

Gov't Delegation Stays Away From Syria Talks

GENEVA/BEIRUT (Dispatches) – Talks on ending the six-year war in Syria resumed on Wednesday with no sign of President Bashar al-Assad's delegation returning to the negotiations in Geneva after they walked out last week.

A source close to the Syrian government's negotiating team told Reuters the delegation was still in Damascus on Wednesday.

The talks began last week and after a few days with little apparent progress, the UN mediator Staffan de Mistura said that the government delegation, led by Bashar al-Ja'afari, was returning to Damascus to "consult and refresh".

De Mistura expected talks to resume "around Tuesday", but Ja'afari left Geneva on Saturday and said he might not come back because the opposition had stated that Assad could not play a role in a future interim government.

Syrian officials have not yet said if Ja'afari will return to the talks, but opposition spokesman Yahya al-Aridi said on Monday that a government boycott would be "an embarrassment to Russia", which is keen to see a negotiated end to the war.

The opposition negotiating team arrived at the UN offices in Geneva on Wednesday morning to resume talks with de Mistura, who declined



The photo shows Syrian ambassador to the United Nations and head of the government delegation, Bashar al-Ja'afari (C-R), after a meeting with the UN special envoy for Syria at the UN Offices in Geneva on November 29, 2017.

to comment when asked about the absence of Ja'afari's negotiators.

During last week's sessions, de Mistura shut-

tled between the representatives of the two warring sides, who did not meet face-to-face. He had planned to continue the round until Dec. 15.

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the outcome of what some states, in region, are doing will be as Qur'an says, 'their own destruction.'"

At the same gathering, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said, "Quds belongs to Islam, Muslims and the Palestinians, and there is no place for new adventurism by global oppressors."

Iran wants "peace and stability" in the region but will not tolerate the violation of Islamic holy sites, Rouhani said.

"No Muslim population, including Iran, will tolerate the violation of oppressors and Zionists against Islamic holy sites," Rouhani said.

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well as pictures of Trump in the Gaza Strip, while relatively clashes erupted near the flashpoint West Bank city of Hebron (Al-Khalil).

A range of world leaders issued further warnings.

"I cannot silence my deep concern over the situation that has emerged in recent days," Pope Francis said, a day after speaking by phone with Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas.

The pontiff added that maintaining the status quo in Al-Quds was important "in order to avoid adding new elements of tension to an already volatile world that is wracked by so many cruel conflicts".

British foreign minister Boris Johnson, speaking as he arrived for a NATO meeting in Brussels, expressed concern "because we think that Jerusalem (Al-Quds) obviously should be part of the final settlement between the Israelis and the Palestinians, a negotiated settlement".

British Prime Minister Theresa May said she planned to call Trump about his plan.

China warned it could fuel tensions in the region and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said "Muslims must stand united against this major plot."

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan called for a summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Istanbul on December 13 "to display joint action among Islamic countries" over Al-Quds.

Rouhani and Erdogan held a phone conversation during which the Iranian president denounced as "provocative and dangerous" the U.S. and called for concerted action by Muslim and other nations to stop such an illegal measure.

While the region requires stability and security, such illegal moves by the U.S. and the Zionist regime could push "the Palestinian state and the whole region" toward instability, Rouhani added.

Erdogan said Trump's worrying decision results from internal rifts in the Muslim world, stressing that Islamic countries should express unity and stand against the U.S. move that is in violation of human rights and of all UN decisions about that status of Al-Quds.

Jordan and the Palestinians also called for an emergency meeting of the Arab League in Cairo.

U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson defended Trump's approach in Brussels, saying the president was "very committed" to the Middle East "peace" process.

Trump's move comes close to fulfilling a campaign promise, and will delight his political donors and the conservative and evangelical base so vital for the embattled president.

Most of the international community does not formally recognize Jerusalem Al-Quds as Israel's capital.

Critics say Trump's approach could ignite the flames of conflict in a region already reeling from crises in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Qatar.

The Palestinian resistance movement Hamas has threatened to launch a new "intifada" or uprising. Palestinians called for three days of protests - or "days of rage" - starting Wednesday,

day, raising fears of potential unrest.

The occupying regime of Israel seized the eastern sector of Al-Quds during the 1967 Six-Day War and later annexed it, claiming both sides of the city as its capital.

The Palestinians want the eastern sector as the capital of their future state.

Trump was pushed to act on the embassy as a result of a 1995 law, which stated that the city "should be recognized as the capital of Israel" and the U.S. embassy be moved there.

A waiver has been invoked by successive U.S. presidents, postponing the move on grounds of "national security" once every six months, meaning the law has never taken effect.

Several "peace" plans have unraveled in the past decades over the issue of how to divide sovereignty or oversee holy sites in Al-Quds.

Saudi... (Continued From Page One)

close military allies, including in Yemen where Saudi Arabia is waging a war which has destroyed the impoverished country.

Michael Stephens, head of RUSI Qatar, told Middle East Eye that the deal likely reflected the actuality of the Persian Gulf's modern alliances. "Clearly it's a de jure announcement of a de facto reality," he said.

"Nevertheless it's hard not to see it as a snub to the GCC as a structure - I'm not quite sure what that's supposed to achieve but it doesn't appear to be a hugely stabilizing development."

Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain, together with Egypt, cut all ties with Qatar on 5 June, accusing the gas-rich emirate of supporting militants and being too close to Iran. Qatar denies the allegations.

Crispin Blunt, former head of the UK's Foreign Affairs Committee and MP for Reigate, said the UK government was working behind the scenes to try to find a resolution to the six-month-old rift.

"This doesn't strike me as anything other than another iteration of the row," he said. "Our pressure is being applied to both sides to sort it out. (The row is) not doing anyone any good at all."

Ben Rhodes, a former foreign policy adviser for Barack Obama, sardonically remarked on Twitter that the UAE-Saudi alliance would "make it more efficient for them to give orders to the Trump administration".

Mediation efforts led by Kuwait have failed to resolve what is the worst crisis to hit the GCC in its 36-year history, casting serious doubts over the future of the six-state alliance.

On Monday, the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia and Qatar attended round-table talks ahead of the gathering, in their first such encounter since the diplomatic crisis erupted in June.

Oman's foreign minister, Yusuf bin Alawi, sat between them at the meeting which the foreign ministers of the UAE, Bahrain and Kuwait also attended.

After cutting off all ties with Qatar, Saudi Arabia and its allies imposed a land, sea and air blockade of the emirate and issued a list of 13 demands in order for it to be lifted.

In October, Bahrain called for Qatar's membership of the GCC to be suspended until it accepted the demands. Experts warn that the crisis could lead to the demise of the once-powerful GCC.

"The justifications for the existence of the GCC bloc amidst the continued crisis are no longer present like before," said Sami al-Faraj, head of the Kuwait Centre for Strategic Studies. "As long as our enemy has changed from Iran to Qatar, the GCC will not continue."

The failure of the GCC members to solidify long-delayed plans for economic unity may also threaten its future.

The Persian Gulf states have approved a customs union, a common market, a single currency and a single central bank, but most of these have yet to be implemented.

Bomb Blast Kills 9 Near Afghan Border

MIRANSHAH (Dispatches) – A bomb rigged to a motorcycle exploded in a militant-plagued part of northwest Pakistan near the Afghan border, killing nine people, officials said on Wednesday, the latest violence in a recent rise in attacks in the nuclear-armed country.

The bomb was detonated by remote control late on Tuesday when an army vehicle passed in Mir Ali town in the North Waziristan region, said three Pakistani officials who declined to

be identified as they are not authorized to speak to the media.

A spokesman for the Pakistani army, which is responsible for security in the volatile, ethnic Pashtun region, did not respond to calls seeking comment.

"Waziristan is bleeding once again," said police official Tahir Khan in Peshawar, the main city in the northwest, who said he had heard about the blast but had no details.

No militant group claimed responsibility.

North Waziristan was long home to Pakistani and foreign terrorists linked to the Taliban and al-Qaeda until the Pakistani army launched a major push against them in mid-2014.

The military offensive cleared the terrorists from their bases and largely broke up their networks, forcing them to flee either over the porous border into Afghanistan or to other parts of Pakistan.

But the militants have struck back, sometimes with major at-

tacks.

Last Friday, three Pakistani Taliban bombers stormed a college in Peshawar, killing eight students and a guard.

A week earlier, a senior police commander was killed in a bomb attack in Peshawar.

On Tuesday, the Pakistani Taliban killed a member of an anti-Taliban faction in another part of the northwest, while a bomb aimed at members of another pro-government faction killed five people a week earlier.

ICC Hints at Probe of UK War Crimes in Iraq



This file image, showing detained Iraqis being guarded by a British soldier, was shown at the Al-Sweady Inquiry into claims that British troops killed and tortured Iraqi civilians.

BAGHDAD (Dispatches) – The chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) has announced that there is "reasonable basis" to believe British troops committed war crimes in Iraq during the U.S.-led military invasion of the West Asian country.

"The [prosecutor's] office has reached the conclusion that there

is a reasonable basis to believe that members of the UK armed forces committed war crimes within the jurisdiction of the court against persons in their custody," Fatou Bensouda said in her conclusion on the long-running inquiry into the role of British soldiers in Iraq between 2003 and 2008.

The announcement was made in

a 74-page report delivered in New York to the annual assembly of state parties to the jurisdiction of the court.

It would mean that The Hague-based ICC will press ahead with a probe into reports that British military forces abused and murdered their Iraqi prisoners after the U.S.-led invasion, UK-based daily The Guardian reported.

According to the report, Bensouda's conclusion reaffirms "interim conclusions made by the court when it ended a previous, preliminary investigation into similar allegations in 2006," when the ICC pointed to seeing evidence suggesting that British forces did commit war crimes in Iraq, "namely willful killing and inhuman treatment" of individuals.

However, the ICC concluded at the time that it should not take further action since there were fewer than 20 allegations. Its probe was subsequently reopened by Bensouda in 2014 after receiving new information from the Bir-

mingham law firm, Public Interest Lawyers (PIL), among others.

The PIL, the daily added, "represented the family of Baha Mousa, the Iraqi hotel receptionist tortured to death by British troops in 2003."

Bensouda's report further examined the controversy over the claims and referred to the Iraq Historic Allegations Team (IHAT).

It also said that "amid concerns of political interference, the defense secretary (Michael Fallon) announced the closing of IHAT ahead of the originally scheduled time frame by 30 June 2017, citing IHAT's own forecasts that the unit's caseload was expected to reduce to around 20 investigations by the summer 2017."

British military authorities had previously expressed confidence that the ICC would not move to the next stage and declare a formal probe, mainly because the UK is capable of investigating the allegations on its own.

Poverty in Israeli-Occupied Territories Remains Worst in OECD

WEST BANK (Dispatches) – Poverty has eased among the elderly and Arabs in the Israeli-occupied territories, reports the National Insurance Institute, but more accurate data about Bedouin has raised the number of poor.

A recalculation of poverty among the Bedouin population in occupied territories increased the number of children classified as poor by 10.2%, according to figures published by the National Insurance Institute in its report on poverty.

The report states that the Zionist regime still has the highest rate of poverty in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Develop-

ment, and that a family in occupied territories with three or more children will be below the poverty line if both parents are employed full-time at the minimum wage.

Minister of Labor, Welfare, and Social Services Haim Katz, said "We still have 1.8 million people that we have to get out of poverty. The two most prominent trends are a fall in the number of poor people who are senior citizens and in the Arab community."

According to the report, Israel had 1,809,000 poor people in 463,000 families in 2016, including 842,300 children. The number of poor

children grew by almost 80,000, but the National Insurance Institute is attributing this to new figures obtained for the Bedouin population, after the Central Bureau of Statistics succeeded for the first time in five years in sampling the Bedouin population in southern parts of the occupied territories.

Excluding the Bedouin population, the number of poor children in occupied territories rose by only 1% to 773,000. The report's figures ostensibly show that Bedouin children were not counted at all in 2015 among poor children in Israel.