

UN Syria envoy to host top envoys from Russia, Turkey, Iran

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GENEVA: The outgoing UN envoy for Syria will meet top diplomats from Iran, Russia and Turkey this week, his office said Monday, in a final bid to make headway toward a new Syrian constitution.

The talks scheduled for Tuesday in Geneva will likely be one of Staffan de Mistura's last meetings with major players in the Syrian conflict, as the veteran UN diplomat is due to step down in the coming days.

Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov will attend, a spokesperson from his office said.

A Turkish diplomatic source told AFP that Ankara's top envoy Mevlut Cavusoglu will be in Geneva along with Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif. The UN did not immediately confirm the list of attendees.

The planned constitutional committee was agreed at a Russia-hosted conference in January.

The centerpiece of UN peace efforts in Syria, the committee would be tasked with negotiating a new post-war constitution that would pave the way to elections aimed at turning the page on seven years of devastating war.

But it has run into objections from the Syrian government.

The opposition has pushed for an entirely new constitution, but Damascus has said it will only discuss altering the current one.

In October, Damascus rejected a list presented by de Mistura of 50 civil society representatives and technical experts.



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[Turkey may work with Syria's Assad if elected fairly](#)

Author:

Mon, 2018-12-17 21:54

ANKARA: In a potentially major policy shift, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu on Sunday said Ankara will consider working with Syrian President Bashar Assad if he wins a free and fair election.

Ankara had previously called on Assad to step down following the start of the uprising against him in 2011.

There are suggestions that the U-turn may be due to Turkey's opposition to growing Kurdish influence on both sides of the border.

"Turkey can't solve the (Kurdish) Democratic Union Party (PYD) problem with

the US alone,” said Timur Akhmetov, a researcher at the Russian International Affairs Council. “A start of dialogue with Assad ... seems like a logical step.”

Turkey will also be driven by ambitions to install friendly political figures in the Syrian government, Akhmetov added.

“Renewed relations between Turkey and Syria will contribute to reconstruction of (Syrian) cities with Turkish companies and bilateral trade,” he said.

A UN-led plan to draft reforms to Syria’s constitution, laying the ground for fresh elections, is expected to be established within weeks.

Under the plan, the Syrian regime will choose 50 members of the Constitutional Committee, with Turkey proposing 50 Syrian opposition members and the UN nominating a further 50 people – comprising academics, experts and civil society members – to oversee the reforms.

Last week, Ankara said it will launch within days a military campaign east of the Euphrates River against the Syrian-Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG), whose political wing is the PYD.

“Ankara may intend that Russia rhetorically supports such a campaign in exchange for a positive message about Assad’s theoretical chances of staying in power,” said Akhmetov.

But mistrust between Ankara and Damascus remains a significant hurdle to smoother diplomatic relations.

Last month, Syria’s Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad demanded that Turkish “occupation” forces leave the country.

He said Damascus would not count on Turkish assurances because Ankara’s intentions are “colonial” and “expansionist.”

Aron Lund, a Syria analyst at the Century Foundation, said he does not think Turkey’s expressed willingness to work with Assad constitutes a big change.

“What Cavusoglu seems to be saying is that Syria should have a democratic election, as is called for in UN Security Council resolution 2254, and that the winner – even if it’s Assad – could be considered legitimate by Turkey,” he told Arab News.

Cavusoglu simply responded to a hypothetical question, Lund said, adding: “For now, Turkey seems content to continue along the current course of action, working with Russia to secure its interests in Syria and relaying messages to Damascus through Moscow and Tehran.”

Ankara still refuses to talk directly to Damascus to seek an end to the conflict in Syria. Sinan Hatahet of Al-Sharq Forum in Istanbul said Turkey’s stance is conditional upon elections in Syria.

“Previously, Turkish officials made it clear that they don’t believe that the

regime would let elections happen,” he told Arab News.

“It’s still difficult to believe there will be any reconciliation between the parties for now.”



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Turkey says it will not let the US hold it back in SyriaSyrian fighters to support anti-Kurdish forces in northeast

[Three rail workers detained after Turkish rail crash](#)

Author:

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Mon, 2018-12-17 18:36

ANKARA: A Turkish court on Monday placed three railway workers in pre-trial detention after they were accused of negligence leading to last week's fatal rail crash in Ankara.

Nine people were killed and almost 90 injured after a high-speed train crashed into a locomotive.

Those detained – a signalman, a switchman and a controller working for the state railway authority – face charges of reckless manslaughter and causing injury, the Anadolu state news agency reported.

Following the accident Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan vowed those responsible would be held to account.

Ankara Governor Vasip Sahin said the accident happened after the early morning high-speed train with some 200 people aboard and traveling to the central province of Konya hit a locomotive checking rails on the same route. Turkey has in recent years sought to modernize its railways network following a string of fatal accidents.

July saw 24 people killed when passenger train left the track in northwestern Turkey.



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Ankara train crash leaves nine dead, 47 injured Turkey train crash leaves 9 dead, dozens injured

[Sudan's President Omar Al-Bashir arrives in Damascus in first such visit by Arab leader to Syria since crisis – Syrian state media](#)

Sun, 2018-12-16 23:15

AMMAN: Sudanese President Omar Al-Bashir arrived in the Syrian capital Damascus on Sunday, the first such visit by an Arab leader since the start of the Syrian conflict, Syrian state media said.

President Bashar Assad welcomed him at the airport, official photos showed. Many Arab countries have shunned Assad since the conflict that began early in 2011 after protests calling for his downfall swept Syria.

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Israeli general denies role as US slaps sanctions for arms sale

Author:

Sun, 2018-12-16 22:33

JERUSALEM: A retired Israeli Army general hit by US sanctions for alleged involvement in the South Sudan conflict denied the charges on Sunday, saying they were based on false information and that he was available for investigation by the Trump administration.

The US Treasury on Friday slapped sanctions on Israel Ziv and three firms he controls, accusing him of using an agricultural consultancy as cover for weapons sales worth \$150 million to the Juba government while also arming the opposition.

"He (Ziv) has also reportedly planned to organize attacks by mercenaries on South Sudanese oil fields and infrastructure, in an effort to create a problem that only his company and affiliates could solve," a Treasury statement said.

Interviewed by Israel's Army Radio, Ziv said he had never trafficked in weaponry and called the charges against him "ludicrous, baseless, completely divorced from reality."

"We have an amazing agriculture project there ... that many communities depend on. Tens of thousands of people are employed through this project and it feeds the South Sudan market. So anyone who claims this project is a cover should come see it."

The Trump administration has championed international arms embargoes against South Sudan to pressure President Salva Kiir into ending the country's civil war and humanitarian crisis.

Two South Sudanese nationals, Obac William Olawo and Gregory Vasili, were named alongside Ziv in Friday's US Treasury sanctions notice. Neither was immediately available for comment.

"This is not the first time the (US) administration has used sanctions to enforce its foreign policy," Ziv said.

"I am approachable ... I want to believe in the decency of the administration. And they are welcome to come, to check, to investigate. We will open up everything for them."

South Sudan erupted in conflict in 2013 after Kiir sacked Riek Machar as vice president. Ethnically charged fighting soon spread, shutting down oil fields and forcing millions to flee.

At least 383,000 South Sudanese have died as a result of the war, through combat, starvation, disease or other factors, according to a recent study by London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine researchers.

Under pressure from governments in East Africa and from UN and Western donors, Machar's group, other rebel factions and the government in September signed the peace accord under which he will again become vice president.



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