

270,000 Syrian Refugees Have Returned Home in Recent Months

DAMASCUS (Dispatches) – The Russian military says nearly 270,000 Syrian refugees have returned home in recent months, some seven years after various terrorist groups started wreaking havoc in the Arab country.

Head of the Russian National Defense Management Center Colonel General Mikhail Mizintsev announced the news in a press conference, adding that nearly 6,000 people returned to the Arab country during the last week alone, according to data collected by Moscow.

Syria and its close ally, Russia, have been encouraging refugees to repatriate, assuring them that the violence has subsided significantly.

Earlier this month, Lebanese authorities also said that more than 80,000 Syrian refugees had returned to their homeland from Lebanon since July, when the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees announced that an estimated 750,000 internally displaced persons in Syria returned to their homes in the first half of the current year.

Russian jets have been carrying out air raids against targets belonging to the Daesh terrorist group and those of other terror outfits inside Syria at the Damascus government's formal request since September 2015.

The airstrikes have significantly helped Syrian forces advance against anti-Damascus terrorists, who have been wreaking havoc in the Arab country since March 2011.

Last month, Russian Defense Minister Sergei



The handout photo released by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent on November 5, 2018, shows displaced Syrians receiving vaccinations at the Rukban camp on the Syrian-Jordanian border.

Shoigu said almost 88,000 foreign-sponsored terrorists had been killed in Syria ever since Moscow launched its anti-terror airstrikes in the war-torn country.

Back in July, Mizintsev reported that more than 6,900,000 people had left Syria since 2011, and 45 countries are currently hosting

the majority of them. The Syrian refugees are mostly living in refugee camps in Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and Egypt.

Russia also blames the United States for being responsible for the horrifying conditions in the Rukban refugee camp in southern Syria on the border with Jordan.

Turkey Outraged Over Photos of U.S. Soldiers Dining With Syrian Kurds



U.S. Army Maj. Gen. Jamie Jarrard, left, thanks Manbij Military Council commander Muhammed Abu Adeel during a visit to a small outpost near the town of Manbij, northern Syria, Wednesday, Feb. 7, 2018.

ANKARA (Dispatches) – Ankara is concerned over recently published photos featuring U.S. servicemen having dinner with members of the Kurdish so-called People's Protection Units (YPG) in northern Syria, near

the Turkish border, as such photos damage the image of the U.S. military, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said on Saturday.

"These photos have found wide coverage in our media

and disturbed our people. They tarnished the image of the U.S. and its army... for the Turkish public... We expect the U.S. to stop cooperation with the YPG terror group as promised... is unacceptable for the U.S. to provide arms and ammunition by plane and trucks to the YPG terrorist group even when Daesh has been neutralized to a large extent," Akari said at the Halifax International Security Forum, currently underway in Canada, as quoted by the Turkish Anadolu news agency.

He added that Turkey would not tolerate a "terror corridor" along its southern border.

Akari also reaffirmed Turkey's request to extradite cleric Fethullah Gulen from the United States, saying that Ankara had provided 85 folders with terrorists' dossiers to the United States and was ready to provide some additional infor-

mation if necessary.

Turkey has repeatedly slammed the United States for supplying the YPG with weapons. While Turkey regards the YPG as a terrorist organization linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (banned in Turkey), the United States considers it as an ally, as the YPG is a major component of the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces, which are seeking to defeat the Daesh terrorist group (outlawed in Russia) in Syria.

Turkey has accused Gulen, who has been living in the United States since 1999, of orchestrating a failed military coup on July 15, 2016. Gulen repeatedly denied taking part in the coup.

On Friday, U.S. Department of State spokesperson Heather Nauert said that the White House had not taken any steps toward Gulen's extradition.

Lebanese Official Calls for Acceleration of Gov't Formation

BEIRUT (Dispatches) – Caretaker Tourism Minister Avedis Guidanian on Saturday called on Lebanese citizens to stage nationwide protests in a bid to pressure Lebanese officials to accelerate government formation.

"If economic bodies and Lebanese citizens decide to protest, I will be the first one to take part in these demonstrations," he was quoted by the National News Agency as saying.

Guidanian said that Lebanon is wasting tremendous opportunities in the absence of an active government.

However, he said that growth in the tourism sector was seen in the first half of this year despite the absence of a cabinet and Lebanon's incapability of taking part in worldwide exhibitions.

Lebanon is estimated to receive 2 million tourists by the end of 2018, he said.

Prime Minister-designate Saad al-Hariri has called on political parties to "show modesty" in their demands regarding the new government, emphasizing that he is not responsible for the serious delay.

"They are blaming me for the delay whereas each party is clinging to its stances and demands," he told reporters on August 7 ahead of a meeting for the Future Movement's parliamentary bloc.

"Everyone must display modesty and sacrifice for the sake of the country," Hariri said.

Political rivalry led to years of governmental paralysis in Lebanon, and the country did not produce a state budget from 2005 until last year.

The International Monetary Fund has said that Lebanon must urgently address its fiscal policy in order to sustain its high levels of public debt.

Belgium to Boost Troops Number in Afghanistan

BRUSSELS (Sputnik) – The Belgian government approved a proposal by the country's Defense Ministry to increase the number of troops in Afghanistan more than 2.5-fold in 2019, local media have reported.

According to the RTBF broadcaster, the number of servicemen will be gradually increased to 220 from 80 as of now.

The country will send not only military instructors, but also special forces to the city of Mazar-i-Sharif, it added.

Belgium participates in NATO training mission in Afghanistan.

The United States and NATO initially launched their military operations in Afghanistan in 2001 after the 9/11 terror at-

tacks. While most of the U.S. troops had been withdrawn from the country by the end of 2014, NATO launched a new mission in 2015, called Resolute Support, to provide training and assistance to the Afghan security forces. A total of 16,000 soldiers from 39 NATO countries are currently serving in Afghanistan as part of the mission.

Leader...

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the Islamic Republic of Iran are determined and look forward to expanding relations with Iraq. I also strongly believe in it."

The Leader said a dignified, powerful, independent and advanced Iraq will also benefit Iran, "and we support our Iraqi brothers".

Ayatollah Khamenei also advised Iraqi leaders to rely on the youth in order to bring about major changes to the country.

"A clear example of amazing outcomes of relying on the youth was the formation of Hashd al-Sha'abi amidst the fight against Takfiri terrorism-- and this must be endorsed."

Salih said, "I have come to Tehran with a clear message that the factors and elements that bond the two nations of Iraq and Iran together is rooted in history and are thus unchangeable."

"We look forward to expanding cooperation in all areas and promoting it to a level which suits the two nations' social and cultural relations and common interests," he added.

Salih said Baghdad will never forget Iran's support in Iraq's fight against Saddam's autocracy and Takfiri terrorism.

He also said, "We deem wisdom, logic, and sagacity of religious authority (marja'iyah) a great blessing for the stability, peace and progress of Iraq."

The two-day visit comes at a sensitive time when the U.S. is pressuring regional countries to go along with Washington in "squeezing" Iran under new sanctions unveiled early this month.

But Iraqi officials have protested to the dictate and underlined Iran's importance, including its place as the top trade partner of the Arab country.

"I have come here today with a clear message from Baghdad: We appreciate the importance of relations with Iran and these economic, cultural and political relations are rooted in history," Salih said in a joint news conference with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani.

President Rouhani said Iran and Iraq will try to raise annual bilateral trade to \$20 billion from the current level of \$12 billion. "Today, the economic relations between the two countries reach about \$12 billion (per year) and, through bilateral efforts, we can raise this figure to \$20 billion," he said.

Foodstuff, livestock, construction material and plastic products constitute the bulk of Iran's exports to Iraq. Iranian vehicles and food items are a ubiquitous sight in Iraq.

There are also energy contracts between the two countries contributing to a volume of trade of \$12 billion last year.

Hamas...

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... That we would sell out our blood for diesel and dollars? They've been disappointed, and their goals have failed," he said.

He said he had spoken to the leader of Hamas' military wing the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, Muhammad Deif. "Deif asked me to say that Tel Aviv and Gush Dan (the greater Tel Aviv area) are next. The first barrage to hit Tel Aviv will surprise Israel."

The Zionist regime's Sunday's raid gone awry and its subsequent airstrikes led on Monday and Tuesday to an unprecedented barrage of rockets and mortar shells fired by Hamas and other resistance movement from the Gaza Strip.

"Our hands are on the trigger and our eyes are open," Sinwar said. "Whoever tests Gaza will find only death and poison. Our missiles are more precise, have a greater range and carry more explosives than in the past."

Following the special forces operation, over 460 rockets and mortar shells were fired at southern occupied territories over the course of around 24 hours, killing one and injuring dozens others.

The fighting ended on Tuesday after a Hamas-announced ceasefire took ef-

fect, though this was not officially confirmed by the Zionist regime.

Israeli war minister Avigdor Liberman resigned on Wednesday, which Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh cheered as an "admission of defeat" by the Zionist regime. Haniyeh also said Hamas "achieved a military victory against this odious occupier in less than a week."

"A military victory occurred with the heroic performance of the Palestinian resistance factions who responded to the occupier's crime and aggression with a response commensurate with its aggression," he said.

The Islamic Jihad, the second-largest resistance movement in the Gaza Strip, similarly said the Zionist war minister's sudden resignation was a victory for the Palestinians.

"Behold the political slaughter dealt to leaders of the occupation who aren't capable of dealing with Gaza," the organization's spokesperson said in a statement.

One...

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Police at first held back protesters from advancing on Paris' Champs-Elysees, with police vans blocking them from moving down the famed avenue. But up to 200 people were later seen walking down the street, apparently heading toward the Elysee presidential palace.

Protesters, wearing yellow safety vests and dubbing themselves the "yellow jackets," had pledged to target tollbooths, roundabouts and the bypass that rings Paris. The fluorescent yellow vests donned by the protesters must be kept in the vehicles of all French drivers in case of car troubles.

The government sent in police to monitor tens of thousands of gathering points, some non-declared in advance and therefore illegal.

The taxes are part of Macron's strategy of weaning France off fossil fuels. Many drivers see them as emblematic of a presidency they view as disconnected from day-to-day economic difficulties and serving the rich. However, protesters and their supporters have voiced anger about other issues, too, including diminishing buying power. Robert Tichit, 67, a retiree, referred to the president as "King Macron."

"We've had enough of it. There are too many taxes in this country," he told The Associated Press.

CIA...

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of Fethullah Gulen, who is wanted in Turkey over accusations he was involved in a failed 2016 coup.

NBC News reported on Thursday the Trump administration had explored whether it could extradite Gulen, as a way to persuade Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan to ease pressure on Saudi Arabia over the killing of Khashoggi.

Trump said he got along well with Erdogan, and spoke of a desire to improve relations with Turkey. He also described Saudi Arabia as "a truly spectacular ally in terms of jobs and economic development".

The communications evidence included an intercept revealing Maher Abdulaziz Mutrib, a security officer who MEE revealed frequently travelled with MBS, telephoning an aide to the crown prince and saying "tell your boss" that the mission was accomplished.

The NYT said phone calls also showed that MBS was attempting to find ways to lure Khashoggi back to Saudi Arabia, although the crown prince did not specifically say in the intercepts that he wanted to have Khashoggi killed, according to people briefed on the intelligence findings.

The revelations appear to confirm that the U.S. used their own advanced satellite-based intelligence to obtain the intercepts.

The "tell your boss" remark did not show up in what MEE understands were Turkish recordings of 19 calls between Mutrib and Riyadh, four of which were to Saud al-Qahtani, a senior aide to MBS, indicating the U.S. may have a fuller account of the events.