

# Syrian Army Launches Operation in Southwest

BEIRUT (Dispatches) – The Syrian government attacked opposition areas of the southwest on Friday, a war monitor and militant officials said, in defiance of U.S. demands that President Bashar al-Assad halt the assault.

Assad has sworn to recapture the area bordering Jordan and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights and the army began ramping up an assault there this week.

The United States on Thursday reiterated its demand that the zone be respected, warning Assad and his Russian allies of “serious repercussions” of violations. It accused Damascus of initiating air strikes, artillery and rocket attacks.

The pro-terrorist so-called Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based war monitor, confirmed the attack.

Meanwhile, Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov says he is “skeptical” about a United Nations report accusing the Syrian government of committing alleged crimes against humanity when its troops



This photo released on March 7, 2018, by the Syrian official news agency SANA shows Syrian government soldiers advancing during a battle against terrorists in Eastern Ghouta.

carried out a military operation in Eastern Ghouta earlier this year.

“We are in principle very skeptical towards the methods of this sort of work, whether it comes to war crimes or the use of chemical weapons,” the top Russian diplomat said at a joint press conference with UN Secretary General Anto-

nio Guterres in Moscow.

Lavrov’s comments came a day after the world body released a report alleging that forces loyal to the government in Damascus had “deliberately” starved civilians during the operation between February and April this year.

Lavrov further cast doubt on the

validity and reliability of the UN report, saying the research committee behind the report had neither visited the area nor carried out any investigations on the ground, and had based their report on “data obtained through social networks” and “videos filmed by witnesses.”

He also said that they had “allegedly interviewed with 140 people,” adding that Moscow did not trust any information obtained through “such remote methods.”

Terrorists belonging to a number of factions had held the Eastern Ghouta, an enclave in the vicinity of the capital Damascus, since 2012 and had practically held hostage its inhabitants, some 400,000 people.

Syrian troops and allied fighters from popular defense groups managed to fully liberate the enclave from the clutches of militants in early April, after months of intense fighting with terror groups, which had used the area as a launch pad for deadly rocket attacks against residents and civilian infrastructure in the capital.

## Lebanese Troops Dismantle Zionist Spying Devices

BEIRUT (Dispatches) – Lebanese government forces have identified and dismantled a network of the Zionist regime’s spying devices in the country’s southern province of Nabatieh.

A security source, speaking on condition of anonymity, told English-language the Daily Star newspaper that the devices were discovered on the outskirts of Kfar Chouba village, located 130 kilometers south of the capital Beirut, on Friday.

On January 10, Lebanese troops uncovered an Israeli spying de-

vice near Zawtar al-Gharbiyeh (Western Zawtar) town, which lies just north of the Litani River.

Lebanese security forces busted an espionage cell in the country, whose members were collecting sensitive information and passing it to the Zionist regime’s spy agency Mossad, on October 31, 2017.

Speaking in an exclusive interview with Lebanon-based Arabic-language al-Mayadeen television news network, General Director of the General Security Directorate Major General Abbas Ibrahim stated that the cell, run by a Syrian

national identified as Paul George Khoury, was dismantled last July. Fighters from the Lebanese Hezbollah resistance movement found an Israeli spying device on the outskirts of Barouk village in the Chouf district of Mount Lebanon, located 52 kilometers southeast of Beirut, on August 13 last year.

The Israeli military then remotely detonated the spy device to prevent the de-codification and interpretation of its recorded data.

However, Hezbollah fighters could recover some parts of the

exploded device, including its transmission receiver base and batteries.

The Lebanese army soldiers and Hezbollah fighters have on occasions dismantled Israeli surveillance devices planted near the country’s border regions with the occupied territories.

The Zionist regime has continued to use offensive tactics aimed at creating chaos in Lebanon. It has planted devices not just on Hezbollah’s civil telecommunication networks, but also on its military ones.

## Bahrain Court Acquits Opposition Leaders in Spying Case

DUBAI (Dispatches) – A Bahraini court on Thursday acquitted three senior leaders of the country’s main opposition group of spying for Qatar, a rare win for opposition figures who say they have been targeted by prosecutors for their political views.

In November, the public prosecutor accused Sheikh Ali Salman, opposition al-Wefaq group secretary general, and Sheikh Hassan Sultan, a former member of the Bahraini parliament for al-Wefaq, of conspiring with Qatari officials to carry out “hostile acts” in the kingdom.

The High Criminal Court acquitted them along with a third senior al-Wefaq member, Ali Alaswad, said Public Prosecutor Osama al-Oufi, cited by the state BNA news agency.

Human rights group Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy

(BIRD) hailed the verdict as “the end of a long, flawed trial”.

“This case should never have been initiated in the first place,” Said Ahmed Alwadaei, director of advocacy at BIRD, said in a statement.

Amnesty International and other human rights groups had censured his arrest and called for his release.

Thousands of anti-regime protesters have held demonstrations in Bahrain on an almost daily basis ever since a popular uprising began in the country in mid-February 2011.

They are demanding that the Al Khalifah dynasty relinquish power and allow a just system representing all Bahrainis to be established.

Manama has gone to great lengths to clamp down on any sign of dissent. On March 14, 2011, troops from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were deployed to assist Bahrain in its crackdown.

## Turkey’s Erdogan Faces Biggest Election Challenge

ANKARA (Dispatches) – After dominating Turkish politics for a decade and a half, President Tayyip Erdogan now faces his biggest electoral challenge, from a combative former teacher who has revitalized a dispirited opposition in less than two months.

Turkey holds presidential and parliamentary elections on Sunday that are among the most important in its modern history. The winner of the presidential race will acquire sweeping new executive powers under a constitutional shake-up that Turkish voters narrowly approved in a referendum last year.

By calling early polls - they were originally set for November 2019 - Erdogan appeared to have wrongfooted his foes. But they have gained momentum with the nomination of Muharrem Ince last month as the candidate of the main opposition party, though Erdogan is still tipped to win.

A former physics teacher from northwest Turkey, Ince is an outspoken lawmaker of the secularist Republican People’s Party (CHP). Unlike many CHP politicians drawn from the Western-facing elite, he comes from a pious Sunni Muslim family. Ince is given to folk dancing and riding trac-

tors on visits to rural areas and sometimes dons a farmer’s cap. His sister, who wears a headscarf, occasionally joins him at rallies.

Erdogan says he might seek to form a coalition government if his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) fails to secure a majority in the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections.

“If it is under 300 [seats], then there could be a search for a coalition,” the Turkish leader said in an interview with Kral FM radio station, adding, however, that the probability of this scenario would be “very, very low.”

Erdogan has long been an ardent critic of coalition governments, believing that the fractious coalition politics was responsible for hampering the Turkish government in the 1990s. Back in May 2015, he even hailed Italy for adopting a law that banned the formation of coalition governments.

The Turkish leader also believes that coalition governments, formed through parliamentary systems, are all against stability in any given country, unlike a presidential system, which boosts stability.

Back in April, Erdogan said parliamentary elections would be brought forward to June

24, more than a year earlier than planned, so that the president could take on executive powers as authorized in last year’s referendum on constitutional reforms.

He argued that his administration was facing numerous legal problems, including economic challenges and the war in Syria that could be solved only with a more powerful presidency.

The AKP has maintained its majority in parliament for nearly all of its almost 16 years in power, only losing it in the June 2015 vote. However, parties failed to form a coalition at the time and Erdogan called a new election in November that year, restoring once again the AKP’s majority.

So far, opinion polls on average have placed the incumbent president around 20 percentage points ahead of his closest rival, Ince of the main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP).

However, if the election goes to a second round between the two candidates, who get the most votes, parties in the “Nation Alliance” that includes the CHP have said they would call on voters to support the alliance’s second-round candidate.

## U.S.... (Continued From Page One)

base near the town of al-Tanf in southeastern Syria into a training camp for terrorists.

“According to satellite and other surveillance data, terrorist squads are stationed there. They are effectively training there,” he commented.

Meanwhile, as part of an anti-terror operation that was launched from the Hamimeh region in southern Aleppo and the second and third oil pumping stations in Badiya a few days ago, Syrian forces and allied popular fighters liberated an area that ran 45 kilometers wide and 60 kilometers deep towards the border with Iraq. The area includes the city of Abu Kamal and U.S. base of al-Tanf, sources on the field reported Friday.

The U.S. is believed to be regularly training terrorists at the base. Washington described the area, which lies at the ultra-strategic intersection of the Syrian, Iraqi, and Jordanian borders, as its “red line.”

The cordoned off area also contains the Rukban refugee camp, which according to Syrian and Russian officials is home to terrorists, including those of al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.

Tensions have been running high between American and Syrian forces in the region following several U.S. airstrikes on positions of pro-government forces.

The National Defense Forces, a popular militia supporting the Syrian government, announced Friday that U.S.-led warplanes had bombed the Syrian army’s outpost in the village of al-Halba, 70 kilometers away from the ancient city of Palmyra (Tadmur) in Homs province.

“The combat planes belonging to the coalition led by the United States, attacked the army position in Jabal Ghurab, some 150 kilometers east of Palmyra near the border with Iraq,” a Syrian Arab Army commander told Russia’s Sputnik.

“One serviceman was killed and several others wounded,” the unnamed official added.

According to the field commander, the attack was allegedly carried out when the army responded to U.S.-led coalition’s attack on Syrian troops.

The Pentagon, however, denied the casualties and said that a U.S.-backed anti-government militant group stationed in the al-Tanf base had engaged an “unidentified hostile force” outside a “deconfliction zone” around the base, forcing it to retreat.

The recent anti-terror operations in Homs, Dayr al-Zawr and the suburbs of the capital Damascus have seen over 4,500 square kilometers of the Syrian Desert being freed from the clutches of Daesh and other terrorist groups.

The Syrian forces had earlier surrounded Daesh in Badiya region and forced the terrorists to retreat. The terror group has lost much of the areas it previously controlled in Syria and is now holding pockets of land in some desert regions.

## Trump’s... (Continued From Page One)

“unpredictable” and “challenging”.

“It is deeply regrettable that the US has been capricious, escalated the tensions, and provoked a trade war,” Gao said. “The U.S. is accustomed to holding ‘big sticks’ for negotiations, but this approach does not apply to China.”

He was responding to U.S. President Donald Trump’s latest threat to hit \$200 billion worth of Chinese imports with 10 percent tariffs if Beijing retaliates against his previous announcement to target \$50 billion in imports, and to target another \$200 billion worth of Chinese products if Beijing chooses to fight back. If it makes good on its threats, U.S. actions could affect as much as \$450 billion worth of Chinese imports, Reuters added.

Meanwhile, Chinese state media called on Beijing not to be distracted by US protectionism, which they censured as a self-defeating “symptom of paranoid delusions.”

Meanwhile, India and Turkey have begun implementing retaliatory tariffs against the United States, joining the European Union (EU), China, and other countries in adopting matching measures against U.S. President Donald Trump’s administration.

New Delhi announced in a notice issued late on Thursday that the retaliatory tariffs would be imposed on 30 American products worth \$240 million and that they would come into force on August 4.

India’s adoption of the new duties on a slew of farm products, steel, and iron imported from the U.S. came some three months after Trump raised concerns when he decided to impose 25-percent tariffs on steel imports and a 10-percent tariff on aluminum imports, primarily to target China, but also U.S. allies such as European countries.

Trump argued at the time that enormous flows of imports to the U.S. were putting in jeopardy the American national security, making an odd departure from a decades-long US-led move toward open and free trade.

Last month, India filed a complaint at the World Trade Organization (WTO) against the US over the steel and aluminum duties after New Delhi failed to win an exemption.

Turkey’s Economy Minister Nihat Zeybekci also announced that Ankara would begin implementing retaliatory duties worth \$266.5 million against the U.S. on Thursday over “ill-advised” and “unsupportable” additional steel tariffs introduced by the White House.

The counter-tariffs will be imposed on imports of, among other things, U.S. coal, paper, walnuts/almonds, tobacco, unprocessed rice, automobiles, cosmetics, machinery equipment, and petrochemical products.

“The total tariff burden today being imposed by Turkey on the U.S. is commensurate with the additional costs Turkey faces due to the tariffs imposed on it by the U.S.,” he said in a statement, adding, “They are proportional, measured and designed to protect Turkey’s interests, while encouraging dialog.”

Zeybekci, however, added that Ankara would remain committed to active, robust and reciprocal trade relations with Washington.

The retaliatory move by New Delhi and Ankara came a day after the European Commission, the EU’s executive arm, announced that the bloc had decided to charge higher import duties on a range of U.S. products.