

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – In a message to his Azerbaijani counterpart Ilham Aliyev, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has said ample opportunities exist for expansion of ties between Tehran and Baku.

Rouhani congratulated the Azeri leader, government and nation on the Republic Day. He said great potentials for bilateral ties as well as cultural, religious and historical values that the two nations have in common have created a unique ground for enhancement of cooperation between the two neighbors in line with their mutual interests.

TEHRAN (Fars) -- Iran's Judiciary Chief Sadeq Amoli Larijani on Monday blasted U.S. President Donald Trump for his terrorism allegations against Tehran during his recent trip to Saudi Arabia, saying the U.S. itself is the creator and main supporter of terrorist groups in the region.

"The Americans have come from thousands of kilometers away and joined the sword dance with the leaders of a regime (Saudi Arabia) which has not experienced any election in the country's history, calling the Islamic Republic a supporter of terrorism," Amoli Larijani said. "They should be told that they are the father of terrorists and creator of terrorism."

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Iran Seeks Explanation From Turkey

TEHRAN (Press TV) -- Iran said on Monday it has asked for explanation from Turkey after a cross-border attack left two Iranian border guards dead on Saturday.

"The subject has been announced to the Turkish government through diplomatic channels and we are awaiting their response," Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Qassemi told a weekly news briefing here.

Seven border guards were also injured when PJAK terrorists attacked them while they were changing posts, before retreating into Turkey.

"This is an unpleasant incident. We don't like to have insecure borders with Turkey. We hope that with the prudence, responsibility and response of the Turkish government, we can take a decision," he added.

Iran's border police chief also said Turkey should be held accountable for the deaths of the Iranian border guards and for letting terrorist groups operate in its border areas.

"We consider Turkey liable and the country should be held accountable for this act of terrorism," Tasnim news agency quoted Brigadier General Qassem Rezaei as saying Sunday.

PJAK is an offshoot of Turkey's

Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and is known for carrying out random hit-and-run attacks against Iranian targets, after which they retreat to their lairs in Turkey as well as Iraq.

They carry out their attacks in parts of Iran's West Azerbaijan province which borders Iraq, Turkey, and Armenia. Rezaei said "unfortunately, in the areas bordering Turkey, we witness activities by terrorist groups under various pretexts."

Earlier this month, Iran said it welcomed Turkey's plan to build a 144-kilometer wall along its border. Ankara says the wall is aimed at halting the movement of PKK militants who are based in Iraq's Qandil mountains bordering Iran and Turkey.

Beside terrorists, smugglers also use the border to bring in bootleg goods such as alcohol from Turkey and northern Iraq.

The Iranian commander issued a harsh warning, saying "terrorist groups will soon meet a crushing response for their stupid acts."

"Terrorist groups are one of the plots of the world arrogance. They once used to go on rampage in the country's northwest and operate within our borders. But, today they are based outside our borders," Rezaei said.

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Iraq's Hashd al-Shaabi Reaches Syrian Border



Hashd al-Shaabi fighters fire their weapons as they advance near a town, west of Mosul.

BAGHDAD (Dispatches) -- An Iraqi government-sanctioned paramilitary force moved on Monday to capture a key town beyond the city of Mosul from Daesh, tightening its grip on series of towns and villages near the Syrian border, officials said.

The Iraqi territory taken by the Popular Mobilization force connected with land held by U.S.-backed Kurdish militants on the Syrian side, creating a possible bridge.

In a statement on its website, Popular Mobilization described its advance through Iraq to the border with Syria as "a Ramadan miracle", referring to the Muslim fasting month which started over the weekend.

Iraq last October launched a wide-scale military offensive to recapture Mosul and the surrounding areas, with various Iraqi military, police and paramilitary forces taking part in the operation. The city's eastern half was declared liberated in January, and the push for the city's western section, separated from the east by the Tigris River, began the following month.

According to lawmaker Karim al-Nouri, the Popular Mobilization Forces known as Hashd al-Shaabi seeks to drive Daesh militants out of the center of strategic Baaj, west of Mosul near the border with Syria. Al-Nouri said the surrounding villages have already been taken from Daesh.

Once Baaj falls, he told The Associated Press, the fight with Daesh will move to the Syrian border.

"Baaj is a strategic town for Daesh as it is the last supply line" linking Daesh with Syria, said Sheikh Sami al-Masoudi, a PMF leader. "Once we reach the border, we will erect

a dirt barricade and dig a trench to derail their (Daesh) move," he added.

By afternoon, a brigade from the PMF reached the Syrian border for the first time, taking Um Jrais village, al-Masoudi later said.

Hashim al-Mousawi, a leader with al-Nujaba militia, which is also part of the PMF, said the troops are ready to move inside Syrian territories but that this needs Iraqi government approval.

The PMF has largely operated since October in the desert to the west of Mosul, trying to cut Daesh supply lines.

On the Syrian side of the border, U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, Daesh militants and other militants are fighting for territory. President Bashar Assad's forces and their allies have also been on the offensive, moving toward the Iraqi and Jordanian border but are still far from reaching it.

On May 18, a U.S. airstrike hit Syrian government forces that the U.S. claimed posed a threat to American troops and allied terrorists operating near the border with Jordan. The attack was the first such close confrontation between American troops and Syrian forces.

Syrian activists said leaflets were dropped Sunday on advancing Syrian soldiers and their allies, warning them to stay away from the border crossing of Tanf. "Any movements toward Tanf will be considered hostile and we will defend our forces," the U.S. leaflet read.

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Putin in France to Mend Ties With West

VERSAILLES, France (Dispatches) -- On a trip likely to shape Russia-France ties for years to come, Russian President Vladimir Putin arrived in France on Monday for talks with newly-elected French President Emmanuel Macron.

The trip offers the Russian leader a chance to turn the page and try to establish a productive relationship with Macron as the Kremlin struggles to mend its bitter rift with the West.

Macron is the first Western leader to speak to Putin after the Group of

Seven summit over the weekend, where relations with Russia were a key topic.

The Kremlin has hailed the visit as a chance for Putin and Macron to get to know each other and better understand their views on a range of disputed issues, including the Ukrainian crisis, the war in Syria and Russia's ties with the European Union.

During his G-7 news conference on Saturday, Macron promised to have a "demanding dialogue" with Russia,

especially on Syria. He called it a failure that European nations were not involved in the talks over Syria's future but were being hit by its effects, including the huge number of Syrian refugees trying to get to Europe.

"We must talk to Russia to change the framework for getting out of the military crisis in Syria and to build a much more collective and integrated inclusive political solution," Macron declared.

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Eurasian Union Close to Iran Free Trade Deal

ASTANA (Dispatches) -- The Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union aims to finalize a free-trade deal with Iran by the end of the year, in an attempt by Russia and its fellow members to deepen ties with Tehran.

The trade overtures are taking place amid signs that Iran's relationship with the U.S. will deteriorate under the administration of Donald Trump. The U.S. president last week attacked Iran during visits to Saudi Arabia and Occupied Palestine, days after Iran re-elected President Hassan Rouhani.

Russia and Iran cooperate on a number of geopolitical issues, most notably in the war in Syria. The two countries have sought to deepen their relationship since the EU and U.S. imposed sanctions on Moscow in 2014.

Putin said last August that Moscow wanted Iran to join the EEU - a move that was seen as crucial in bringing the two countries closer in their plans to form a strategic partnership.

Putin emphasized that a research had already started overt the possibility of creating a free-trade zone between Iran and the EEU.

"Iran is Russia's longtime

partner. We believe that bilateral relations will benefit from the reduction of tensions around Iran following the comprehensive agreement on the Iranian nuclear program," Putin was quoted as saying.

Reaching a deal on free trade would represent a notable victory for the nascent EEU - a single market of Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia set up in 2015 - and mark a significant strengthening of relations between Iran and the former Soviet republics.

"We believe we can come up with something substantial by the end of the year... finished talks," said Timur Suleimenov, Kazakhstan's minister of economy.

The EEU's prime ministers resolved in March to make talks with Tehran a priority, scenting an opportunity to expand beyond the bloc's combined market of 183 million people.

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Egypt's Airstrikes Anger Libyans

TRIPOLI (Dispatches) -- Libyan militants inside Derna on Monday condemned Egyptian air attacks on the city, saying they had hit civilian rather than military targets and that claims they were responsible for attacks on Coptic Christians in Egypt were baseless.

The Shura Council of Derna said in a statement that Egypt's attacks were "war crimes" and that they had nothing to do with an attack south of Cairo last week which killed 29 Christians. The Daesh group, which is active in Libya, claimed the attack.

wave of airstrikes was launched on Derna on Monday, which followed raids on Friday and Saturday by Egyptian forces and their allies, the Libyan National Army under the control of the renegade general, Khalifa Haftar. No nation or group has claimed the Monday attacks, however.

"The criminal regime inflicted upon the Egyptians launched strikes against our safe and secure city," the council's statement said.

"The criminal Sisi's airplanes mounted six raids which they alleged to be on military targets. It was claimed that the strikes

came in response to the killing of Coptic Christians in Egypt. And the criminal Sisi accused the Shura Council of being behind the attacks."

"The council deplors in the strongest terms the air strikes against civilians in our city, and classifies the aggressors as war criminals.

"And sharing the criminal responsibility are Haftar's militias - loyalists to this criminal regime. The council considers all those who aided this operation traitors to God and their country."

Derna has a history of militancy