

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – Iranian Foreign Minister Muhammad Javad Zarif said Wednesday Syria and Turkey can resolve the issues related to the flashpoint city of Idlib through the good offices of the Islamic Republic.

Zarif expressed Iran's readiness to help tackle the crisis in Syria's northwestern city of Idlib, where direct clashes between Syrian and Turkish troops have escalated in recent weeks. "We are prepared to hold talks with our Syrian and Turkish brothers about Idlib at various levels," Zarif said.

TEHRAN (Dispatches) – Austrian Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg plans to travel to Iran on Saturday to hold talks with senior officials of the Islamic Republic on the latest efforts to save the 2015 nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), local reports said.

Dutch Foreign Minister Stef Blok is also about to pay an official visit to Iran on Friday and Saturday and hold talks with senior officials of the Islamic Republic on issues of mutual interest.

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## UK's Covert Role in Syria Sedition Exposed

LONDON (Dispatches) -- The British government covertly established a network of citizen journalists across Syria during the early years of the country's war in an attempt to shape perceptions of the conflict, frequently recruiting people who were unaware that they were being directed from London.

A number of leaked documents seen by Middle East Eye show how the propaganda initiative began in 2012 and gathered pace the following year, shortly after the UK parliament refused to authorize British military action in Syria.

Drawing upon British, American and Canadian funding, UK government contractors set up offices in Istanbul and Amman, where they hired members of the Syrian diaspora, who in turn recruited citizen journalists inside Syria.

These journalists, many of them young, were commissioned to produce TV footage, radio programs, social media, posters, magazines and even children's comics.

While many Syrians turned spontaneously to media activism from the start of the war, the documents describe the way in which the British government sought to guide some of their output, seeing citizen journalism as a way of covertly influencing Syrian audiences.

The papers also make clear that those people who were recruited were often unaware that they were part of a British propaganda initiative.

The documents were drawn up as blueprints for the initiative by an anthropologist working in counter-terrorism at the foreign office in London. They were issued in late 2014 to a small number of communications companies that were invited to deliver the work.

The documents show that the over-arching aim of the citizen journalism project – and a series of interlinked British propaganda initiatives – was to promote the UK's strategic interests in Syria and the Middle East.

These are defined in the leaked papers as "a more stable and democratic Syria that better meets the needs and aspirations of its people", support for a political solution to the conflict, the alleviation of humanitarian suffering, and enhanced UK security.

As well as developing grass-roots journalism aligned with British government values, the UK and other western governments were at the same time attempting to build "civil society" in areas controlled by some of

President Bashar al-Assad's opponents, financing and training "police forces and civil defense teams".

However, the documents acknowledge the risks to the young journalists who had unwittingly been co-opted by the British government.

The British government's citizen journalism project was part of a three-pronged propaganda initiative that was developed in London and was, according to the documents, intended to "have a synergistic effect".

Individuals familiar with the project say that around nine companies were invited to bid for the contracts. They included a number of firms established by former British diplomats, intelligence officers and army officers.

Although the contracts were awarded by the UK's foreign office, they were managed by the country's Ministry of Defense, and sometimes by military intelligence officers.

These companies set up offices in Amman, Istanbul and, for a period, at Reyhanli in southeast Turkey. From here they would employ Syrians who would in turn recruit citizen journalists inside Syria, who were under the impression that they were working for the media offices of Syrian opposition groups.

"It was a shady, shady business," says one person involved in the work, adding that frequently the individual journalist would believe they were working for an opposition group, and have no idea that a British communications company was running their media office, under contract to the UK government.

A second person involved with the initiative added that if you hired Syrians "to pump out propaganda, inside Syria and outside", attributing their work in any way to the British government would have undermined its effectiveness.

Many of these citizen journalists would be using equipment that they believed was being supplied by opposition groups but which had in fact been bought using funds supplied by the UK government as part of the contract.

Some would be paid a retainer of between \$250-\$500 a month, while others were paid for individual pieces of media – around \$50 for each picture or \$200 for a short piece of video.

These would then be distributed to Arabic language media organizations, through what purported to be the press offices of Syrian opposition groups.

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## Iran Gears Up for Another Epic Election



A woman adjusts posters of a candidate on a billboard in Tehran.

TEHRAN (Dispatches) -- Iranians are going to the polls Friday in the first general elections since the U.S. imposed sanctions following the pullout from the 2015 nuclear deal.

Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei on Tuesday called on Iranians to vote, saying it was "not only a revolutionary and national responsibility, but also a religious duty".

Directly or indirectly U.S. sanctions have hit almost all sectors of Iran's economy and it is the economy that is on voters' minds during this election season.

Principlists are expected to make an overwhelming resurgence in Friday's

Erdogan Warns of 'Imminent' Aggression

### Russia Warns Turkey Against Attacking Syria

MOSCOW (Dispatches) -- Turkey and Russia exchanged warnings on Wednesday after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan threatened an "imminent" operation in Syria to end the government's assault on the last terrorist enclave.

Erdogan said talks with Moscow over the past fortnight had so far failed to achieve "the desired result" and warned that Turkey would launch an offensive into Syria unless Damascus pulled its forces back by the end of the month.

"An operation in Idlib is imminent... We are counting down, we are making our final warnings," Erdogan said in a televised speech.

He called for Syrian forces to retreat behind Turkey's military posts in Idlib, which were set up under a 2018 deal with Russia designed to hold off a government advance.

election, which comes after months of steeply escalating tensions between Iran and the United States.

Their gains would be made at the expense of those who back President Hassan Rouhani, who was re-elected in 2017 promising people the benefits of engagement with the West which never materialized.

A week of campaigning came to an end on Wednesday, before a day of silence on the eve of polling day.

Thousands of hopefuls are running for 290 seats across the country. Some candidates were barred from standing by the Guardian Council, the body that vets election candidates in Iran.

But the Council said Wednesday it

The Kremlin quickly responded to Erdogan's threat, warning that any operation against Syrian forces would be "the worst scenario".

With Turkey moving large numbers of reinforcements into Idlib in recent weeks, Defense Minister Hulusi Akar emphasized that it was "out of the question for us to withdraw from our observation posts".

"If there is any sort of attack against them, we will retaliate in kind," he told reporters in Ankara.

Erdogan said talks with Russia on the conflict in Idlib province were far from meeting Turkey's demands.

Turkey and Russia back opposing sides in the nine-year-old Syrian conflict but have collaborated toward finding a political solution to end it.

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was neutral in its dealings with all political camps and acted in accordance with the law when it blocked their candidacy.

"The Guardian Council follows the laws and regulations parliament has passed at different times," said its spokesman Abbas Ali Kadkhodaei.

"This time, just like at previous (elections), we have tried to properly follow the law," he told a news conference.

"The Council has never had a political view... It approaches political factions with closed eyes.

"What it does judge is the evidence in the cases of the candidates and then it only acts in accordance with the law passed by parliament."

BEIJING (AP) — Inspectors in protective suits went door-to-door Wednesday in the epicenter of China's viral outbreak to try to find every infected person in the city hit worst by an epidemic that is showing signs of waning as new cases fell for a second straight day.

Wuhan, where the new form of coronavirus emerged, was in the final day of a campaign to root out anyone with symptoms whom authorities may have missed so far.

"This must be taken seriously," said Wang Zhonglin, the city's newly minted Communist Party secretary. "If a single new case is found (after Wednesday), the district leaders will be held responsible."

His remarks were published on Hubei's provincial website, alongside the declaration, "If the masses cannot mobilize, it's impossible to fight a people's war."

Mainland China reported 1,749

President Rouhani said Wednesday taking part in the elections would give Iran the "strength and unity" needed in its stand against the United States.

"We are going to the polls to choose the best people for parliament, which is a very important institution," he said in televised remarks after a meeting of his cabinet.

"We are under severe sanctions and pressure by the global arrogance, and we have to break these sanctions and improve people's lives," he added, referring to the United States.

"Sanctions are a terrorist and tyrannical act against Iran," he said, adding "one cannot say sanctions have no effect and the government should be doing more... It's lies, it's supporting America."

The Guardian Council said it expected at least 50 percent of registered voters to cast ballots in the election.

"Our forecast is that we will have a good turnout in the upcoming election, and the average turnout has usually not been under 50 percent, and we will witness a turnout of 50 percent turnout in this election too," Kadkhodaei said.

The Iranian economy is under strain since Trump abandoned the nuclear deal in 2018 and reimposed sanctions as part of a "maximum pressure" campaign.

Tensions between Iran and the United States have come to a head twice in the past seven months, most recently after the U.S. assassinated prominent Iranian general Qassem Soleimani on January 3.

The martyrdom of the hugely popular general provoked an outpouring of grief in Iran. Millions from all walks of life turned out to mourn his martyrdom in a show of unity which stunned the world.

new cases and 136 additional deaths. While the overall spread of the virus has been slowing, the situation remains severe in Hubei province, whose capital is Wuhan. Infections in Hubei constitute more than 80% of the country's 74,185 total cases and 95% of its 2,004 deaths, according to data from China's National Health Commission.

Cities in Hubei with a combined population of more than 60 million have been under lockdown since the Lunar New Year holiday last month, usually the busiest time of the year for travel. Authorities put a halt to nearly all transportation and movement except for quarantine efforts, medical care, and delivery of food and basic necessities. "Wartime" measures were implemented in some places, with residents prevented from leaving their apartments.

The stringent measures have followed

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## China Inspectors Go Door-to-Door to Check Virus