

U.S. Imposes Sanctions on Turkey Over Russian S-400 Missile System

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) – The U.S. Department of State has imposed sanctions against a Turkish defense agency and four of its officials in response to Ankara's acquisition of the Russian S-400 anti-aircraft system, according to an announcement.

The sanctions, which will be published in the Federal Register on Wednesday, are being brought against the Turkish Presidency of Defense Industries (SSB), a government agency tasked with managing military technology and Turkey's defense industry.

"The Secretary of State (Antony Blinken) has... selected certain sanctions to be imposed upon SSB and Ismail Demir, SSB's president; Faruk Yigit, SSB's vice president; Serhat Gencoglu, SSB's head of the Department of Air Defense and Space; and Mustafa Alper Deniz, Program Manager for SSB's Regional Air Defense Systems Directorate, pursuant to CAATSA," the Department of State notice said.

The U.S. says Russia's S-400 surface-to-air missile system is incompatible with NATO technology and poses a threat to the Euro-Atlantic alliance.

The U.S. had already barred Turkey



This file picture shows sophisticated Russian-made S-400 anti-aircraft missile systems in the Black Sea peninsula of Crimea, Russia.

from its F-35 fighter jet program over the purchase of the Russian-made missile system.

In a previous statement earlier this year, the State Department said that "Russian S-400s are incompatible with NATO equipment, threaten the security of NATO technology, and are inconsistent with Turkey's commitments as a NATO Ally. This significant transaction from Russia triggered CAATSA (Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act) sanctions under U.S. legislation."

However, Cavusoglu replied that Ankara's purchase of a Russian missile-defense system was "a done deal." "On the S-400s, we reminded them once again why Turkey had to buy them and repeated that Turkey had bought them and this is a done deal," Cavusoglu told reporters in Brussels, where the two

officials met on the sidelines of a NATO meeting.

A Russian official says the United States' practice of blackmailing other countries and imposing sanctions on them is continuing under the administration of President Joe Biden and will never end.

"No changes since then so far. This policy will continue with some exceptions," Ulyanov, Russia's permanent representative to international organizations in Vienna, said in a tweet on Tuesday. Turkey has condemned the sanctions as a "grave mistake" that would inevitably harm mutual relations between Ankara and Washington and has threatened retaliation.

Turkey and Russia finalized the agreement on the delivery of the S-400 missile systems in late 2017.

The S-400 is considered Russia's most advanced long-range, anti-aircraft missile system.

Turkey has sought to boost its air defense particularly since Washington decided in 2015 to withdraw its Patriot surface-to-air missile system from the Turkish border with Syria, a move that weakened Turkey's air defense.

As soon as next week, Brazil may break the record U.S. seven-day average for deaths, forecasts the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington. The U.S. average for daily deaths peaked at 3,285 in January.

The IHME forecast does not currently extend beyond July 1, when it projects Brazil could reach 563,000 deaths, compared with 609,000 U.S. casualties expected by then.

Nicolelis and Christovam Barcellos, a researcher at Brazilian medical institute Fiocruz, are separately predicting that Brazil could surpass the United States in both overall deaths and the record for average deaths per day.

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Saudi Arabia Owes Subway Builders Billions of Dollars: Report

RIYADH (BLOOMBERG)—U.S.-based Bechtel Corp. and other international firms are pursuing billions of dollars in unpaid bills from Saudi Arabia's government for work done on the Riyadh metro project, according to five people familiar with the matter.

Bechtel is owed around \$1 billion for the transport system, a cornerstone of the government's efforts to upgrade the traffic-clogged Saudi capital, according to four of the people. Companies working on the project — which also involves

French, Spanish and Italian firms — are pursuing several billions of dollars in unpaid bills in total, two of the people said, with Bechtel owed the most.

The overdue payments are related in part to construction delays and cost overruns caused by the coronavirus pandemic, which trapped some workers outside the kingdom and made it difficult to continue the pace of work on the project, three of the people said. The payments dispute took on diplomatic overtones last year when the American,

French and Spanish embassies in Riyadh raised the matter in a letter to the Saudi government, two of the people said.

Government contractors have complained for years about overdue payments since a 2015 oil price slump led authorities to withhold tens of billions of dollars to help rein in a ballooning budget deficit. While that decision helped to keep a lid on state spending, it dented the confidence of a private sector that relies heavily on government contracts.

Officials say the crash in crude prices last year appears to have led to similar delays for some companies, though the problem is less systemic than before.

Bechtel didn't respond to a request for comment. The Royal Commission for Riyadh City, which oversees the project, said in a statement that payments to contractors "have been made in a timely manner" and "the aforementioned claims are being assessed as per a dispute resolution process stipulated within the contract."

Egypt Displaces Residents for Mummies, Modernity

CAIRO (Middle East Eye) – In a resplendent ceremony watched by hundreds of millions of people worldwide, Egypt transported 22 ancient mummies through Cairo to a new national museum on Sunday, in what was called the Golden Parade.

The 18 kings and four queens were moved from the Egyptian Museum in central Cairo, where they had been exhibited since the early 1900s, to a new museum six kilometers to the south, the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization, a vast new facility located in Fustat, Islamic Egypt's first capital.

The royal procession of performers in traditional costumes and chariots played on nationalist

sentiment and Egypt's historical importance, as those following the event watched the remains of kings and queens more than three millennia-old, slowly parade to their new home.

But forgotten in the fanfare were the Egyptians whose lives have been turned upside down, the collateral damage of a vast and controversial regeneration project meant to renovate Egypt's Old Cairo.

As the 40-minute parade rolled south from Cairo's Tahrir Square in Fustat, it passed by the ruins of different residential demolished neighborhoods.

The Egyptian government is bulldozing lower-class districts to es-

tablish several tourism complexes with 5-stars hotels, cafes, restaurants, and The National Museum of Egyptian Civilization - where the mummies are now resting.

No official numbers have been released, but rough estimates suggest hundreds of families have been affected.

Middle East Eye talked to former residents in neighborhoods demolished since 2019. While some were offered alternative housing options, others were forcefully kicked out of their houses, arrested, threatened and even ended up on the street.

President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who received the mummified royals at the newly inaugurated muse-

um, hailed the event as a national success.

Despite the pomp and celebratory mood, many took to social media to criticize the event for prioritizing the celebration of the dead, while the living - including political detainees, and victims of Covid-19 and a recent train crash - were being neglected.

Several commentators accused the government of using the parade to distract from human rights abuses.

"I hope that one day in Egypt, the living will be celebrated with the same grandeur as the celebration of the dead," said Egyptian writer May Azzam. "If death has majesty... life has rights."

Beirut's Blast-Hit Silos Must Be Demolished, Experts Warn

BEIRUT (AFP) — A section of the grain silos that absorbed much of last year's Beirut port blast must be demolished to avoid collapse, experts warned in a report published Monday.

Swiss company Amann Engineering, which has offered laser scanning assistance to Lebanon since the cataclysmic August 4 explosion, called the most damaged of the disemboved silos an "unstable, moving structure."

"Our recommendation is to proceed with the deconstruction of this block," the company said in a report.

"As it becomes more obvious the concrete piles have been heavily damaged... new silos will have to be built at a different location," it warned.

Economy minister Raoul Nehme had said in November that Lebanon will demolish its largest grain store over public safety concerns, but authorities have yet to take action.

Once boasting a capacity of more than 100,000 tons, the imposing 48-meter-high structure has become emblematic of the catastrophic port blast that killed more than 200 people and damaged swathes of the capital.

Global...

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At least 370.3 million people or nearly 4.75% of the global population have received a single dose of COVID-19 vaccine by Sunday, according to latest figures from research and data provider firm Our World in Data.

However, the World Health Organization is urging countries to donate more doses of approved COVID-19 vaccines to help meet vaccination targets for the most vulnerable in poorer countries.

Brazil's overall death toll trails only the U.S. outbreak, with nearly 333,000 killed, according to Health Ministry data.

But with Brazil's healthcare system at the breaking point, the country could also exceed total U.S. deaths, despite having two-thirds the population, two experts told Reuters.

"It's a nuclear reactor that has set off a chain reaction and is out of control. It's a biological Fukushima," said Miguel Nicolelis, a Brazilian doctor and professor at Duke University, who is closely tracking the virus.

Right-wing President Jair Bolsonaro has pushed back against mask-wearing and lockdowns that public health experts consider necessary. The country dragged its feet last year as the world raced to secure vaccines, slowing the launch of a national immunization program.

With weak measures failing to combat contagion, Brazil's COVID-19 cases and deaths are accumulating faster than ever.

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Iran ...

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honor @POTUS campaign promise to rejoin the JCPOA. So this opportunity shouldn't be wasted," he said on Twitter. "If U.S. lifts all sanctions, Iran will then cease all remedial measures."

Diplomats said the talks could continue for several days to resolve some of the less contentious issues before resuming in several rounds over the coming weeks.

The objective is some form of an accord ahead of June's Iranian presidential election, Reuters said, citing an EU official.

The Biden administration has said it wants to build a "longer and stronger agreement" that would deal with other issues, including Iran's long-term nuclear program, its development of ballistic missiles, and its support for resistance movements across the Middle East.

Ali Shamkhani, Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, dismissed that option on Twitter.

"Regardless of whether Europe has the will or ability to persuade #USA to lift all sanctions at once & Washington's return to its commitments, there will be no possibility for Iran entering talks in the new fields, more than JCPOA, under any circumstances."

Quds...

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Qa'ani has vowed to continue the path of General Soleimani, whose main goal was to drive American forces out of the region.

That pledge prompted the U.S. to threaten the Islamic Republic with yet another act of state terrorism and assassination Gen. Qa'ani as well if he followed on the path of the martyred general.

Qa'ani visited Iraq twice in December 2020, when he met senior Iraqi officials, including Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, and discussed political ties and security cooperation between the two neighbors.

Why...

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A preferential trade agreement between Iran and the EAEU came into effect in

April 2020 and the Islamic Republic's transactions with the block in six months topped \$1.7 billion.

"We hope to increase our relations with the member countries of this union so that after tariff liberalizations in the next one and a half to two years - when cars are to be added to the list of tariff-free goods - we can produce cars in the classes in which there is less competition in Russia," Nobari said.

"Russia can also produce cars in classes of lower production in Iran," she added.

In the past, Russian officials have said the country's largest carmaker AvtoVaz was in negotiations with its Iranian counterparts for the assembly and sale of cars in Iran.

AvtoVaz, majority-owned by France's Renault and its alliance partner Nissan, produces Russia's best-selling Lada brand.

Both Renault and its competitor Peugeot-Citroën put their development in Iran on hold after the U.S. unilaterally imposed sanctions on the country. Other international companies also dropped plans to expand their Iran business.

In their absence, Iran's massive automotive industry went through a period of turbulence as foreign companies stopped supplying pre-manufactured kits for cars assembled in the country.

As a result, Iran Khodro and its Iranian competitor Saipa pooled up local manufacturers of parts to produce cars as the defense ministry joined in to manufacture hi-tech auto parts which Iran used to import.

This year, Iranian automakers are about to produce more than 1.3 million cars, marking a 50 percent jump in production in the face of U.S. sanctions, a deputy industry minister said in December.

Nobari said Iran Khodro has exported 5,000 cars to neighboring Azerbaijan in the past two years, including Iranian saloon Samand, Dena family car and Peugeot 405 passenger car.

For the Russian market, "we mostly try to play a role in producing economy cars like Dena, Samand and Runna, while Tara is also a good and new car", she added.

Importance of Eurasia

Iranian officials say Eurasia bears a strategic importance for the country. It is located in an important geostrategic region encompassing the EU, China, India, Central Asia and the Middle East.

The officials have touched on the opportunities which the EAEU holds for Iran amid the sanctions - the country can source its essential needs at lower costs and boost its exports through foreign exchange arrangements with EAEU members.

The union was established by Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan in 2015, but it has since grown to include Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, with Iran and a number of East Asian and African countries waiting in line to join.

Iran's Foreign Minister Muhammad Javad Zarif was in Kyrgyzstan Tuesday as part of a four-nation tour of Central Asia, which has already taken him to Uzbekistan, with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan being his next destinations.

In a tweet, Zarif wrote that the aim of the visit was "to build on our millennia-old ties to propel our bilateral and regional cooperation".

On Monday, the minister said in Uzbekistan that Iran can provide Central Asia with a transit route to international markets and waters.

Iran lies at the heart of the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a 7,200-km multimode route proposed by Russia, Iran and India in 2000, before being joined by 10 Central Asian countries. It envisages a network of ship, rail and road for freight transport that will cut carriage costs by about 30-60% and transit time from 40 days to about 20 days.

The corridor is gaining importance by the day in light of the growing economic and infrastructure connections between the BRI and EAEU initiatives and the increasing geopolitical synchronization among Russia, China and other members.

Last month, the second batch of equipment supplied by India reached Chabahar, bringing New Delhi closer to full operation of the two terminals which it is developing in the strategic Iranian port.

New Delhi has proposed that Chabahar be included in the INSTC, connecting Mumbai to Moscow through Iran.

While the West is fragmenting, Eurasia is laying the basis for an alternative international system, where the ancient legacies from the Chinese to Russian, Turkic and Iranian are moving to the forefront of contemporary equations.

PA Urges Action Against 'Cancerous' Settlements

WEST BANK (Dispatches) – The Palestinian Authority (PA) has urged the international community to take immediate action against the Zionist regime's settlement expansion and "ethnic cleansing".

In a statement issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, the Authority said: "Israeli settlement practices are part of official Israeli plans to evacuate the Palestinian territories from their original residents and make it a deep background for the strategic Israeli colonial project."

This statement came in response to the occupying regime setting up a new settlement post in the occupied

Jordan Valley.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian Authority condemned the regime's usurping of Ein Al Hilwa spring, also in the northern part of the Jordan Valley and its targeting of Bedouin in the area.

The Zionist regime prevents Palestinians from using more than 85 percent of the Jordan Valley.

The PA also called on the international community, courts, and NGOs to "urgently take action against the cancerous settlement posts which swallow Palestinian lands and to stop ethnic cleansing," stressing that lack of accountability encourages the regime to accelerate the theft of Palestinian lands.