



### Turkish Court Rules to Keep U.S. Consulate Worker in Jail

ISTANBUL (Reuters) – A Turkish court ruled on Wednesday to keep a U.S. consulate employee in jail as his trial on espionage charges continues, a lawyer said, meaning he will remain in detention until the next hearing in March. The trial of Metin Topuz has been one of many sources of strain between NATO allies Turkey and the U.S. Topuz, a Turkish translator and fixer for the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) at the U.S. consulate in Istanbul, has been in custody for more than two years. The next hearing was set for March 10, said his lawyer, Halit Akalp. Topuz is charged with espionage and links to the network of cleric Fethullah Gulen, who is based in the United States and blamed by Turkey for plotting a failed 2016 coup.

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# Turkey May Close Incirlik Air Base for U.S. Over Sanctions



This September 1, 2013, file photo shows a U.S. Air Force plane taking off from the Incirlik Airbase in southern Turkey.

ANKARA (Dispatches) – Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said in a statement that Ankara may insist that the U.S. leave Incirlik Air Base if Washington

goes ahead with the sanctions it has threatened in response to Turkey's purchase of S-400 missiles.

"We will assess the worst-case scenario and make a decision. If

the U.S. imposes sanctions against Turkey, then the issue of the Incirlik and Kurecik bases may be on the agenda," Cavusoglu said. Mevlut Cavusoglu added that

Ankara will not support NATO's plan to protect the Baltic states until the alliance adopts a plan to protect Turkey from "terrorist" threat.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said in November after the meeting with his U.S. counterpart Donald Trump in Washington that Ankara might buy U.S. Patriot systems, but it considers the U.S. requests to get rid of Russia's air defense systems S-400 an infringement upon its sovereignty.

Deliveries of the latest Russian-made S-400 air defense systems, which caused a significant rift in relations between Turkey and the United States, began in July. According to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the S-400 will be fully operational in April 2020.

Washington demanded that Turkey cancel any deliveries of the Russian-made systems over fears that they are incompatible with NATO security standards and might compromise the operation of U.S. F-35 fighter jets. Turkey has insisted that it will continue to accept delivery of the S-400 systems.

## 'White Helmets Boost Presence in Idlib'



In this file picture, members of the so-called White Helmets group walk amid rubble in an undisclosed location in Syria.

DAMASCUS (Dispatches) – The White Helmets are ramping up their presence in Syria's Idlib, potentially readying a provocation, Russian President's Special Envoy Aleksandr Lavrentyev, said on Wednesday at a press conference following talks in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan.

Lavrentyev added that Moscow is calling on all its partners to carefully assess the information about the potential provocation.

The White Helmets is a UK-registered NGO. They describe themselves as former bakers, tailors, engineers, pharmacists, painters, carpenters, students and workers of other professions who volunteer to go to the "most dangerous place on earth" and protect local civilians from violence. The group has been accused by Damascus of extremism and spreading propaganda.

Russia considers the group's activity an element of an informational campaign aimed at the vilification of the Syrian government.

In particular, Moscow accused the White Helmets of staging a false-flag provocation in Syria in 2013 that later gave grounds for the West to accuse Damascus of chemical attacks.

The Astana format remains the only process that has any real impact on the situation, Lavrentyev said.

"We are confident that [the Astana format is] the only relevant format that can have real influence, real impact on the situation, on the Syrian settlement," added Lavrentyev.

Lavrentyev also said that the work of the Syrian Constitutional Committee should not be artificially accelerated.

The new round of meetings of the constitutional committee was held in Geneva at the end of November, but the meetings of the small group (which is preparing the main initiatives) did not take place due to disagreements between the delegations.

## 'Ex-U.S. Officials Helped UAE Build Secret Spy Unit'

WASHINGTON (Press TV) – A group of former U.S. National Security Agency (NSA) operatives and other elite intelligence veterans helped the United Arab Emirates construct secret internet-surveillance apparatus, a Reuters investigation reveals.

According to the probe, the UAE's Development Research Exploitation and Analysis Department (DREAD), later known as Project Raven, spied on a wide range of targets -- from suspected extremists to human rights activists, dissidents, diplomats and FIFA personnel.

DREAD was set up in an unused airport facility in Abu Dhabi in 2008 by former American counterterrorism czar Richard Clarke, along with ex-NSA officials-turned-contractors.

The program began as an arm

of Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan's royal court and was initially managed by the prince's son, Khalid.

The contractors trained Emirati staff in hacking techniques and created covert computer networks and Internet accounts the UAE could use for surveillance operations.

By 2012, DREAD operatives had targeted Google, Hotmail and Yahoo email accounts to exploit information on targets despite prohibitions against targeting U.S. servers.

"The program's evolution illustrates how Washington's contractor culture benefits from a system of legal and regulatory loopholes that allows ex-spies and government insiders to transfer their skills to foreign countries, even

ones reputed to have poor human rights track records," the Doha-based Al Jazeera broadcaster reported.

In an interview in Washington, Clarke said that after recommending that the UAE create a cyber-surveillance agency, his company, Good Harbor Consulting, was hired to help the Persian Gulf country build it.

The plan, he added, was approved by the US State Department and the NSA, and that Good Harbor Consulting followed U.S. law.

"The incentive was to help in the fight against al-Qaeda. The UAE is a very good counterterrorism partner. You need to remember the timing back then, post 9-11," he said. "The NSA wanted it to happen."

Mike Rogers, former chairman

of the U.S. House Intelligence Committee, raised concerns that former U.S. intelligence officials are cashing in by working for foreign countries, saying it is time for Washington to impose tougher restrictions on foreign intelligence contracting.

"Outright eliminating those opportunities, I think, should absolutely be on the table," he said.

Reuters examined over 10,000 DREAD program documents and interviewed more than a dozen contractors in order to chart the UAE spying mission's evolution.

A former DREAD operative said the program hacked the emails of Saudi women's rights activist Loujain al-Hathloul in 2017, after she tried to defy a female driving ban in the kingdom.

## Lebanese Demonstrate Against France's Financial Aid to Current Gov't

BEIRUT (Dispatches) – Protesters demonstrated near the French embassy in Lebanon on Wednesday asking French president not to provide any financial aid to Lebanon in the presence of the current ruling political class, local media reported.

Protesters said that any financial support for Lebanon will go to the pockets of corrupt politicians without being used to save the country's deteriorating economy, according to Elnashra, an online independent newspaper.

The protests come in parallel to the meeting of the International Support Group for Lebanon which is taking place in France to discuss ways of supporting Lebanon in its current crisis.

The French foreign ministry announced on Monday that it will help the protests-hit country quickly create a "credible" government able to restore stability and bring its economy back on track.

Lebanon has been facing a very tough economic

situation because of failing policies of successive governments which led to the impoverishment of the people.

Lebanese officials have been incapable of undertaking necessary reform measures to solve economic and financial issues in the country, prompting a nationwide protest started on Oct. 17 aiming at changing the current political government.

This, in addition to other factors, caused great challenges facing local companies who have not been able to operate normally to even cover their basic expenses.

The protests come as Lebanese Labor Minister Camille Abousleiman says 70 companies in Lebanon will lay off employees very soon, the National News Agency reported.

"Around 70 companies submitted a request to the ministry during the past 10 days for laying off a big number of employees, but we are negotiating with

them to reduce the number of the fired people," Abousleiman said during a press conference.

Abousleiman urged the companies not to fire employees without further thoughts because this will cause further deterioration in the living conditions of thousands of Lebanese families.

He added that his ministry is trying to come up with a law that protects employees amid the current exceptional crisis prevailing in the country.

On Monday, anti-government protesters clashed with soldiers and pro-government demonstrators in front of a politician's house in Tripoli, northern Lebanon.

Protesters angry at the political establishment gathered in front of the home of lawmaker Faisal Karami where they faced off with a group of his supporters.

The two sides threw stones and glass bottles at each other while the army and security forces attempted to keep them apart.

## EU to Discuss Recognition of State of Palestine

BRUSSELS (Dispatches) – European Union foreign ministers are expected to exchange views next month on whether the 28-nation bloc should recognize Palestine as a sovereign state as the U.S. pushes ahead with pro-occupation policies undermining the prospect of the so-called two-state solution to the Zionist-Palestinian conflict.

Ireland and Luxembourg are among the EU member states seeking to raise the issue at the EU Foreign Affairs Council meeting in Brussels on January 20, 2020.

Speaking on Monday, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said the top diplomats will discuss whether the bloc should modify its Middle East policy following Washington's decision "on the legality of the [Zionist regime's] colonies and some fears that they (the Americans) can continue taking decisions on this in this way."

He was referring to U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's announcement last month that the establishment of settlements in the occupied West Bank "is not per se inconsistent with international law."

"Certainly we are in a difficult period in the Middle East Peace Process. We continue holding our position, that is to say a ne-

gotiated two-state solution. But for sure if we want a two-state solution we need to help and encourage both parties to enter a serious and credible negotiation. And this is not the case -- really, it is not the case," Borrell said.

"Recognition is not an EU competence. It is a responsibility of individual member states. But we continue, as European Union, supporting a two-state solution. And what we have decided is that in January, we will devote one point of the agenda to deeply discuss the situation in Middle East and of the Middle East Peace Process," he added.

He also noted that the recognition of the Palestine is among the "very much dividing" issues among EU countries.

Palestinians are seeking to create an independent state in the territories of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and East al-Quds, with the latter as its capital.

In November 2012, the United Nations General Assembly voted to upgrade Palestine's status from "non-member observer entity" to "non-member observer state" despite strong opposition from the Zionist regime.

The Palestinian national flag was hoisted for the first time at the UN headquarters in New York in September 2015.