

BEIRUT (Xinhua) – President Michel Aoun said Wednesday that Lebanon does not have enough resources to sustain the increase in the big number of Syrian refugees living in the country, the presidency's website reported. "The small size of our country and its infrastructure in addition to its limited resources do not allow us to sustain any increase in population number," Aoun told foreign diplomats during a meeting at Baabda Palace. Aoun said refugees must return home to take part in Syria's reconstruction where they will be "living with dignity." He also criticized the international community for its attitude towards refugees' return to their homeland.

To refrain from unlawful and impious source of pleasures is an ornament to the poor and to be thankful for the riches granted is the adornment of wealth.

Amir al-Momeneen Ali (AS)

Syrian Gov't 'Activates' Contacts With Kurds

Six Shias Killed, One Arrested in Saudi Attack in Qatif



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DAMASCUS (Dispatches) – The Syrian government has "activated" contacts with Kurdish groups "in light of Turkish intervention", Faisal Mekdad, the Arab Republic's deputy foreign minister said on Wednesday.

He added that there is no alternative to dialogue with the Kurdish groups.

"Therefore I am always optimis-

tic... we encourage these political groups to be sincere in dialog that is happening now between the Syrian state and these groups, taking into account that there is no alternative to that," he said.

Earlier, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that Ankara was ready to launch a military operation against the YPG if the United States did not compel them

to abandon territory they had taken to the west of the Euphrates River.

In December, the Syrian government sent troops to Manbij "after Kurdish militants appealed to Damascus for help against the threat of attack by Turkey in the face of the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the area", according to media reports.

The U.S.' support for Syrian

Kurdish militants has long soured bilateral relations with Ankara, which considers the YPG to be the Syrian branch of the PKK, and is designated a terrorist organization by Turkey.

Turkey considers that the YPG presence near its border threatens its national security.

A top Syrian Kurdish politician told Reuters last week that the Kurdish groups had presented a "road map" for a deal with Damascus during recent meetings at the Russian Foreign Ministry in Moscow.

If such a deal could be agreed, it would piece back together the two biggest chunks of a country splintered by eight years of war and leave one corner of the northwest in the hands of anti-Assad militants backed by Turkey.

The immediate priority for the Kurdish-led authorities of northern Syria is to find a way to shield the region from Turkey, which views the Kurdish YPG militants as a national security threat.

Turkey has already sent its army into Syria twice to push back the YPG. But it has held off attacking the large Kurdish-controlled area of the northeast where U.S. forces operate.

Mekdad said he was certain all "foreign forces" would withdraw from Syria.



One of the leaders of the protest movement, Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr, was executed in 2016 on a 'terrorism' indictment.

RIYADH (Dispatches) – Six Shia Saudis are killed and one has been arrested in a security operation in Saudi Arabia's eastern al-Qatif region, the state news agency reported on Wednesday.

Security forces claimed they attempted to facilitate the suspects' surrender but were forced to open fire after they refused to stand down, Al-Arabiya English reported.

Six people were killed and one was detained as a result of an operation conducted in Saudi Arabia's eastern Al-Qatif province on Monday, according to the reports.

Al-Arabiya cited its sources as saying the suspects were not in a declared wanted criminals list.

Saudi Arabia's State Security Presidency is yet to comment on the incident.

Unverified photographs shared earlier on social media showed a bloodied body carried in a tarp by men dressed in fatigues, and

homes pockmarked with bullet holes. An online video appeared to show a military vehicle firing in a residential area.

Qatif came to the spotlight in 2017 when Saudi security forces carried out a massive raid that left much of the town's old quarter flattened.

The province in Saudi Arabia's east is a flashpoint between the government and Shia Muslims complaining of discrimination and marginalization by the kingdom's Wahhabi rulers.

According to local sources, Saudi forces on Monday surrounded Qatif for about 15 hours during which they stormed a number of rural houses, claiming they were searching for a number of wanted people.

Protests and attacks on security forces have escalated since Nimr al-Nimr, a Shia cleric critical of Saudi Arabia's ruling family, was executed two years ago.

Russia Doubts Full U.S. Withdrawal From Syria

MOSCOW (Dispatches) – Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said Wednesday it was hard to believe that the United States would pull out of Syria completely under the current circumstances, given the strong position of those who support the continued U.S. military presence in the Arab Republic.

"I believe the positions of those who want to maintain U.S. military presence in Syria — illegal, breaching the international law — are quite strong in Washington... I cannot imagine that the United States will fully and indisputably leave Syria in terms

of physical military presence in the current situation where Washington is locked in unstoppable contest for world domination and driven to be present everywhere and resolve issues only on its own conditions," the diplomat told reporters.

The contacts on Syria between Russia and the United States do not stop even if they are not always announced, there are no long pauses in the talks, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said Wednesday.

"The contacts on various aspects of the situation in Syria do not stop... These contacts are not always announced; if the

information on them becomes widely available, they attract additional attention. But the contacts are ongoing on various issues. There will be contacts on other topics in the near future... The breaks in the contacts may be different, but there are no long pauses," the diplomat told reporters.

Earlier, U.S. President Donald Trump said that the United States would withdraw its troops from Syria because the Daesh terrorist group had been defeated in Syria.

The U.S.-led coalition of over 70 countries has been carrying out airstrikes in Syria on a regu-

lar basis on the pretext of assisting the SDF in its fight against the Daesh terrorist group.

Moscow would like to resume a meaningful dialogue on arms control with the United States in the near future, Sergey Ryabkov said.

"We would like to resume a meaningful dialogue on arms control as well in the near future. We are working on it, too. Perhaps, something will come out of it, but we cannot announce any schedules or agreed events yet," Ryabkov told reporters.

The diplomat confirmed that Russia was ready to discuss missiles with Washington.

'Sex-Convict Rabbi Offered Followers' Votes for Public Comeback'

WEST BANK (Dispatches) – Ex-fugitive rabbi Eliezer Berland, who has served prison time for sex offences, has tried to trade his followers' votes for public rehabilitation from ultra-Orthodox parties.

Berland, 81, was seen in a recording obtained by Hadashot News speaking with Meir Porush, Zionist deputy education minister and a member of parliament from United Torah Judaism, an alliance between two small ultra-Orthodox parties that has six seats in the Knesset.

The controversial Israel-based religious leader Eliezer Berland has made an unsuccessful attempt to negotiate a comeback to the public spotlight following isolation,

where he found himself after confessing to sex crimes.

The recording, which is not available online yet, is said to have been filmed ahead of the October municipal election in the occupied territories. Berland's aide, Natan Bezenson, reportedly demanded "minimal recognition" on the part of the ultra-Orthodox, while the controversial rabbi would in exchange take part in a photo op with a call on his followers to vote for Agudath Israel, one of the two parties that make up United Torah Judaism.

Otherwise, Bezenson allegedly warned that Berland would ally with the enemies of Agudath Israel. The rabbi followed through with his threat as he failed to hammer out a deal:

he later supported a mayoral candidate from Shas, another ultra-Orthodox party with 7 parliament seats.

Eliezer Berland, the founder and leader of the Shuvu Banim religious community, was accused of sex offences in 2013, but fled the Israeli-occupied territories to escape punishment and moved between the Netherlands, Zimbabwe, Switzerland and South Africa. He was eventually extradited to the territories in 2016 and pleaded guilty to two counts of indecent acts and one case of sexual assault.

He received an 18-month sentence but was released in April 2017 after some five months in jail on medical grounds.

Kuwait to Distance Itself From GCC

KUWAIT CITY (Dispatches) – Although Persian Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states concur on many policies, such as Syrian government being admitted back into the Arab world, some issues remain unresolved within the council as Kuwait is apparently not following in the footsteps of others to normalize diplomatic ties with the Zionist regime.

According to a commentary published by the U.S.-based al-Monitor media site, Kuwaiti officials are not on board with their GCC counterparts on establishment of relations with the Tel Aviv regime.

It noted that Kuwait threw its backing behind Lebanon at the UN Security Council on December 19, 2018, saying the Zionist regime's military operation to block what it claims are tunnels the Hezbollah resistance movement has dug into the occupied territories are in violation of Lebanese sovereignty.

"Lebanon has been living for years with Israeli violations. Israel has tried to exaggerate this incident militarily, and in the media," Kuwaiti Ambassador Mansour Ayyad al-Otaibi said at the time.

Otaibi then condemned "Israeli violations against Lebanese sovereignty, in land, air

and sea," stressing that efforts by Hezbollah to counter Israel are "legitimate" resistance and not terrorism.

The Kuwaiti government even considered opening an embassy in Palestine last year as part of attempts to strengthen its diplomatic presence in the occupied territories.

President of the Kuwait Football Association, Sheikh Ahmad Yusef, recently told the Kuwaiti Arab-language al-Rai daily newspaper that his country would not co-host the 2022 FIFA World Cup soccer tournament with Qatar as the Persian Gulf kingdom would not issue entry visas for Israelis – something that is against FIFA regulation.

This is while Israeli politician and the leader of the opposition Israeli Labor Party, Avi Gabbay, secretly visited Abu Dhabi, the United Arab Emirates, last month and discussed various regional issues with three senior Emirati officials.

Zionist Transportation and Intelligence Minister Yisrael Katz visited Oman on November 4 last year to attend an international transport conference and pitch a railway project that would link the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean via the Israeli-occupied territories.