

Russia Questions OPCW's Syria Probes

MOSCOW (Dispatches) – Russian Foreign Minister Segei Lavrov has questioned the impartiality of probes being carried out by an international organization into accusations of a chemical attack in Syria.

A fact-finding mission was set up by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons into allegations that a Syrian government gas attack killed over 80 people in the town of Khan Shaykhun in Idlib Province on April 4. Damascus has denied the allegation, explaining that it gave up its entire chemical arms stockpile as part of a U.S.-Russia deal in 2014.

The single mission later split into two separate groups. One is now being led by Steven Wallis, a citizen of the United Kingdom, who works in contact with the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and the other is being headed by Wallis' fellow countryman Leonard Phillips, according to Russia's Permanent Representative at the OPCW, Ambassador Alexander Shulgin.

The latter group deals with the claims filed by Syrian terrorist groups, who are fighting to overthrow Assad.

Both groups interview survivors and gather bio-metric samples from the site of the April 4 incident.

On Tuesday, Lavrov said the fact that both groups were being headed by UK citizens raised questions of bias.

"I would like to remind you that we have pointed out a very strange coincidence: that the two groups of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission (FFM)



A Syrian man collects samples from a site where a toxic gas on April 4 killed over 80 people, in Khan Sheikhun, in Syria's northwestern Idlib Province, on April 5, 2017.

on the potential use of chemical weapons in Syria are chaired by UK citizens."

He questioned the "strange coincidence" and described it as "contrary to the principles of an international organization, the structures of which must be maximally balanced."

The impartiality of the OPCW's investigatory work had been questioned by Russia before, too. Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said last Friday that "Moscow believes that the

conclusions formulated by the fact-finding mission in Syria are politically motivated, biased and requiring further clarification." He said Russia was "very skeptical" of the work they did.

In a missile strike that the U.S. said was in retaliation for the alleged gas attack, U.S. Navy destroyers fired 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles from the Mediterranean Sea at Syria's al-Shayrat Airfield on April 7.

Meanwhile, British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said on Tuesday that London would most

probably support the U.S. if it decided to launch further attacks on Syrian government positions.

Lavrov further said in his Tuesday remarks that "many players in Syria, among the external opposition and in many countries in and outside the region" were trying to use the situation "to place the blame squarely on Bashar al-Assad."

The Syrian government says during the April 4 incident, a conventional airstrike hit a chemical depot belonging to terrorists, causing the leak of the gas and the deaths.

Saudi ... (Continued From Page One)

How soon that happens is open to question. For one thing, the economics of the global oil business have changed dramatically recently. A point in case is the success of so-called fracking or hydraulic fracturing of shale oil deposits. The lowest prices at which shale oil can be extracted at a profit have fallen steadily in the U.S. over the past few years, according to recent research cited by BMO Private Bank. In 2016, all five U.S. shale oil regions listed by BMO could produce oil at a profit for less than \$40 a barrel, down from as a much as \$80 three years earlier.

In simple terms, that means all the extra crude from fracking isn't helping oil market stability.

"The kingdom plans to use the proceeds to diversify away from energy," states the BMO report. Such investments would include natural gas, and refined products such as gasoline.

But if the public offering of Aramco is delayed due to instability in the oil market (or for other reasons), then the money coming in will be delayed and hence the investment in new non-oil products to export will also be delayed.

One telling point raised by BMO is that Saudi Arabia already invested \$3.5 billion in the controversial ride-sharing service Uber, "a company that represents a threat to future oil demand", the BMO report says. Put simply, it's more evidence that the Saudi leaders know that the jig is soon to be up in the oil business.

Another obstacle for the Aramco sale is the potential for a sudden change of political leadership.

"The Aramco IPO plan is not immune to leadership changes in Saudi Arabia," according to a recent report from Eurasia Group. "The current reform strategy is closely associated with (Muhammad bin Salman) and some elements of it might not remain in place if he fails to become either king or crown prince."

So if bin Salman dies or if someone else gets one of the key top jobs, bets on the economic reforms would be cast into doubt.

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On top of that, there are security risks within the country. Violence from militant groups have increased and the country itself doesn't have the institutional infrastructure that foreign investors expect, Eurasia Group says. Neither could be seen as an advantage to any potential investor in the country.

On top of volatile oil prices, political transitions and security concerns, analysts say that the kingdom's track record for reform has historically been poor.

Saudi Arabia's leadership has known for a long time that its economy needs to change, but progress has been slow, according to Roberts.

There is a conservative religious community in the kingdom and that tends to slow down the pace of change, he said.

"If Muhammad bin Salman could click his fingers to make change happen, I am sure he would," Roberts added.

The Baker Institute report echoes what Roberts said. "The dizzying pace and ambition of Saudi Vision 2030 and associated developments ... have been uncharacteristic for a kingdom more used to periods of incremental change unfolding slowly over time."

Change is hard anywhere, but perhaps more so inside the Saudi Kingdom.

Lufthansa ... (Continued From Page One)

"We are hoping this business will pick up because the market as such is a huge market with high potential," Lufthansa Group's Senior Vice President for Sales Heike Birlenbach said.

Last year the group axed plans for its budget carrier Eurowings to launch a service to Tehran after deciding the demand was not there, although its other airlines Lufthansa, Austrian and Swiss already fly to Iran.

Trump's executive orders, since

blocked, banning citizens of some Muslim-majority countries, including Iran, from travelling to the United States has shifted travel flows to Europe as a holiday destination for Iranians flying with Lufthansa.

"It caused lots of insecurity for our customers," Birlenbach said of the travel bans.

Emirates said on Tuesday bookings to Iran and the Indian Subcontinent had slowed since the first travel ban in January.

Iran has signed orders for 200 new Western-built aircraft for Iran Air taking delivery so far of two new Airbus and an A321.

Industry executives say they were left on the planemaker's books when their Colombian buyer, Avianca, balked at taking delivery. Such orphan planes are often known as 'white tails'.

Iranian government officials have however been forced to defend the reshuffling from suggestions that Iran is getting cast-off airplanes.

They stress the Avianca jets, for example, had been sitting unused for two years and had never flown commercially.

"It is good for Airbus and Boeing, but this is part of the game that everyone knows," Deputy Roads and Urban Development Minister Asghar Fakhrieh-Kashan told Reuters in remarks published on Tuesday.

Iranians ... (Continued From Page 2)

The four groups suing the Trump administration over the order are the Pars Equality Center, the Iranian American Bar Association, National Iranian American Council, and Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans. The groups contend that Iranians in the U.S. would be hit hardest by the executive order if it is allowed to take effect. The State Department indicates that in 2015, Iranians were issued 35,266 nonimmigrant visas to come to the United States - more than to nationals from any of the other five countries named in the revised order.

The revised order would ban foreign nationals of Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen from traveling to the United States for 90 days. It would also ban for 120 days all refugee resettlement in the United States and would lower the cap on the number of refugees to be allowed into the United States this year from 110,000 people to 50,000 people.

Before the first order was issued in January, the president of the Iranian American Bar Association testified that only about 10% of the organization's resources were dedicated to dealing with immigration or visa issues. After the order was announced, Babak Yousefzadeh said the organization "went into crisis mode" and now roughly 50% of its resources are being directed toward issues related to the order. Even with the order on hold, he said the group is still plagued with questions they aren't able to answer because of a lack of certainty in how the government will implement the order if it is allowed to take effect.

Leila Golestaneh Austin, executive director of the Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans, said her group had to postpone projects such as a sports diplomacy program that would have brought Iranians to the U.S. as a result of uncertainty about the executive order. She said the order has created a stigma against Iranians and led members to take on new initiatives such as addressing hate crimes targeting the Iranian community in the U.S.

The Justice Department sought unsuccessfully to prevent Tuesday's testimony ahead of a preliminary injunction hearing scheduled for Friday, arguing that declarations filed in court were sufficient. Judge Chutkan will preside over the preliminary injunction arguments set for Friday, which are being heard in conjunction with a second case - filed by the Universal Muslim Association of America, Muslim Advocates, and the Southern Poverty Law Center.

Minister Rejects Comments Against Turkey's Electoral Board

ANKARA (Dispatches) – Turkey's minister for European Union affairs has rejected violation accusations raised against the national electoral board that supervised a plebiscite on changes in the constitution, describing the move as "politically motivated".

Turkey's bar association as well as an international monitor criticized a last-minute decision by the High Electoral Board (YSK) to accept unstamped ballots in Sunday's narrow referendum, which gives President Recep Tayyip Erdogan extensive executive powers. They said the decision is in violation of electoral laws.

However, Turkish government officials have rejected the violation claim.

"Politically motivated comments against the YSK's decision to accept unstamped ballots are wrong," Omer Celik told reporters in the capital Ankara on Tuesday.

Celik defended the YSK decision,

claiming Turkey had a strong legal framework and transparent process for elections.

On Monday, President Erdogan made similar comments. He told a crowd of his supporters that his critics should "know their place", adding that Ankara did not "see, hear or acknowledge" any irregularities in the historic referendum.

Meanwhile, the country's main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) has called for the annulment of the results of the referendum.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has congratulated his Turkish counterpart, Erdogan, over his victory in a referendum to boost the Turkish presidency.

"Vladimir Putin congratulated Recep Tayyip Erdogan on the successful outcome of a referendum on constitutional changes in Turkey," said a statement released by the Kremlin on Tuesday.



Supporters of the "No" march at Besiktas to submit their petition calling for the annulment of a referendum that approved sweeping constitutional changes boosting President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's powers, claiming blatant vote-rigging had swung the result, on April 18, 2017 in Istanbul.

The two presidents also stressed the importance of normalizing ties which have somewhat deteriorated following an incident in which Turkish fighter planes downed a Russia jet over the Syrian border

in 2015.

They also emphasized the importance of stabilizing the ceasefire in Syria which was brokered by both countries plus Iran.

Daesh Attack in Egypt's Sinai Kills 1 Police Officer, Injures 4

CAIRO (Press TV) – Armed men have attacked Egyptian security forces close to the St. Catherine Monastery in the country's Sinai Peninsula, killing one police officer and wounding four more.

The Daesh terrorist group claimed responsibility for the Tuesday attack on the security checkpoint, which is situated some 800 meters from the monastery.

St. Catherine is one of the

world's most important Christian sites and was built in the late 6th century and is registered as a UNESCO world heritage site.

The incident comes just over one week after the terrorist group claimed responsibility for two deadly bombings on Christian churches in the country.

On April 9, at least 17 people were killed and more than 40 injured after a bomb targeted a

church in Alexandria. The attack took place just hours after a church in the city of Tanta near Cairo was targeted with a remote-controlled bomb, killing at least 27 people and wounding around 80 others.

A three-month state of emergency was also announced by President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and approved by parliament in the aftermath of the attacks.

Meanwhile, Egyptian police have

arrested a man allegedly involved in the church bombings.

The arrestee, Ali Mahmoud Mohamed Hassan, was one of 19 suspects whose names were made public by the police after the blasts.

On Monday, Egyptian officials arrested 13 people suspected of planning attacks on the country's minority Christians as well as security forces.