). U.S. ally and NATO member Turkey has been wary of the SDF's growing influence in northern Syria.

In August 2016, Ankara started a ground military intervention in Syria to quell SDF advances. The U.S. has special operations forces advising the SDF on the ground in Syria.

On Wednesday, Votel told journalists traveling with him in the Middle East that more U.S. troops might be needed in Syria, although he stressed local forces would be the primary force.

"I am very concerned about maintaining momentum," Votel said, in comments reported by the New York Times and other outlets. "It could be that we take on a larger burden ourselves."

Saudi...

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durably defeat the Takfiri group and its ideology which is widely preached and tolerated in Saudi Arabia.

As evidenced in recent attacks, Daesh has retained its ability to sow chaos and undermine the Iraqi government's authority even after it lost fixed positions in various regions.

Several of them have occurred in Iraq's vast Anbar province, which has long and porous borders with Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Syria.

"Jubeir congratulated Iraq on the victories achieved against Daesh and pledged Saudi Arabia's support to Iraq in fighting terrorism," the statement from Abadi's office said.

It said the minister had also "expressed Saudi Arabia's willingness to back the stability of liberated areas."

The Iraqi government official said there was an opportunity for Baghdad to bring Saudi Arabia and Iran closer.

"The whole region is heading towards compromise and Saudi Arabia sees Iraq as an important player to have on its side," he said. "Iraq's neutrality could make it a ground for Iranian-Saudi rapprochement."

He stressed that despite intense pressure from the street to take a strong stand against Saudi Arabia, Abadi -- who belongs to Iraq's largest Shia political bloc -- had "never indulged in aggressive rhetoric against Saudi Arabia."

Iran...

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China - plus Germany signed the JCPOA on July 14, 2015 and started implementing it on January 16, 2016.

The deal does not set limits on Iran's supplies of uranium ore.

In its latest quarterly report on Friday, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) once again confirmed that Iran has lived up to its commitments under the landmark nuclear agreement.

The confidential report said that at under 102 kilograms (225 pounds) Iran is only at

about half of its permitted limit of a form of low-enriched uranium, and is not producing higher grades.

The AEOI said on January 28 that Iran had started injecting UF6 into IR-8 centrifuge machines in 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 machines have the capacity to enrich uranium some 20 times faster than the IR-1 ones.

Zarif...

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said dismissively, referring to the anti-Iran comments by the Turkish officials.

Iran had earlier summoned the Turkish ambassador to Tehran for a diplomatic rebuke over the remarks by Cavusoglu and Erdogan. The Iranian Foreign Ministry had also warned that there was a certain ceiling to Tehran's patience with the Turkish government.

On Thursday, in an interview with the daily Iran, Foreign Minister Zarif had recalled Iran's supportive stance vis-à-vis the Turkish government following a failed coup attempt that sought to topple officials in Ankara in July last year and said the Islamic Republic did not expect the behavior that the Turks later displayed.

Following the coup, Iran voiced full support for the Ankara government, and Zarif soon traveled to Ankara to carry a message of support for the legitimate Turkish government. He even visited the damaged parliament building in the Turkish capital, shelled by rogue soldiers.

"Our friends in Turkey apparently have a weak memory..." he said in the Thursday interview. "They both have a poor memory and are ungrateful toward those who have been kind to them and supportive of them."

Also speaking at the Munich conference, the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia and Israel seemed to echo one another -- and Cavusoglu -- by making anti-Iran remarks of their own.

In his Thursday interview, Zarif called Saudi Arabia and the other regimes working in tandem against Iran "the coalition of the defeated."

"Once... I said that the international anti-Daesh coalition is 'the coalition of the repentant,' now I say it is 'the coalition of the defeated.' All the parties that have failed in our region have formed a coalition and are saying things. I think one shouldn't take them very seriously," Zarif said in that interview.

The Iranian foreign minister also said that while Iran has been speaking -- including in the Munich Security Conference where Zarif himself represented Iran -- of cooperation and dialog, the anti-Iran regimes have been "throwing wrenches in the works, which is often not what the powerful side does."

"The powerful side should lay out its plans and speak of what the future should look like, not call others names," Zarif said.

Iran...

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IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano congratulated Iran on assuming the chairmanship.

"G-77 countries are extremely important partners for the IAEA. You are active collaborators in everything we do," he said.

The office of the G-77 in Vienna, which was inaugurated on 19 May 1998, provides support services for the preparation of meetings for the UN organizations based in Vienna International Center (VIC), such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the United Nations Office at Vienna (UNOV), the Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO) and UNIDO. The office serves as an institutional memory to members of G-77, keeping documents and minutes of meetings and other relevant information for member states to consult.

The Vienna Chapter of G-77 also prepares statements, joint declarations, action programs and agreements, and proposes the creation of formal and informal groups of consultation and discussion.

The Group of 77 was established on June 15, 1964 by 77 developing countries signatories of the "Joint Declaration of the Seventy-Seven Developing Countries" issued at the end of the first session of the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in Geneva.

Although the members of the G-77 have increased to 134 countries, the original name was retained due to its historic significance.

The Group of 77 is the largest intergovernmental organization of developing countries in the United Nations, which provides the means for the countries of the South to articulate and promote their collective economic interests and enhance their joint negotiating capacity on all major international economic issues within the UN system, and promote South-South cooperation for development.

Iran held the presidency of the G-77 in 1973-74.

11 Afghans Shot to Death by Daesh in Mosque Ambush



Afghan police officers keep watch along a street after an attack from a building close to the Pakistan consulate in the city of Jalalabad, eastern Afghanistan, Jan. 13, 2016.

KABUL (Press TV) – Nearly a dozen people have been shot dead in an ambush by Daesh terrorists in northern Afghanistan, a local official says.

The fatalities, including 10 Afghan police officers and the wife of a police commander, occurred in the country's northern Jowzjan Province after the victims came under attack while leaving a mosque.

Mohammad Reza Ghafari, spokesman for the provincial governor, said the commander's wife was gunned down when she rushed to the scene after hearing about her husband being shot.

Afghanistan faces many security challenges years after the U.S. and its allies invaded the country in

2001 as part of Washington's so-called war on terror. The offensive removed the Taliban from power, but many areas in the country are still beset with insecurity.

Despite the presence of thousands of foreign boots on the ground, Afghanistan has been rocked by a surge in terrorist attacks, some of them carried out by Daesh.

The rise of Daesh in Afghanistan has raised concerns in the Asian country that has already been torn apart by decades of Taliban-led militancy and the US-led invasion.

Civilian casualties in 2016 were the highest recorded by the United Nations since 2009, with nearly 11,500 non-combatants killed or wounded.

Jordanians Protest Against Recent Tax, Price Hikes

AMMAN (Dispatches) – Jordanians have taken to the streets in the capital, Amman, and other areas to demonstrate against government measures to raise prices and taxes.

Nearly 1,500 protesters staged a rally against recent economic measures and price hikes in the capital after Friday prayers.

During the protest, which was organized by the opposition Muslim Brotherhood, the demonstrators also chanted slogans, calling for the ouster of the cabinet. They carried banners that read, "Raising prices is playing with fire."

"The government that raises prices must fall, the government that impoverishes people must go," some protesters chanted.

Earlier this month, the government imposed new taxes on bread, soft drinks, cigarettes, internet and mobile use as well as domestic fuel and petrol. Passport renewal fees and prices on imported commodi-

ties were also increased.

The decision comes as Amman tries to narrow the country's budget deficit, and raise 450 million Jordanian dinars (about \$635 million) after it struck an agreement with the International Monetary Fund in July 2016.

However, protesters slammed the government's economic policies, saying they were only making people poorer.

"These economic policies, and not just the recent decision to raise prices, the ongoing policies undertaken by government after government, only result in making Jordanians hungrier. These economic policies must stop and be changed," said Ali Abu Sukkar, the deputy head of the Islamic Action Front, the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Hind Fayezi, a former member of parliament, urged the government to find solutions other than continuing to impose new taxes.



Protesters from the Islamic Action Front and others hold Jordanian national flags and chant slogans during a protest against rising prices and the imposition of more taxes, in Amman, Jordan, February 24, 2017.

"When these governments want to solve the economic problems and the budget deficit, which has reached 26 billion (Jordanian dinars), unfortunately their only solution is to encroach on the pockets of

the citizens," Fayezi said.

The northwestern city of Salt, as well as the regions of Karak and Madaba, south of the capital, also saw similar demonstrations on Friday.