

Ankara considering opportunities to start talks with Syria: Hurriyet

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ANKARA: The Turkish government is mulling over opportunities to establish a dialogue channel with the Syrian government, the pro-government Hurriyet newspaper has reported.

Using anonymous sources, the Turkish daily said: "The balanced policy recently followed by Turkey and the role that Ankara has played in recent months, especially in resolving the war in Ukraine, have made the current period suitable for resolving the Syrian crisis."

According to the report, the bilateral discussions will focus on three key issues: Protection of the unitary structure of the Syrian state against the activities of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), safeguarding the territorial integrity of Syria and allowing the safe return of about half of the Syrian refugees currently living in Turkey.

There has been no comment yet on the Hurriyet report from either Damascus or Ankara.

Francesco Siccardi, a senior program manager at Carnegie Europe, told Arab News that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is seizing a political opportunity with a potential move of rapprochement with Syrian President Bashar Assad.

"After presenting himself as the mediator between Russia and Ukraine, he could portray himself as a benevolent leader also in the Syrian scenario. The fact that both initiatives could bear no fruit is secondary to the perception of these posturing that will help him lift his image both at home and abroad," he said.

The improvement of diplomatic ties with Damascus could also help Ankara reduce the political and economic burden of hosting 3.7 million refugees in Turkey amid skyrocketing inflation and decreasing purchasing power. The economic problems crippling the country are often blamed on the presence of an uncontrolled number of refugees.

According to Siccardi, this initiative could produce excellent gains for Erdogan if a portion of the Syrian refugees currently in Turkey are allowed to return to Syria.

Hurriyet also claimed that Assad's visit to the UAE last month was seen in Ankara as a show of his willingness to take new initiatives and rally new support as he hopes to stabilize the country.

In the meantime, the normalization of ties between Turkey and Egypt is also on the horizon, with some unconfirmed reports of an eventual appointment of a Turkish ambassador in Cairo after nearly nine years.

Experts note that Turkey's ongoing normalization efforts with the Middle Eastern and Gulf countries will inevitably require resuming relations with Syria.

Samuel Ramani, an associate fellow at the London-based Royal United Services Institute, said Turkey regards itself as an increasingly important actor in the crisis diplomacy sphere.

"Turkey has acted as a dialogue facilitator and mediator between Russia and Ukraine, and is now trying to channel that experience to Syria. Assad's recent visit to the UAE underscores his growing normalization with Arab countries, and despite Turkey's antipathy toward him, Ankara realizes that Assad is Syria's only leadership option," he told Arab News.

According to Ramani, given the fact that Turkey is trying to ease tensions with regional powers, such as the UAE and Egypt, removing Syria as a source of tension serves that agenda.

Since the beginning of the civil war in Syria, Turkey conducted multiple military operations in Syria's northern part in a bid to fight back against Syrian Kurdish militants that it associates with the PKK.

According to the 1998 Adana memorandum between Syria and Turkey, both parties are required to take necessary measures to remove PKK fighters from the Syria border.

Ankara has deployed thousands of troops in Syria and set up dozens of military outposts and bases there, which Damascus considers a violation of its sovereignty.

The last meeting between Turkey, Russia and Iran under the Astana process was held in December. How Turkey's potential disagreements with Russia over its pro-Ukrainian neutrality policy will affect dynamics in Syria remain to be seen.

According to Ramani, Turkey has tried to compartmentalize its disagreements with Russia over Ukraine in its engagement with Moscow in Syria.

"Patrols between Russia and Turkey have continued in northern Syria, even as Russian tanks brandish the Z symbol of support for the war which Turkey opposes. Presidential spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin cited Turkey's ability to engage with Russia in theaters, such as Syria, while disagreeing with its conduct in Ukraine as a model for Western countries to follow," he said.

As Turkey has not joined Western sanctions against Russia, Ramani does not expect that Moscow will have any objections to dialogue with Ankara in Syria.

"It will welcome talks between Turkey and Assad too," he said.

For Siccardi, Turkey has much to lose in Syria and a change of the status quo in Idlib could have catastrophic consequences for Ankara.

"More than 3 million civilians have taken refuge there. An Assad regime's

offensive – backed by Moscow – could lead to many people crossing into Turkey, where almost 4 million Syrians have already taken shelter. This would be incredibly damaging for Erdogan, who is working for the safe return home of the better part of the Syrians currently living in Turkey. To prevent this outcome, Turkey will continue to be very careful and protective of its relationship with Moscow.”

Last year, Erdogan raised the specter of a new Turkish military campaign against Kurdish forces in northern Syria. For the moment, such an offensive is not on the domestic agenda.

“But, with an eye on the country’s parliamentary and presidential elections in 2023, any new plan for military operation in Syria will help Erdogan connect with his nationalistic constituencies and drum up support,” Aydin Sezer, an expert on Turkey-Russia relations, told Arab News.

“Last year, Russia did not give Syria the green light to any plan of a military offensive. But, considering current balances between Russia and the US over the Ukrainian conflict, Russia may push for a military offensive in Syria against Kurdish militants just to draw the US forces into a new turmoil,” he added.

According to Sezer, if the rapprochement between Ankara and Damascus bears fruit before the elections, the repatriation of refugees may take place with some political offsets.

“Damascus can ask Ankara to take back fighters of the Syrian National Army who mostly have Turkish citizenship, and offer its help for the repatriation of Syrian refugees,” he said, adding: “If Turkey takes coordinated steps with the UAE in Syria, it should also align its strategies with Russia.”

Ankara has, in the last four years, maintained low-level contact with Damascus through intelligence agencies.

But in 2019, Erdogan asserted that he would never talk to Assad, “who is responsible for the death of more than 1 million Syrians.”



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Turkey's Erdogan, Germany's Scholz to hold talks in Ankara on Ukraine

[Gaza, Ukraine, Germany: From one home to another](#)

Wed, 2022-04-06 18:14

SCHWETZINGEN, Germany: Dr. Mohab Mousa, a Palestinian brain and neurosurgeon, lived and worked in Ukraine until the war forced him to flee. Now he and his family have taken refuge in Germany.

More than 4 million people have fled Ukraine since the conflict began. Over 300,000 of them have arrived in Germany, many from the Middle East as Ukraine has a community of tens of thousands of people from the region.

Mousa, from Rafah in the Gaza Strip, has seen firsthand the horrors of war at home. As the situation in Gaza was unlikely to improve, he decided to leave.

“I wanted to improve my skills and provide a safe home for my wife and children,” he told Arab News. Mousa registered at the University of Kharkiv in eastern Ukraine in 2016.

His wife and three children followed shortly afterward. His fourth child was born there and is a Ukrainian citizen.

Mousa learned Russian and started to work in the city of Kharkiv. Ukraine became his new home. “I like the country, but Kharkiv is something like a personal love story,” he said.

“The people are nice, there’s a large community of expats – basically everything in Kharkiv is beautiful.”

But the new world Mousa had escaped to has been turned upside down, something he said he did not expect even until the day before the conflict began.

“I was having coffee with a friend who asked me if there was going to be a war. I told him no.”

The very next day, the quarter where he lives on the outskirts of the city was hit by missiles. “I woke up my wife and children, and we fled to the school to find shelter there,” Mousa said.

As the situation deteriorated further every day, he and his wife decided to leave to protect the children.

They only took what they could carry and booked a train to the city of Lviv in western Ukraine.

They arrived after an exhausting trip that took 30 hours, but they were far from safety. Devious people who offered refugees a ride to Slovakia did not hesitate to exploit their needs.

“They charged foreigners 2,500 Ukrainian hryvnia (\$85) instead of the regular 500,” Mousa said. With his children around and sub-zero temperatures at night, he accepted.

They managed to get to Bratislava, where “the stress the little ones had to suffer started to show,” he said.

Despite positive memories of people prepared to help, Mousa described the overall treatment of non-Ukrainian foreigners in Slovakia as “shameful.”

Despite guarantees by the EU that refugees coming from Ukraine could travel freely, an employee at Bratislava’s main railway station insisted that Mousa pay €77 (\$84) for tickets because he is not Ukrainian.

“I asked her why? I had our residence permits from Ukraine and my youngest child is a Ukrainian citizen.” He had to pay regardless. “It was arbitrary.”

The family's odyssey was not over yet. After numerous stations, they finally arrived in the city of Karlsruhe in southwest Germany, where they registered and were given shelter, first in the town of Heidelberg and then in the town of Schwetzingen.

Mousa said he did his best to hide the reality of war from his children – an almost impossible task.

His wish now is for them to resume their education and pursue outdoor activities. "They should start to learn German now so they can integrate more easily."

Although he has lived in Ukraine for six years, Mousa is determined to stay in Germany and practice his profession there.

To do that, he wants to learn German as quickly as possible, prove his qualifications and start to work. "An unproductive man is a burden to society."



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Arab delegation visits Moscow, Warsaw to discuss Ukraine conflict

Yemen truce reduces hostilities despite violations: UN Yemen envoy

Wed, 2022-04-06 17:32

RIYADH: Hans Grundberg, the UN envoy to Yemen, said on Wednesday the current truce between warring factions has led to a rare significant reduction of hostilities, despite reports about the mobilization of forces and violations in mainly around Marib.

“We have seen a significant reduction of violence. However, there are reports of some hostile military activities, particularly around Marib, which are of concern,” Grundberg said during a virtual press conference.

“We are currently setting up (a) coordination mechanism with the parties to maintain open channels of communication and help them prevent, de-escalate and manage incidents in support of their commitment to halt all offensive military operations and freeze their positions.”

The official said the UN is not monitoring the truce on the ground and has left the implementation to parties concerned, expressing hope that the truce would pave the way for achieving a comprehensive settlement to end the war in Yemen.

“We need to make the best possible use of the window this truce gives us to work toward ending the conflict. These two months will be a test of the parties’ commitment to reaching a peaceful resolution of the conflict that prioritizes the needs of the Yemeni people.”

The two-month-long ceasefire that took effect on April 2 was meant to stop hostilities across the country, opening Sanaa International Airport, allowing fuel ships into the port at Hodeidah and opening roads in Taiz and many other provinces.

Meanwhile, Yemen’s human rights groups and officials have demanded that international mediators order the Iran-backed Houthis to hand over maps that show the locations of hundreds of landmines across the country.

“The Houthis should be forced into submitting those maps, and the government and other organizations should help the country get rid of this plague,” Saleem Allawo, a lawyer and activist from Yemen’s National Organization for Defending Rights and Freedoms told Arab News on Wednesday.

Even before capturing Sanaa in late 2014, the Houthis planted hundreds of thousands of landmines across the country to block military advances by their opponents.

The landmines have killed and wounded thousands of people, ruined villages and farms, destroyed hundreds of vehicles and barred many displaced people from returning to their houses.

Military officials say the Houthis have randomly and intensively laid the landmines across former battlefields, and locating and defusing them might take years.

Allawo said that if the Houthis do not have maps, their fighters should be ordered to locate the landmines, demanding that demining teams quickly clean land affected to save the lives of displaced people who return to their homes during the truce.

Abdul Baset Al-Qaedi, undersecretary at Yemen's Ministry of Information, told Arab News on Wednesday that the Houthis had planted landmines that look like rocks or other shapes to inflict maximum casualties.

"The biggest problem is that the Houthi militia plants mines indiscriminately and without maps, which doubles the losses," Al-Qaedi said.

A report prepared by several Yemeni organizations released on Tuesday showed that landmines planted by the Houthis have killed 2,818 people, including 534 children and 177 women, and wounded 3,655 more, including 854 children and 255 women since 2014.

The biggest number of civilian deaths from landmines was recorded in Taiz where 549 died, followed by Hodeidah, 479, and Marib, 274.

The Yemeni Landmine Monitor said on Wednesday that at least 363 civilians have been killed by Houthi landmines and unexploded ordnances since January last year.



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[Germany arrests Syrian accused of torturing captives with Daesh](#)

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Wed, 2022-04-06 16:41

BERLIN: German investigators on Wednesday arrested a Syrian man accused of war crimes for allegedly torturing captives while he was with Daesh group in Syria in 2014.

Federal prosecutors said the man, identified only as Raed E. in line with German privacy rules, was arrested in Berlin. He is suspected of membership in a foreign terrorist organization, crimes against humanity, war crimes and bodily harm.

The suspect joined Daesh in summer 2014 and participated in an attack that August on the Shueitat tribe in the Deir Ezzor region of eastern Syria, prosecutors said.

Activists reported death tolls ranging up to 700.

Raed E. is accused of abusing and torturing three captives after that attack. Prosecutors say that he had a man who was looking for a 13-year old brother kidnapped by Daesh arrested and then tortured him at various prisons run by the terrorist group.

The suspect allegedly also ordered the 13-year-old suspended from a ceiling with his hands tied behind his back. And he is accused of twice physically abusing a third captive during months in captivity.

Prosecutors said in a statement that, in addition to working in Daesh prisons, he handled transactions in which the freedom of Shueitat captives was bought and manned two checkpoints for the extremist group.

They didn't say how or when he came to Germany.



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Germany arrests woman accused of joining Daesh in Syria
German prosecutors charge Syrian doctor with murder, torture

[Lebanese elections to see 103 lists compete](#)

Tue, 2022-04-05 20:44

BEIRUT: A total of 103 electoral lists will compete in around 40 days for 128 seats in the Lebanese Parliament.

No one had expected the surprisingly high number, with only 77 lists in the previous elections in 2018.

There are 11 electoral lists in the Tripoli constituency alone, followed by

the capital, Beirut, with 10 competing lists.

While all constituencies had an unprecedented increase in the number of lists, South Lebanon's third constituency has the lowest number, with only three lists.

These parliamentary elections are particularly important since they are the first to be held after the October 2019 protests and the subsequent financial and economic crises.

In addition, this parliament will in turn elect the next Lebanese president for a six-year term to succeed Michel Aoun.

The electoral lists registration deadline ended at midnight on Monday, with an increase of 26 lists from the 2018 elections.

The number of candidates reached 1043, 42 of whom withdrew, and 284 others did not join the electoral lists.

The number of candidates who joined the lists decreased to 718, including 118 women, with a noticeable increase in the percentage of women over the previous elections.

Civil society groups, known as the "new forces," were divided between several lists in all constituencies.

In 2018, there were 77 lists with 597 candidates, 86 of whom were women.

The total number of candidates reached 976, including 113 women, but 379 candidates withdrew or did not join the lists.

Since the Future Movement refrained from participating in the elections, candidates loyal to the movement were distributed among several lists from Akkar to Sidon.

Some submitted their resignations from the movement before submitting their candidacies, while others are new faces running for the first time.

Some MPs of the bloc re-nominated themselves independently in the North and West Bekaa constituencies.

The lists of the Shiite duo Hezbollah and the Amal Movement remained the same as in the previous elections, with minor changes in Nabatiyeh, Bint Jbeil, Zahle and Baalbek-Hermel.

The lists of the Free Patriotic Movement, Aoun's supporters, were slightly altered as some former MPs were excluded from the lists.

Meanwhile, major changes were made in the Lebanese Forces lists in various constituencies from the North to Beirut.

The "new forces" are contesting the elections with unified lists in various constituencies, although the rivalries that prevailed between these forces

had given the impression that they will be unable to reach an understanding on unified lists.

Some of these lists have good chances of winning over the ruling parties' lists in several constituencies, with some serious battles ahead in 10 of the 16.

However, political observers believe that the existence of a large number of opposition lists is not necessarily a good thing, and may reflect the existing differences between these forces that would split votes in favor of the ruling parties, especially since voters loyal to traditional parties all vote for the same parties they have always supported, especially Hezbollah, the Amal Movement.

They also feel that the traditional parties will now focus on securing votes for their strongest candidates in each constituency or finding ways to bring down other candidates.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Interior has to train over 14,000 permanent employees and about 2,000 others in electoral law and on the logistical matters required of them on election day, in addition to securing electricity and the internet at polling and sorting stations, as well as transportation for staff and logistics; all of which have become very expensive.

On Tuesday, the Election Supervisory Authority began monitoring electoral campaigns, electoral advertising and electoral spending.



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