

Blast Rocks Building in Istanbul, At Least One Dead

ISTANBUL (Sputnik) – A blast has hit a building in Turkey's largest city of Istanbul, leaving at least one person dead.
"According to preliminary data, an explosion occurred in the area of Buyukcekmece in the Hurriyet quarter. As a result of the explosion, one person died," the administration said in a statement.
According to reports, fire crews are on the scene and continuing their emergency efforts. After the explosion, police arrived at the scene, in addition to a large number of paramedics.

Daesh Closer to Defeat in Last Syrian Enclave



Militants with the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) keep a position during an operation to expel Daesh from the Baghouz area in the eastern Syrian province of Dayr al-Zawr on February 14, 2019.

NEAR BAGHOUZ (Dispatches) – **Daesh appeared closer to defeat in its last enclave in eastern Syria on Wednesday, as a civilian convoy left the besieged area estimates show a few hundred terrorists are still holed up.**
Its capture will nudge the eight-year-old war towards a new phase, with U.S. President Donald Trump having pledged to withdraw American troops.
A Reuters witness near the front lines at Baghouz on the Iraqi border saw dozens of trucks leaving the village and a spokesman for the so-

called Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) said they were bringing out civilians.
Baghouz is the final scrap of ground left to Daesh in the Euphrates valley region that became its last major stronghold in Iraq and Syria after a series of catastrophic defeats in 2017.
In another development, Russian and Syrian coordination centers on returning refugees have managed to open two humanitarian corridors for thousands of displaced Syrians stranded in a camp near the Jordanian border to leave the site toward government-controlled areas.

"In accordance with the February 16 joint statement by the Russian and Syrian coordination centers on opening the humanitarian corridors for the evacuation of Syrians from the Rukban camp, two checkpoints at Jleb and Jabal al-Ghurab opened today," the chief of Russia's National Defense Control Center, Major General Mikhail Mizintsev, said in a statement on Tuesday.
He added that the Syrian refugees will be provided with voluntary, unimpeded and safe exit from the camp to places of their choice of residence within 24 hours.
The UN says about 45,000 people, mostly women and children, are trapped inside Rukban, where conditions are desperate. This is while Geneva-based international aid agency Doctors Without Borders has put the number there at some 60,000.
In October, the so-called Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said people in Rukban had been without access to food and humanitarian aid for several months, highlighting that the tough situation was further complicated with a closed border by Jordan.
United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet has warned that some 200 families are trapped in a shrinking area in Syria's eastern province of Dayr al-Zawr, which is controlled by Daesh Takfiri terrorists.
Many of the families in the village of Baghouz "continue to be subjected to intensified air and ground-based strikes by the U.S.-led coalition forces and their [Syrian Democratic Forces] SDF allies on the ground," Bachelet said in a statement on Tuesday.

Palestinian President Rejects Tax Money From Zionist Regime

RAMALLAH (Dispatches) – **The Palestinian Authority (PA) will no longer accept tax revenues collected on its behalf by the Zionist regime following its decision to trim the sum over the PA's financial support of resistance fighters' families, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas said.**
The cash-strapped Palestinian Authority, an interim self-government body set up following the 1993 Oslo accords, has suffered a series of financial blows in the past year.
Under interim deals, the Zionist regime collects taxes in the occupied West Bank and in the Gaza Strip and makes monthly payments to the PA, which says it receives around \$222 million

each month.
The regime's finance ministry said on Wednesday it collects about 700 million shekels (\$193 million) in Palestinian taxes and transfers around 600 million shekels of that to the Palestinian Authority after deducting payments for electricity, water, sewage and medical treatment services.
In early July last year, Israel's parliament (Knesset) passed a bill to withheld hundreds of millions of dollars in funds from the Palestinians over welfare payments given to prisoners and their families.
At the time, Secretary General of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Saeb Erekat

condemned the decision, which he described as "piracy."
In a speech in June 2017, Abbas argued that "payments to support the families are a social responsibility to look after innocent people affected by the incarceration or killing of their loved ones."
"It's quite frankly racist rhetoric to call all our political prisoners terrorists," Abbas said. "They are, in actuality, the victims of the occupation, not the creators of the occupation."
Earlier, the United States officially ended its financial support for Palestinian security services.
The U.S. President Donald Trump administration has taken a harsh stance against the Pal-

estinians. In August, the Trump administration announced it was slashing millions of dollars in support to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).
Millions of dollars have also been cut in aid to the Palestinians for projects in the West Bank and the besieged Gaza Strip, including to hospitals in the occupied East al-Quds.
Last year, the U.S. also moved its embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to al-Quds, recognizing that city as the regime's "capital." Ramallah has refused to take part in any US-led negotiations with the Israeli regime since that move.

Jordanian MPs Want Zionist Envoy Expelled

AMMAN (Dispatches) – **Members of the Jordanian lower house of parliament demanded the expulsion of the Zionist ambassador from the country and the withdrawal of the Jordanian ambassador from Tel Aviv in response to the occupying regime's actions in al-Quds, Ammonews reported.**
The call followed arrest of five Palestinians after clashes with the Zionist regime's police at the Temple Mount compound in al-Quds' Old City. According to media reports, the clashes took place due to the situation around Bab al-Rahma, the site inside the Golden Gate that has been closed since 2003 after the regime's authorities accused the Islamic heritage association that operated thereof links to Hamas.
According to Ammonews, the Jordanian lawmakers condemn the actions of the regime authorities and residents of the illegal settle-

ments in relation to the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Temple Mount, as well as employees of the holy sites.
In a latest attack by the regime, nearly a dozen Palestinians were injured after Zionist troops attacked worshippers entering al-Aqsa Mosque in the occupied Old City of Jerusalem al-Quds.
Local sources, requesting not to be named, told the Arabic-language Palestine al-Aan news agency that ten Palestinians sustained injuries on Tuesday evening after Zionist troops assaulted them at Bab al-Rahma (Gate of Mercy) to the third-holiest site in Islam.
The sources added that 15 other Palestinians were arrested by Zionist troops inside the mosque as well. A majority of those arrested were reportedly seminary school students.
The Palestinian sources identified some of those arrested as Mohammed Abu Shousha,

Omar Zaghir, Omar Ouda, Hamza Zagir and Hisham al-Bashiti.
Palestinian Ma'an News Agency reported on Monday that Israeli soldiers had sealed off Bab al-Rahma with locks and iron chains a day earlier and prevented the Palestinian worshippers from entering the al-Aqsa Mosque compound.
The agency said the Israeli move sparked clashes between Palestinian youths and the Tel Aviv regime forces, which resulted in the detention of five Palestinians, including a woman.
Firas al-Dibs, spokesperson of the Islamic Waqf (Endowment) organization, said Israeli forces had installed the locks and chains at the gate in response to members of the organization performing prayers at the gate last Thursday.
The al-Rahma Gate is a big building that lays to the east of the al-Aqsa Mosque.

UAE Eases Qatar Shipping Ban Amid Continuing Dispute



This general view taken on July 2, 2017, shows the corniche of the Qatari capital Doha.

DOHA (Dispatches) – **The United Arab Emirates has eased a ban on the shipping of goods between it and Qatar enforced under a political and economic boycott of Doha, according to port circulars and an industry source.**
The UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Bahrain severed diplomatic, trade and transport ties with Qatar in June 2017 over allegations it supports terrorism, a charge Doha denies.
An Abu Dhabi Ports circular dated Feb. 12 canceled previous directives that banned cargoes of Qatar origin from UAE waters and ports and those of UAE origin from Qatar.
It maintained a ban on vessels flying the Qatar flag, owned by Qatari shipping firms or nationals. UAE-flagged vessels still cannot call at Qatar ports.
An industry source told Reuters the circular applied to all UAE ports. Government authorities in both Persian Gulf Arab states did not immediately respond to Reuters' request for comment.
Liberian flagged container ship MSC ELSA 3 arrived at Dubai's Jebel Ali Port on February 20 from Qatar's Umm Said, accord-

ing Refinitiv data.
It was not clear if the move was linked to complaints filed to the World Trade Organization related to the Persian Gulf dispute.
In June 2017, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates severed their diplomatic ties with Qatar, accusing Doha of supporting terrorism but widely seen to have actually been angered by its independent foreign policy.
The four countries also imposed a land, sea, and air blockade on import-dependent Qatar.
Except for Egypt, all of those countries are members of the GCC, to which Qatar is also a member. The other two members of the body, namely Kuwait and Oman, took a neutral stance.
Regional powerhouse Turkey also took Qatar's side.
The Saudi-led bloc also presented Qatar with a list of demands and gave it an ultimatum to comply with them. That deadline came and went as Doha refused to meet the demands or drop its line of foreign policy. Qatar, however, consistently called for a peaceful resolution of the dispute.

Turkish Prosecutor Seeks Life Sentences for 16 Over 2013 Gezi Protests

ISTANBUL (Reuters) – **A Turkish prosecutor is seeking aggravated life sentences for 16 defendants including businessman Osman Kavala for financing widespread protests around Turkey in 2013 and attempting to overthrow the government, broadcaster NTV said on Wednesday.**
Hundreds of thousands of people marched in Istanbul in 2013 to protest against a plan to build a replica of an Ottoman barracks on Gezi park in the city center. The protests turned into nationwide anti-government demonstrations and amounted to a direct challenge to President Tayyip Erdogan's government.
Authorities recently renewed their efforts to investigate the protests, a move opposition figures said was designed to polarize public opinion and rally support for Erdogan ahead of local elections next month.
Erdogan says the protests were organized and financed by Ka-

vala, a businessman, and rights activists. Kavala has been in pre-trial detention in connection with the investigation for more than 15 months. He has denied the claim against him. The indictment against Kavala was delivered to the court on Wednesday, according to state broadcaster TRT, which added that the investigation into the Gezi protests had been completed.
TRT said the defendants included famous actor Mehmet Ali Alabora, who was vocal during the protests, and journalist Can Dundar, who fled abroad after being sentenced to jail for over espionage charges and is being tried in absentia in other cases.
In November, police detained more than a dozen people as part of the investigation into the Gezi protests, while George Soros's Open Society Foundation said it would cease operations in Turkey after it became a target of the investigation.